Be Your Own Heir[1]

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1. The Social Question

"Be Your Own Heir!"

In June 1999, a sauntering Parisian leaving the Place de la République for the Place de la Nation following the left sidewalk of the Boulevard Voltaire could have read this dynamic piece of advertisement in the storefront of a real estate broker specializing in life annuity sales. And indeed, why leave the benefit of an inheritance to some indifferent or undeserving relatives, if you could just as easily turn this transaction to your own benefit?

Our unease with this formula is logical more than it is moral. Can we conceive of a transaction, call it "bequeath to X", that can be made between oneself, the owner, and someone else, the heir, but also between oneself, the owner, and oneself, the heir? Did we just find a way to double our fortune by owning it *twice*, once as the estate's usufructuary, once as its heir?

It feels like the slogan's force as an advertisement stems from its incongruous turn of phrase, pointing to some conceptual or logical mistake. And we're struck with the same discomfort when faced with certain philosophical analyses of human sociality, if by "sociality" we mean the social character of the human animal ("human beings are social and political animals"). These analyses have something in common: they seek the social relation in a move from a so-called subjective perspective (expressed in the first person singular) to a so-called intersubjective perspective (expressed in the first person plural). Our aim, these philosophers tell us, is to understand how we get from "I" to "we". As long as we only have thoughts and experiences we can express in the singular, we fall short of the social life. The moment we must move to "we", social relations have been established.

The royal road from an isolated individual to an individual living in her society is paved: it consists in explaining how one might compose into a single utterance the "I" uttered by one person, and the "I" uttered by another. Society thus appears when two subjects are aware that they think or live the same

thing. It appears with the *intersubjective relation*, if by this we mean the relation which comes to hold between different beings the moment a verb is used collectively, and predicated of these different beings. Take for instance an experience I experience with others: we're at a show and come to feel the same emotion. The plural here isn't distributive, but collective. To indicate that we're together at the show (we're co-spectators) and that we feel this emotion together (we're co-experiencers of the same pathos), we qualify the verbs with the adverb "together", which specifies the collective mode under which these verbs must be applied to their subjects. In other words, the intersubjectivity of an experience or action is what we might call a co-subjectivity (just as we speak of a condominium).

The move from "me" to "us" is what happens to a thinking subject when she begins with egological reflections of a cartesian type, and then discovers that she's thinking something with a "co-thinker" or feeling an emotion with a "co-emoter". Such a discovery is supposed to socialize an individual who was first defined outside any social milieu.

The phenomenology of social relations has distanced itself as much as possible from this way of conceptualizing human sociality. Phenomenologists flatter themselves as establishing rigor and clarity in our philosophy of the social by posing in radical fashion a problem which, on their view, had until then been ignored: the problem of the other. Or more precisely: the problem of the experience of the other, of an episode in the life of the subject in which it's effectively given to that subject to be confronted to another subject. The phenomenologist's distinctive approach is to seek the "essence of the social"[2] in the development of the phenomenological relationship between oneself and the other, between *ego* and the *alter ego* of whoever occupies the position marked "*ego*".

A defining characteristic of this type of philosophy is that it assumes an *egological* semantics: if there's going to be signification, its identity must be related to an act or experience "in the first person", which means that one must be the person acting or experiencing to understand which signification it is.[3] Of

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[2]Cf René Toulemont, *L'essence de la société selon Husserl*, PUF, 1962.

[3]Castoriadis gives a good description of this philosophical position: "... for *there to be* meaning is for *there to be* a subject (an *ego*) to posit it (aim for it, constitute it, construct it, etc). And for *there to be* a subject is for that subject to *be* either the sole and unique origin of the meaning, or its necessary correlate. It's a source of serious questions that this subject is called, in philosophy, *ego* or conscience in general, and, in sociology, individual [...] but that doesn't make any substantial difference. In both cases, the postulates and aims of thought are clearly

course, it's because the sense must always be explained "in the first person" that we have to deal with what we call "the problem of the other".

So my question is basically this: what's the difference between "Titius dines with Lucullus" and "Lucullus dines with Lucullus"? This difference seems to me a good starting point to work out a philosophy of the social, that is, a reflection on the sociality proper to human beings, on what makes the human animal a social animal. We'll try to determine whether a theory of intersubjective relations is capable of recognizing this difference through the solution it provides to the "problem of the other".

2. The multiplication of the me

When Lucullus dines with Lucullus, he most likely dines well, but there's no hospitality involved—a meal offered to someone, received by someone, and hence given to someone.

It may seem like the difference we seek stems from the *number* of actors: the diner who is his own host lacks a companion, an *alter ego*. Philosophy must equip the subject conscious of herself with such a companion, and will thus pose the daunting "problem of the other". This problem, Merleau-Ponty explains in a text which is an excellent sample of this way of thinking,[4] is first of all that of the perception of the other. To perceive another isn't yet to be social with them, but it is a condition thereof.

Merleau-Ponty's text begins with a series of questions the philosopher asks herself, in order to bring out the necessity of adopting his proposed solution. These questions are brought about by the following observation: when I stand in front of some utensil I'm just looking at (and not using), and more generally in front of a human object whose function I don't recognize, I'm able to recognize an intention, a sense, though I myself am not holding this intention or making use of this function (as a subject performing the action of using the utensil for some end or another). And this is the surprising fact: I understand an "operation in the first person" (thought, action) though it isn't currently my operation, nor yet the operation of anyone else. One might say: I understand this intention "without a subject" through an analogy with what I could do myself if I were to use the object. Sure, but the difficulty is pushed one step back:

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egological. So there's one thing we can't do no matter what: present the socio-historical as a 'product' of the cooperation (or conflict) between 'individuals' [...]" (*Le monde morcelé*, Seuil, 1990, p.49).

