The Experience of Private Space

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'Private' is a familiar term. We all, in a conventional sort of way, know what it means: to enter private space is to enter a zone in which someone has (or appears to have) control. Objective analyses of private space (usually in opposition to public space) are common. They often take the form of debate about territory, defensible space or privilege; spatial quality as a mediator of social interaction. My intention in this essay is not to pursue the objective view, but to explore methods of explaining what the experience of private space might be; what it is that takes place within consciousness when one approaches 'privacy'. A small scene (with apologies to Sartre) will help to describe the scope and limits of the essay:

I pass by a park bench. Its presence does not disturb me, and I know that if I want to I can sit on it. But suppose that the bench has an empty sleeping bag on it. My perception of the bench is changed. Now I am reluctant to sit on it, even if there is space (and even if the bag is clean). This is not because of some objective analysis of territoriality - I know that I am fully entitled to sit on the bench, and in any case the chances are that the bag owner will not return for a while, if at all. But I am undergoing some kind of change of conscious awareness in the presence of the bag....

I will leave the scene at this unresolved point, for it is the purpose of the essay to try to explain what is going on. I hope, though, that it helps to clarify what I mean in this context by the three potentially problematic terms of the title; experience, private and space.
Since experience is what I am trying to analyse, it seems natural that I should use phenomenology, the philosophy of experience, as an environment for discussion. The essay is, for the main part, a survey of phenomenological positions which can contribute to an understanding of the experience of private space.

The essay is in three sections:

Section 1: **Self**

"Everyone feels that he is a single person with both body and thought so related by nature that the thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it."

René Descartes [1]

Descartes' description of unity reveals a binary split that has haunted and occupied Western philosophers ever since its articulation. The 'mind-body problem', as it is now generally called, is this: how can two completely different entities - the inner world of thought and experience (Descartes' res cogitans) and the outer world of the body as it exists in physical space (res extensa) - co-exist, let alone be causally related to each other? This 'substance dualism' (thinking substance and physical substance) provides the backdrop for this essay. It underlies all the discussions that follow, even when those discussions try to evade its grip.

An historical problem with dualism is that it has had a tendency to lead to a twin-poled axis of philosophical thought, ranging from idealism (an emphasis on res cogitans) at one end to realism (emphasis on res extensa) at the other. Unsatisfactory though this is in conveying the true scope of debate, it is a convenient way of summarising a series of positions on the nature of consciousness. A crude example (including the writers referred to in this essay) may look like this:

Idealism / solipsism: Foster
Strong phenomenology: Husserl
Weak phenomenology: Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Gurwitsch
Weak naturalism: Nagel
Strong naturalism: Searle
Realism / materialism

Phenomenologists will immediately object to this, arguing that phenomenology lies in a different dimension altogether, and directly addresses the split implicit in dualism. There are, however, some connections, and it will help in the explanation of phenomenology (which provides the main set of ideas in this essay) if I put it into some sort of relationship with idealism and realism.

Philosophical Positions

The realist camp, which would include idealism as its logical counterpart (although few members actually take a fully idealist view) is sometimes referred to as the 'Anglo-American analytical' position. The phenomenological camp is generally classed as 'Continental'. The former tends to deny the existence of the latter: in the Oxford 'Philosophy of Mind - A Guide and Anthology', a 900 page compendium of thinking with contributions from 41 philosophers, neither Husserl nor any of his successors in the field of phenomenology - Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty or Levinas - are mentioned, let alone included. John Foster, a proponent of the idealist position, is similarly exclusive in his setting-out of the philosophical field:

> "Adopting the framework of realism in our previous discussion was, of course, entirely reasonable. On the face of it, the realist view is the only position which does justice to our basic understanding of what a physical world is; and it is simply taken for granted in almost all current philosophical writing." [2]

This - to the outside view - rather peculiar ignorance (or at least ignoring) of other viewpoints may in part be due to the way that philosophical debate has evolved historically, quite apart from differences between geographically-based 'camps'. Dan Zahavi describes a "turn from a philosophy of subjectivity to a philosophy of language" [3] in the 20th Century, followed by what has been described as the 'consciousness boom' - a return to the debate of consciousness in recent decades, linked largely to developments in cognitive science and neuroscience.

On the phenomenological side of the debate, there has been an attempt to move away from 'old-fashioned phenomenology' - a grouping in which I would include the writers listed above - to a compromise position between phenomenology and realism, expressed in anthologies such as 'Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science' and 'Naturalizing Phenomenology'. On the other side, the attempt to explain consciousness within an essentially realist framework seems to occupy all current thinking (certainly all of the Oxford 'Philosophy of Mind'). But it still seems to be an unbridgeable divide. As Colin McGinn puts it:

> "We have been trying for a long time to solve the mind-body problem. It has stubbornly resisted our best efforts. The mystery persists. How is it possible for conscious states to depend upon brain states? How can technicolour phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter?... We know that brains are the de facto causal basis of consciousness, but we have, it seems, no understanding whatever of how this can be so." [4]

In spite of the breadth and depth of the current debate, it seems that what I called 'old-fashioned phenomenology' is still the only perspective from which subjective consciousness can properly be addressed. In a sense (and according to which philosopher one is reading) it accepts the paradoxes and impossibilities that subjectivity generates, and incorporates them into itself - one of the reasons why it often appears at best confusing, at worst logically flawed and incomprehensible. But as Merleau-Ponty points out, other approaches simply do not fully address the issue of subjectivity:

> "Both idealism and realism, the former by making the external world immanent in me, the latter by subjecting me to causal action, falsify the motivational relations existing between the external and internal worlds, and make this relationship unintelligible." [5]

The Idealism/Realism Opposition

The phrase that has almost come to stand for Descartes: "I think, therefore I am", seems to imply a view of the mind as the sole reality. This would, however, be an erroneous view of Descartes' philosophy. As John Heil points out, Descartes never doubted the existence of substances: "if there is thinking, then, there must be a thinker: a substance doing the thinking." [6] This is the basis of Descartes' 'substance dualism', the concept which underlies the mind-body problem.