[4]*Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, pp.400–401.

to conceive the analogy, I now have to conceive an intention which belongs to someone other than myself, and thus again an intention of which I'm not the subject.

> The question is precisely this: how can the word I be pluralized, how can I form a general idea of the I, how can I speak of another I than my own, how can I know there are other I's, how can a conscience which, on principle, and as knowledge of itself, is in the I-mode, be grasped in the Your-mode and thereby in the We-mode?[5] (*ibid.*)

Merleau-Ponty's answer lies in the thought that we must analyze the perception of the other to understand how a subject can conceive that there be sense and thought outside her own actions.

> The constitution of the other doesn't entirely make clear the constitution of society, which isn't the existence of two people, nor yet the existence of three, but a coexistence with an indefinite number of consciences. Still, the analysis of the other's perception meets the theoretical difficulty raised by the cultural world, since it must resolve the paradox of a conscience viewed from the outside, of a thought that resides externally, and which is thus already without subject and anonymous with respect to my own. (*ibid.*)

In this text, as is often the case, it isn't the solution that raises the biggest difficulties, but the formulation of the problem. What exactly is the problem? Merleau-Ponty has multiplied questions, but none of them seems capable of affording us any clarity concerning the nature of inquiry we set for ourselves.

How can the word I be pluralized? We want to say: the word "I" can't be pluralized. Actually this is so plainly true that Merleau-Ponty doesn't even give a plural ending to the word "I" (when he speaks of "other Is [autres Je]"). Granted, many persons can say "we" (together or each on their own): but "we" doesn't, properly speaking, signify *many first persons*, it signifies many individuals forming a single *plural subject*, a single actant.[6] The move to "we" doesn't resolve anything.

How can I speak of an I other than my own? We want to reply to the philosopher's question: tell us first how I can speak of the I that's my own, and I'll

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[5]My copy (21st ed., 1957) reads "in the We-world" but this must surely be corrected in light of the question raised on p.400: "How can a human action or thought be grasped in the We-mode, since, on principle, it's a first-person operation, inseparable from an I?".

[6]This exposition uses Lucien Tesnière's terminology (*Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, Klincksieck, 2nd ed., 1988.)

tell you how it's possible to speak of the others. By definition, if I can speak of an X as my X, then I can also speak of an X as yours. On the other hand, if I don't know how X can be yours rather than mine, then I don't know how it can by mine rather than yours. The whole setup of the problem of the other supposes that we understand from the start what it is to speak of an I that's mine, but not of an I that isn't mine. But our retort is that the two go together: if I understand what the expressions "my Ego", "my I", "the I that's my own" mean, then, in virtue of the relation between "mine" and "not-mine" (between "me" and "other than me"), I understand what "her Ego", "her I", "the I that's her own" mean. But if I don't understand the latter, it becomes impossible to explain what's understood when I'm supposed to understand "the I that's my own".

So what should we think now about the final question? There would be a theoretical difficulty to be resolved by any philosophy of the social, for we encounter the same difficulty with the other as we do with the human object: in both cases, a signification or an intention offer themselves to me though I'm not their subject, since at times it's someone else who has intentions (in the case where I see someone do something intentionally) and at others no one (in the case of the object not presently being used).

Merleau-Ponty speaks of the paradox of a conscience seen from the outside, or yet of a thought that resides outside, that's, "as seen by my conscience", something other than a lived experience or a state of the self? These formulations have the advantage of suggesting an answer: there's a paradox if the mode of being of an intention or thought is that of a form of consciousness or lived experience. However the paradox disappears the moment we see realize the assimilation is improper.

If to see a conscience from the outside is to see "a thought residing outside", we see a conscience from the outside each time we see a diligent schoolboy doing his homework, an artisan carefully wielding his tool, a tennis player going for a winner.[7] Not only do I see thought "outside", that's the only place I can *see* it. Will the phenomenologist insist: when I see these thoughts this way, I'm not their thinker, so I don't see the thought as the thinker does? But the assumption motivating this whole story is that a thinker stands to his thought as an observer to the observed phenomenon, except with the privilege of special access through an organ of the intimate sense. And if the point is to correct this assumption by

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[7]One can turn here to the so-called adverbial theory of thinking verbs developed by Gilbert Ryle.

underlining the fact that *witnessing* acts of consciousness isn't enough, that one must live them, it's sufficient to note that thinking one's action doesn't *consist* in feeling anything (even where it would give rise to different lived states).

3. What is the problem of the other?

What's meant by "the problem of the other"? How do we come to pose such a problem? We've seen that, under an egological doctrine of signification, the reason for posing the problem was that we had to find in the subject's mental life an episode that could pass for a perception of the other. As long as this episode isn't singled out, the significations we attach to terms like "other", "another's personality", "another's point of view", etc., these significations aren't available to the subject.

Indeed, it's important to note that there does in fact exist something like the perception of the other. When I look at passersby in the street, I don't see objects that could just as well be mannequins or automata. I see individual human beings taking a walk, I even see that one's in a hurry, the other worried, etc. Still, the recognition of this fact isn't enough to constitute what philosophers call a problem. Our philosophy of psychology has a chapter on the perception we have of others of our kind, dealing with themes like human expressiveness, physiognomy, the display of emotions, empathy—but not "the problem of the other".

A philosophical problem of the other would arise if we could give some substance to a doubt concerning the legitimacy of what we call our *experience of the other*. Really, the expression "experience of the other" seems infelicitous, if not misguiding. Perceiving someone passing in the street isn't properly speaking a "perception of the other", just a perception of some particular person. When I see someone passing by, I do indeed see someone other than myself passing by, but what I see—the intentional object of my perceiving—isn't properly speaking: *a person other than me*. At most, it might be a person other than you or than any possible other passerby. The perceiving subject doesn't have the chance to tell herself: it's amazing, I was at the window and I saw passing in the street a person who was not me, but a person other than me. This isn't the Great Bear in Goldilocks' tale, who cries out: isn't this strange, somebody's eaten my porridge and slept in my bed, and yet I'm not the one who ate my porridge and slept in my bed.

At this point the philosopher of the "problem of the other" will say: granted, I don't see passing in the street a person other than me in the sense in which the

polarity "me or other than me?" would apply to the description "a passerby" (because the old argument against the possibility of an "objective" observation of oneself excludes the possibility that I see myself passing in the street while I'm at the window); nonetheless, I see something passing that I take to be a person just as I take myself to be a person, and it's to this title of person that the "me or other than me" polarity applies. If I can see someone passing in the street, that means I can see outside myself someone who is a person without being me, who's a person like me without being the same person as me. How is that possible?

But in explaining the problem this way, we're giving up on the perception of the other and moving to the problem of the existence of the other. What's under consideration isn't a specific experience, but a signification, a concept. In order to be able to say, when I see something in the street, that it's someone other than me, I have to have the means to understand that there is, outside me, someone who is, like me, a subject who says "me" to speak of herself and not of me.

On this new topic, that of the *sense* a subject can give to what should be called "other", we note that egological thought has attempted two strategies: conceive of the other as a *second first person*, or conceive of the other as a *second second person*.

4. The other as a *second first person*.

Let's return with Merleau-Ponty to the fact that we're surrounded by "cultural objects," the perception of which evokes straight away their use by someone, by myself as much as by others other than myself. The other is, in a sense, already given in this simple fact.

> Someone uses my familiar objects. But who is it? I say that it's another,
> a second me, and I know it first of all because this living body has [the]
> same structure as my own. (*op. cit.*, p.406)

The phenomenologist judges that the other is a "second me". Thus, the solution he proposes to the problem of the other consists in introducing the other person not properly speaking as a second person, but rather as a second *first* person. This same, Husserl-inspired, solution is also found in Ricoeur when he writes: "the second person signifies another first person."[8] Or: "the third and second

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[8]P. Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, Seuil, 1986, p.294.

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persons are also first persons."[9]

When the philosopher speaks of the "first person," he no longer focuses on the verb's grammatical form, but rather on an ontological status (just as "being married" or "being freed of one's military obligations" are civil statuses). The signification of the signs "I" and "myself" is no longer to fix a dialogical position. But how would the matter present itself if we were to place ourselves in the context of a conversational relation? Consider the difference between addressing someone, hence addressing a *second* person, and addressing *another first* person. The difference does seem to be the one between an allocution (I'm addressing you) and a soliloquy in which I address myself.

So we're back to our initial paradox: it's not the same thing for me to address you and for me to address myself. Suppose I want to ask a favor, or ask for some information, or a confirmation: it isn't the same thing to ask these things of someone else as it is to ask them of myself. When I seek to address some other person, do I want to address *another me*? Shouldn't we rather say that the point is precisely that I don't want to address myself or another person equivalent to me, but rather address *you*?

In making the conversational partner an *alter ego*, we really end up reducing the second person in favor of a duplication of the first person.

This isn't a satisfying solution. When we claim to "make" the second person by "making" a second *first* person, we don't obtain what we were seeking. Indeed, what were we seeking, if not the difference between reporting something to myself and reporting something to someone else? Suppose I'm the supervisor of a complex project, with many operations. As director, it's up to me to say who does what at what stage of the global operation. It doesn't matter whether my directions are addressed to a team composed of many people (among which I count myself), or addressed to a team reduced to a single person (myself). Either way, we want to draw a distinction between:

(1) I fix what has to be done and assign someone the task of doing it. That someone will be *you*.
(2) I fix what has to be done and assign someone the task of doing it. That someone will be *me*.

The sign of the first person appears twice in situation (2), once as the prime actant indicating the order's addressor, and one more time as the third actant or order addressee. The effect of the repetition of the first person sign is that this

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[9] *Ibid.*, p.295.

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third actant function is ascribed to the same individual who was already playing the role of the prime actant (agent) of the verb "assign".

I think this has to be our diagnosis: an *alter ego* isn't enough of a stranger to me to be considered another conscience or a subject other than me.

It's true that a better interpretation of the notion of second first person is possible. Consider the occurrences of first person signs in a sentence. If the first person appears more than once in the sentence—in French, if we find the first person before and after the verb—then the verb has become "reflexive" and this reflection is signified in the sentence's very wording. Compare the two instructions:

(1) The task of closing the door falls upon whoever is best placed to do it.
(2) The task of closing the door falls upon me.

Instruction (1) can have as a consequence, if it turns out that way, to assign me the task in question, but that will be because I'd happen to correspond to the indefinite description of the person best placed to do it. On the other hand, instruction (2) is reflexive: the second occurrence of the first person signifies that I am myself the order's addressee.

So we see that it's impossible to give any content to the thought of a relation between a *me* and another *me*: that just amounts to a communication from oneself to oneself, on the model that has just been given. How come such a communication occurs? It's made possible by the polyadicity of certain predicates, or as Tesnière would put it, by the polyvalence of certain verbs. Some verbs allow us to "multiply the I," if that means filling the actantial positions (which form an ordinal series: first actant, second actant, etc.) with the first person sign. This is how it goes with the verb "to assign". We might mark the passage from childlike insouciance to adulthood by saying that it involves making the following kind of speech act: *I assign myself my own care*. Such a task has three actants, but only one individual is implicated (who must participate in the task by assuming all three grammatical persons).

Still, on this understanding of the doubling of the *ego* and *alter ego* we've just confirmed that we haven't at all established a relation of the subject to another. Lucullus' host remains Lucullus.

5. The other as a *second second person*.

The attempt to find or constitute the other by a multiplication of the instances of the "I" within the first person has just failed. We weren't able to lay down a

grammatical second person ("you") by starting from the first person. As might have been expected, all we derive from the first person remains part of the first person, whether it be singular ("me") or plural ("we"). So the thing that barred us from obtaining another person was an alterity that would allow us to step out of the me-sphere.

It's as though proponents of an egological philosophy reasoned like this. Why not simply help ourselves to this alterity from the start, by beginning with the second person, which is indisputably exterior to the first? But careful! The idea isn't to just begin from the interlocutory relation between two subjects, for we haven't given up on creating a signification the subject will understand on her own (private) terms: the signification attached to any position of the other. Therefore instead of seeking a home for the second person in the first (as *alter ego*), we will seek a home for the first person in the second. So this is what we'll hold: there can be a second person for the *first* person because the second person is really a *first second* person.

If the other must be a stranger to me, it has to be a stranger-for-me, to have this signification of stranger for me. In order for me to understand what it is to be him and not me, I have to understand on the basis of my experience what it is to be estranged from myself. I have to find *in my experience* an experience of estrangement that would allow me to understand the estrangement of what is estranged *from my experience*. In other words, if we could show that I'm already myself estranged from myself, we could then say that the other is other than me *for me* by being what I am, not when I am myself for me, but when I am other than me for me.

So we'll seek an experience of "dispossession" or "alienation" that might serve as a foundation for the understanding of our intellection of the other. Each one of us is already, with respect to herself, a person other than herself. If I'm able to understand that I'm dealing with a second person in situations where I'm dealing with someone else, it's because I myself have the experience of being already for myself a second person. The intersubjective relation is first between me and me, *before* being between me and another.

Husserl suggested that such an experience of estrangement from oneself was given in the awareness of time.[10] By definition, I don't have direct access to the experience of the other. But I can conceive that there be an experience other than my own based on my experience of the modification of myself through time (*Modifikation meines Ich*). My own past was lived in the present, and it's as

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[10]*Cartesian Meditations* §52.

a modified present or "past present" that it presents itself to me in memory.

Merleau-Ponty, in his chapter on temporality, takes up Husserl's solution: it's the diachronic difference between me and me that allows me to grasp the difference between me and the other.

Here's the objection that's often been raised against classical formulations of idealism: your philosophy basically claims that the world began to exist with human consciousness, that there was no world before any human presence. And by the same reasoning, there will no longer be any world at all when there's no longer any world "for us" or "for me". So the two questions of the "transcendant" existence of the world and of the "transcendant" existence of the other coincide.[11] The solution is the same in both cases. Here's how.

"My presence to the world is the condition of this world's possibility".[12] An objection presents itself right away: if that were the case, I couldn't *understand* something (which I nonetheless know to be true!), namely that there will still be human beings in the world after I disappear. The solution to this objection is quite simple, if we're to believe Merleau-Ponty: when I understand what there will be when there are human beings after me, it's still my present that I'm affirming. But isn't that paradoxical? How can I affirm my presence by saying "I won't be there anymore"? He answers that this is taking a limit, the same limit we notice in the transcendent position given to the other:

> In the perception of the other [...], I cross over in intention the infinite distance that will always separate my subjectivity from another's, I overcome the conceptual impossibility of another for oneself for myself, because I notice another behavior, another presence to the world. (*ibid.*, p.494)

I cross over in intention: remarkable phrase! What is there to cross over? The abyss between "a subjectivity" and another. But let's be careful: I don't actually cross over—otherwise I'd become another. From the start, it's out of the question that I actually manage to cross over the abyss: that would require a kind of prowess that's impossible to realize *for conceptual reasons*. Needless to say, Merleau-Ponty agrees to maintain a paradox: one the one hand it's inconceivable that there be "another for oneself" than me, on the other, this conceptual impossibility really doesn't matter at all, since I remain capable of observing that there exists another "presence to the world" than my own.

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[11]In the phenomenologist's lexicon, an existence is "transcendant" when it can't be reduced to an actual *percipi* from one or another subject.

[12]Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p.494.

The paradox we're being asked to accept here isn't an eccentric thesis, but rather an unintelligible one. If conceiving something is a "conceptual impossibility", then it must be impossible to conceive what we're supposed to moreover notice, and notice apparently without feeling the least bit tested. The philosopher speaks of a paradox, but seems to believe we could observe paradoxical facts: Achilles catches up with and passes the turtle. Still, if we can state what Achilles does, the description we give of his action is a description we understand, and if there is indeed a paradox, it certainly wouldn't be found in this innocent description.

In the important introduction he wrote to his translation of Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry*, Derrida pushed even further the paradox of establishing a first second person (me) within the second person. Indeed, he sketched a theory of communication that radically internalizes the interlocutory relation. The root of all intersubjectivity, he writes, must be sought in a "dialectic" played out in the subject, between oneself and oneself.[13] Communication is a process that unfolds in the subject's egological immanence before it takes place between one person and another.

> Before it occurs between multiple individuals, recognition and communication of the "*same*" occur within the individual conscience [...] So before it becomes the ideality of an object that's identical for other subjects, sense is that thing for *different* moments of the same subject. Intersubjectivity is thus first, in some way, the nonempirical relation between me and me [...] (*ibid.*, p.81-82)

In this text, "communicate the same" means for instance that all geometers teaching the Pythagorean theorem are dealing with the same theorem.[14] Consider now the series of mathematicians. Each one transmits to his successors under the label "Pythagorean theorem" one single theorem, the very same he received from his predecessors. Derrida shows how Husserl's way of explaining the communication taking place between mathematicians already implies that there be a communication taking place between any given mathematician

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[13] From the introduction to his translation of Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie*, PUF, 1962, p.83, n.1.

[14] "The Pythagorean theorem and geometry as a whole exist only once, no matter how often and in what language they can be expressed" (Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie, op. cit.*, p.179). When the question: "How does the ideality of geometry (as well as that of all the sciences) arrive at its ideal objectivity starting from its original, intra-personal emergence in which it presents itself as a formation in the space of the conscious soul of the first inventor?" (*ibid.*, p.181).

and himself, from one day to the other, from one operation to the next. Here we want to ask: in what language is the geometer communicating with himself? It has to be one or another of the languages he already has. But if that's right, we couldn't say that the solutions to the problem of communication are to be sought "within the individual conscience", unless the individual subject is bestowed a private language of communication.

Anyway, in the end we fall back on the same relation we considered a few moments ago: the relation to the other doesn't distinguish itself in the way the relation the subject has with herself should.

I've reviewed two solutions. The first is suggested by the expression "*alter ego*": if the other is another myself, it's a "lesser figure"[15] within what each calls oneself. The second seeks to reinstate to the other an alterity that might render it truly exterior ("transcendent") to the first person experience: it's a stranger, on the model of the stranger within me. In the first case, everything happens as though the other heard itself say: *You're a second first person (after me).* In other words: the only position I can offer you (from the egological perspective) is a position within myself, within the first person. In the second the other is surprised to learn that it isn't the first interlocutor aimed at by me, since we say to it: *I'm the first second person (before you).* In other words: it's because there's a sense in which I'm already you and not just me that I can conceive that you also be a second person for me, on the model of the one I'm already for myself.

After walking down this path, our inevitable question is: *why wouldn't the second person be the second person?* Why is it absolutely necessary that she be a person other than a full-blooded second person (that it be a second first person or a second second person)? Why is it that a first person can only face a second person if the latter is first constituted as something other than a second person?

6. The dialogical relation

Derrida's commentary has the merit of highlighting the fact that a phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity isn't so much a theory about the diversity of human beings as it is a theory about the subjective diversity within one single individual. "Intersubjectivity is thus first the nonempirical relation between me and me" (*op. cit.*, p.82). Here's how we might take this: what matters for there to be intersubjectivity somewhere isn't a diversity of agents, but a diversity of actions. So by subject we should understand not an individual like Pierre and

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[15]Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p.495.

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Paul, but a pure actantial position. We would then say that there's a diversity of subjects (of actants) the moment multiple individual independent actions must be posited as constituents of a complex operation. Two actions A and B are independent if action A can unfold without B unfolding, and this even if action A seeks to bring it about that a B-type action be performed by someone. For instance, *asking a question* is an action independent of the action which consists in answering this question. By contrast, *selling some good* is an action that depends on the existence of another action (the buying of this same good by a client).

The phenomenologists' notion of intersubjectivity is thus a parent of the pragmatist notion of a dialogical relation. Peirce went over this many times: thought is fundamentally dialogical, and this doesn't mean that I can only think with someone else, but rather than I myself can't think anything without dividing myself in two "selves", one to propose a thought, the other to receive it and examine its meaning and consequences (in other words, to give it an "interpretant"). "All thinking is dialogical in form. Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent".[16]

Dialogism demands a difference between subjects, but not necessarily a *personal* difference between these subjects. We can explain it as follows.

How come I can ask myself a question or give myself an order? Suppose there's a question I ask because I don't know the answer, and not just to check, as an examiner would, whether the person I'm asking knows the answer (that I myself know). I ask it to someone else to obtain an answer I can't provide myself by using my own memories or present knowledge. It might be that my interlocutor is the only person in the world with this information. In that case, I depend on another for the answer to my question. Still, suppose the information being asked is easier to come about: it's enough to look around or consult an encyclopedia. In this latter case, the following scenario can unfold: A asks a question to B, and doesn't ask this question to B to check whether B knows the answer, but to learn from B what the answer is. Now suppose B doesn't know the answer, but knows where to find it: he passes the question on to C, and returns to A with the answer obtained from C.[17] From A's point of view, it makes no difference whether the answer came straight from B, or whether the latter was only able to give it after leading his own investigation. What matters is thus that an answer be given by someone (without designation),

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[16] *Collected Papers*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1935, vol. 6, §338. On this point, see the Christiane Chauviré's comments in *Peirce and signification*, PUF 1995, p.92-93.

[17] We find here too the "division of labor" Putnam recognized in the functioning of natural kind terms.

not that it come from some specific person.

If this is right, there's nothing to prevent A, realizing that it's too costly or hazardous to wait for the answer he needs from his interlocutor, from deciding to assign the task of answering it to someone over whom he can exert control more directly: that someone is himself. This particular case is one where the operation can take place provided it's internalized, and changed into a communication from oneself to oneself. We're therefore not in the situation where Lucullus, having not been invited by someone else, decides to be invited by himself (which is just to say he simply isn't invited), but rather a different sort of situation: Lucullus, being unable to get table service (his servers have the day off today), decides to assign himself the task of serving himself. In this scenario, the result is that Lucullus is indeed served, even if he himself is his own server.

Call *dialogical* an operation that requires that the operating subject address himself to an indeterminate subject, where it isn't ruled out that the same person might end up receiving the signs addressed to another "subject" (*self*) and react as a consequence. A dialogical activity is intersubjective: it produces two subjects, in the sense that two actions must be posited and that anytime an individual action takes place there is by definition someone who places themselves as subject of that action (which doesn't exclude in any way that they also place themselves later on as subject of another action). But a dialogical activity isn't necessarily social, if a social activity requires that the subjects be distinguished as one person is to another person.

7. Social operations

Let's return to the original question. What's incongruous about an operation that would consist in ridding oneself of one's goods for one's own profit? Why does such an operation have to be empty? There are some things one can give to another and also oneself, like advice, but also things we can only give to another and not to oneself, like one's estate, one's promise or one's forgiveness. Applying these operations to oneself has a comical effect. Compare: "I swear to you it's true" and "I swear to myself it's true".

It's as though the polarity of the me and other than me (the philosopher's other) made sense in certain contexts, but not in others. It makes sense when I address someone who claims to have handed a parcel to someone in-house, and ask: did you hand it to me or to someone other than me? Or when I take note of the division of labor between us, and divide the different tasks in two categories: those that befall others than me (they'll be performed, as some philosophical

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schools might put it, by "the not-me"), and those that befall me. In both cases, "me" and "other than me" serve to identify one of us. But consider now the following situation: I had a meeting, but forgot with whom? Here I'm going to ask myself: was it with him (A) or her (B)? But not: was it with someone else, for instance him (A) or was it with myself? In the latter case, it doesn't seems like the conditions are there to ground an application of the "either me or someone other than me" polarity. And if the polarity is applied, it would be in what Wittgenstein, taking up the mathematician's qualification, calls a "degenerate" form, that is, a form in which the operation counts for nothing, and cancels itself out.[18]

When discussing the possibility of a private or solipsistic language, Wittgenstein often relied on this type of incongruity to make clear the nature of the impossibility he wanted to highlight. Someone wishing to make up their private language by non-linguistic means (by giving himself non-verbal explanations, for instance to choose a designation for some object by fixing his attention to *that* object to be named) would be like someone seeking to make private donations to himself.

> Why can't my right hand give my left hand money? My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift, and my left hand a receipt. But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, and so forth, one will ask, "Well, and now what?" (PI §268, Hacker trans.)

What's the point of the comparison?[19] I can assign a name (chosen by me) to something only if I've already *identified* the thing to be named. But it's precisely this identification that hasn't yet taken place in the scenario where a name is assigned mentally to an indeterminate object, since the only thing that was provided to make known what it was was the mental focus expressed in the pronoun "*that*". So Wittgenstein is drawing attention here to the impossibility of having certain relations—social relations—emerge from a subjective act, a

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[18]Imagine this scenario: someone has setup a meeting far in the future to discuss some dossier with the minister; meanwhile, the government has fallen and this person becomes the minister; the day of the meeting, he discovers on the minister's agenda that he, the minister, has a meeting with someone who's none other than himself.

[19]See also, in the *Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience"*, the parallel between the two impossibilities: to give a private name to an impression identified by the mere face that it's the one a subject experiences now, and to sell something to oneself by performing all the usual operations of a properly executed sale (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, Indianapolis, Hackett, p.205).

pure intention. It's not enough to utter a word and assign it the task of serving as a name for there to be something that bears that name from then on. It's as though we were to say that it's enough to *want* that the displacement of money from one hand to another be a gift for it to be a gift. The conditions that turn these movements into actions with practical consequences aren't there. This gap is the gap that a philosophy of the social must allow us to conceive without having to give our conceptual apparatus a paradoxical or dialectic orientation.

If I've managed to identify something to be named, anyone could have done it (without thereby having to coincide with me). If I'm able to identify it for me, then I'm able to identify it for others. Conversely, if I claim to assign a name to an object whose identification would be subjective (*one has to be me to understand what I'm talking about*), then I haven't identified it at all. The name assigned to the thing may well only be used in my own discourse, but it remains that everyone knows or can know what I'm talking about.

We can give something "from hand to hand", but then the two hands are respectively the donor's and the recipient's. The hand that gives belongs to the person who gives to the other person by handing over the gift "in person [*en main propre*]". By contrast, the description "X give to Y" doesn't apply to a transfer that would occur between X = someone's right hand and Y = the same person's left hand. What's similar with the illusory creation of a private language by means of purely ostensive definitions (unaccompanied by verbal explanations, whether explicit or implicit) is the omission of the conditions constitutive of the action signified by the descriptions "to give money" or "to assign a name to something". I use the verb "constitute" here in the sense in which an attorney might speak of what formally constitutes a crime, or more generally an act meeting some legal classification. It's not enough that certain operations were performed (the matter from which the action is to be constituted). It must also be the case that these operations were performed in the right circumstances. Otherwise there will only have been the operation's outward appearance (to name, to give), but no operation will have been performed, and nothing will have been established. The announced operation didn't take place, even if the outward appearances were scrupulously produced. Why is that also the case with the gift? Why can't the right hand give to the left? Because a *personal* difference between the two cooperating "subjects" is missing for the transfer of money to take place.

8. The philosophy of mental social operations

Let's try to clarify this point with a piece by Thomas Reid[20] on the difference between activities it's possible to engage in under solipsistic conditions (only one intelligent being is needed) and activities that are only possible under social conditions (multiple intelligent beings must take part).

> The operations of the human mind can be divided into the solitary and the social. Because promises and contracts belong to the social class, I should explain this division.
>
> I call an operation 'solitary' if it can be performed by a man in solitude, without intercourse with any other thinking being. A man can
>
> - see,
> - hear,
> - remember,
> - judge,
> - reason,
> - deliberate and form purposes, and execute them,
>
> without the intervention of any other thinking being. They are solitary acts.
>
> I call an operation 'social' if it necessarily involves social intercourse with some other thinking being who has a part in it. When a man
>
> - asks a question for information,
> - testifies to a fact,
> - gives a command to his servant,
> - makes a promise, or
> - enters into a contract,
>
> these are social acts of the mind that can't happen without the involvement of some other thinking being who plays a part in them.
>
> Between the operations of the mind that I call 'solitary' and those I call 'social' there is a notable difference: the solitary don't have to be expressed

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[20]Thomas Reid, *Essays on the active powers of man*, Essay V (*Of Morals*), ch. VI, "Of the Nature and Obligation of a Contract", Edinburgh, 1788, p.447-448. David Bloor (to whom I'm indebted for having seen its interest) comments on this text in his *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions*, London, Routledge, 1997.

by words or any other sensible sign; they can exist and be complete without being expressed, without being known to any other person; whereas in the social operations the expression is essential.

They can't happen without being ● expressed by words or signs, and ● known to the other party.

So for Reid, an intelligent, solitary creature could have a mental life. It might of course have the mental life of a simple animal: perception, memory, imagination, emotions and desires. It would also, he writes, have an intellectual mental life: to think, reason, deliberate, and want. On the other hand, it wouldn't be able to ask questions, give commands, testify, make promises, or negotiate. We might say that language plays a *constitutive* role in this second class of operations, while in the first class it merely serves an expressive or communicative purpose.

The interest of this text is that it invites us to expand the domain assigned to philosophy of mind. Reid criticizes authors of books on logic and the philosophy of mind (which he calls "pneumatology") for having dealt exclusively with *solitary* mental operations. They think they can stick with the mental functions of an independent animal. They don't discuss the mental functions of social animal. Why not? Surely because of their atomistic bias: they believe social mental operations are just combinations of solitary ones. There's nothing specific about them, and they therefore don't need to be treated for their own sake, since they can be analyzed as a composition of solitary operations.

So Reid, well before we fell into the confusions of methodological individualism, saw quite well what the reductive program really consisted it when it came to social questions. The methodological individualist makes clear his intention to reduce the appearance of a mysterious entity (society, the "we")—an appearance which on his view just amounts to various manners of speech. How does the reduction proceed? By explaining how this pseudo-entity isn't really a being, but really just a composition of familiar entities (human individuals, Peter and Jane) related in certain ways. Related how? By relations holding between multiple persons who perform, each on their own, mental "solitary operations," even if the individuals here are putting their minds to the task of adapting their own behavior to the presence of an other. Consider the interaction taking place between two independent subjects A and B under the following conditions: each one knows the other of the two is like him a being that pursues ends, procures himself information, reasons, has preferences, and so on—a being that exercises a capacity to perform solitary mental opera-

tions. A and B take this into consideration when they act. The result is that they coordinate their behavior reciprocally, and thereby have an intersubjective experience of adjusting to each other. But they coordinate their behaviors independently from each other, merely by anticipating based on whatever they judge the other's behavior must be. Our individuals A and B are thus living a social life simulacrum that more or less corresponds to what Max Weber called the "social meaning" of an action (the cyclist swerves to avoid another cyclist, the person with an umbrella avoids the other person with an umbrella, etc.). Or for that matter to the sort of coordination relying on "convention" in the sense of David Lewis.[21] Recall that this convention isn't at all a common rule—it's not normative, and is just a natural and "rational" phenomenon of mutual adjustment.

Yet the philosophical problem of the social isn't primarily to know if the sociologist must posit the existence of both Romans and Rome, the individual persons and the collective ones. The entire discussion of this matter is just a diversion from the question we should really be asking: a question that, as Reid indicated quite well, belongs to the philosophy of mind and not to a supposed "ontology of social entities". For the goal is to find out whether *social operations* of the human mind, like promising, negotiating a contract, entering into an alliance, can be analyzed as a composition of *solitary* mental operations. The question is thus about the structure, or composition of social mental operations. That such a social mental operation is performed, whenever it is, by an intelligent individual being doesn't at all resolve the problem of its structure or constitution.

9. The social and the dialogical

Reid rightly detected an atomistic bias governing the "pneumatological" treatises of his time (one can't really say we've made much progress in this regard). It's a mistake to think we can get social actions by merely composing solitary mental actions. Still, we can't rest with this observation.

The notion of *solitude* is too vague. There's a sense in which Robinson himself wasn't solitary: it's enough to suppose that he write a message and place it in a bottle he entrusts to the ocean's currents. He's then writing to some possible addressee. His operation is definitely intersubjective, since it's

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[21]David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1969.

oriented towards others, but it isn't social since it can be accomplished in the absence of any reception and even in the absence of any addressee.

And there is a sense in which an intelligent being could be solitary in a crowd: it would only have to be the case that his mental activity be limited to solitary operations. Reid nicely explains that solitary mental operations don't owe their solitary status to the fact that they would have to be accomplished in a solitary state. They would be just as solitary if the subject was in the middle of a crowd. Let's imagine, he writes, a creature that nature would have endowed with a capacity for solitary operations, but not social ones. It could do everything the authors of logic books describe: think, reason, but also desire, shy away from, hope, etc. *But at the same time he would still be a solitary being, even in a crowd.*

So what's at stake isn't the presence of another, or even the perception of another. To perceive someone else, or to take their presence into account for my behavior isn't yet to accomplish a social operation. Thus social life doesn't begin, as in phenomenologies, with the recognition of the other (on the model of Robinson discovering traces of Friday's presence).[22] Nor is the point to know whether or not the agent, in determining how to conduct his behavior, takes into account the presence and potential reactions of another, as on the Weberian model of cyclists taking care not to run into each other, or umbrella wielders avoiding collisions in a crowd.

So what is the point? First, to determine whether or not language is *constitutive* of the operation or merely *communicative* (as when I let you know what operation I've just performed). Thus I can't give my server an order without communicating this order to him, but the communication of what he's being ordered to do isn't a mere notification, an action by which I let him know that I've just performed the action of ordering him to do something (as I might let someone know that I've just performed the action of recommending him to his superiors). It's the ordering itself. In other words, Reid saw full well that social operations could be understood like what we analyze, after Austin, as *speech acts*.

How can we make precise the solitude of nonsocial actions and the sociality of social actions?

Apply Thomas Reid's distinctions, and let there be an intelligent, solitary

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[22]In the short phenomenology included in his *Philosophical Propaedeutics*, Hegel doesn't miss the chance to allude to Daniel Defoë's novel when presenting the dialectic of recognition through the struggle of consciences.

being living in a world where he cohabits with other intelligent solitary beings. This being would then face what the phenomenologist calls the "problem of the other," in other words the problem of the perception of the other. Since our solitary being is able to perceive what's around him, he's able to perceive that he's surrounded by other perceiving beings. And also that these intelligent beings perceive that they're being perceived. As a consequence, our solitary beings would have intersubjective relations (in the sense stipulated above). They would have *common knowledge*, if this means knowledge based on a reciprocity of perspectives (he knows that I know that he knows... and so on). Nothings prevents us from granting them a capacity for sympathy and empathy. The only thing we deny them is intentional communication: not the natural communication by which everyone betrays (or feigns betraying) their intentions and feelings by the way they behave, but the sort of communication that's constitutive of the communicated action, as in the *speech act*.

The solitary being A can hypothesize about B's conduct. His reasoning can moreover lead him to conceive that there be interests or tastes common to B and himself. So nothing prevents him from saying "we," and thus identify with the first person of a plurality of bearers of the same needs, wills, or sensibilities. It's true that this "we" will be distributive and not collective. The solitary being A can therefore resolve "the phenomenological paradox of a conscience seen from the outside". Still, he remains incapable of any social life, since we deny him the ability to conceive of operations that are only performed if someone else operates with the subject.

Nonetheless, we can't rest content having pointed out the constitutive role language plays in the mind's social operations. That language be constitutive is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Before going any further, let's introduce two distinctions:

(1) The notion of a solitary act of the mind doesn't allow us to distinguish between:

(a) actions I can perform *on my own* (whether alone or in a crowd), like seeing, or hearing;

(b) actions I can perform on my own, but that I can't be *the only one* to perform. I can't do business on my own, but I can do geometrical demonstration on my own. The meaning and validity of my operation doesn't depend on what my neighbors think about it. But can I be the only one to do a geometrical demonstration? More generally, I can apply rules on my own, but can I be the only one living in a universe of rules?

(2) The criterion of constitutive communication isn't sufficient to define the

class of social operations. We might say the criterion defines *symbolic* operations of the mind (in the sense that one has to use symbols to perform such operations). Still, one has to take into account our ability to internalize certain forms of communication. I can't be my own heir, but I can talk to myself. So we have to distinguish two types of operations, depending on whether or not they're internalizable. Which leads us back to the difference between intersubjective (dialogical) and social relations.

We're now in a position to determine the difference between both sorts of relations. I suggest the following.

An *intersubjective relation* is established between two subjects through actions independent of each other on the dialogical model: in a dialogue I say something to be heard or ask a question to be answered, but the mere fact that I'm speaking or questioning obviously isn't sufficient to make someone hear or answer me.

A *social relation* is established between cooperating persons under the following conditions: the first has performed her part of a social act when the second has performed its complementary part. For instance, the relation between a professor and a student is merely intersubjective when it's an attempt to communicate, but it becomes social when it's a teaching relation, because the professor has only taught if someone has been taught, and a student has only been taught something if someone else has taught it to them.