If instead we do take an idealist standpoint, the problem disappears. Consciousness is all there is; everything else is subsidiary. With the body, and indeed the rest of the apparently natural world, created within consciousness, there is no problem of explaining how consciousness is caused by the body's physical functions, or how it causes the body to operate. The causal links are subsumed into consciousness, and a philosophical unity joins everything.

Idealism, therefore, has a strong logical attraction, but it has a fundamental flaw: a tendency to solipsism, the inevitable conclusion that if the world is a product of my consciousness, then I am all that exists. As Bertrand Russell pointed out, while the logic of this position is impeccable, it is unworkable if one is to accept at least the appearance of a real world and adopt the behaviour necessary to operate within it:

> "As against solipsism it has to be said, in the first place, that it is psychologically impossible to believe, and is rejected in fact even by those who mean to accept it. I once received a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs Christine Ladd Franklin, saying she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others." [7]

The realist position is easier to explain, simply for the reason that it is the one that we all naturally and unreflectively adopt. For the realist, the world that we perceive 'out there' - outside our minds - is the true reality. The world will continue without any essential change even after our death. The world is imperfectly (or at least incompletely) represented in our minds through perception, but in principle it is completely open to our enquiry. There is no 'problem' with our interface with it; what we perceive is what there is, even if we need to resort to scientific investigation to uncover it.

The only serious problem with realism is how to account for consciousness. To the realist, the world is 'ontologically prior' to consciousness - that is to say its 'being' would include consciousness within it. In fact, consciousness is not required for the realist world to exist, and there is absolutely no way to explain how, as Descartes put it, "thought can move the body and feel the things which happen to it"; in other words, to explain the causal relationship between consciousness and body. Some realist philosophers resort to denying the existence of consciousness. Others relegate it to the status of an 'epiphenomenon'; something essentially redundant which hangs on to the body and only has the illusion of being the cause of its movements.

Phenomenology

The underlying principle of all phenomenology is that on reflection neither the idealist nor the realist positions describe what we actually experience, and there is absolutely no reason to suppose that what we experience is not right. The phenomenologist would say that the idealist/realist too readily moves away from experience to a position of objective abstraction, without stopping to consider that conscious experience is all that is 'given' to us (the word 'given' occurs frequently in phenomenological discussion). This does not deny the existence of the world, but it insists that the world can only truly be described as it exists for consciousness, not as it exists in some theoretical way outside it. In other words, for phenomenology consciousness is prior to the world.

Husserl

Edmund Husserl, though not the originator of phenomenology (that achievement is usually credited to his teacher, Franz Brentano) is at least thought of as having developed it into a fully-working philosophy. Husserl's 'strong' phenomenology is in a sense worked out from first principles, and the strictness of his adherence to these makes it appear unyielding and impractical, though paradoxically it is his views which have more recently been taken up in the attempt to link phenomenology with cognitive science. His successors in the field - Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, all developed his ideas into something more earth-bound, which is why I have categorized them as 'weak' phenomenologists. In the last part of this section I will concentrate on some of the problems inherent in Husserl's philosophy, and I will debate the others in the following sections.

Husserl's intention was to see past the 'natural attitude' - the unreflective, generally realist view of the world that assumes its absolute prior reality. He attempted to form an entirely re-orientated philosophy based, not on theories of how the world might 'be' outside our experience of it, but accepting instead that experience itself has to be the logical starting point for any investigation of the world. 'Phenomena' - items of actual experience - were to be the objects of enquiry for this philosophy.

Husserl's method of enquiry was known as phenomenological reduction, or the 'epoché'. It involved the stripping away of all one's natural assumptions about a thing - the layers of superficial meaning with which we all cloak items of perception in order to make them fit more easily into our objective idea of reality - until all that was left was a pure awareness of the phenomenon itself (the object of consciousness), and the ego that perceived it (the subject of consciousness, or the 'transcendental ego').

This relationship of subject to object of consciousness - of transcendental ego to phenomenon - is at the heart of phenomenology, for it is in the relationship itself that being lies. Husserl, and almost all phenomenologists since, have taken this 'reaching out' of the ego to phenomena (which may be as a result either of perception or of reflective thought) as something fundamental: the fact that conscious thought always has to be 'about' something means that the ego cannot exist consciously on its own, but only in conjunction with a 'world' (not an objective world, but a world as it appears for consciousness). This stretching out, or 'intentionality' was not a new idea. David Hume had put it very well in the 18th Century:

> "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other... I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception." [8]

The intentionality of subject to object makes each a part of the other: each 'constitutes' the other; it makes it what it is. But intentionality is a mental operation - it takes place inside consciousness - and this gives rise to the potential for solipsism. The idea that the world as it is for me only exists within my consciousness inevitably leads to a doubt that anything need exist outside my consciousness at all. In his early philosophy Husserl took the line that the existence or not of an external world was simply not a relevant question. Later, as he tackled the problem of intersubjectivity and the possibility of other consciousnesses, the dangers of solipsism became much more apparent. The problem of 'Others' is addressed in the next section.

Section 2: **Self, Other**

"The existence of other people is a difficulty and an outrage for objective thought.... that consciousness which is hidden in so much flesh and blood is the least intelligible of occult qualities."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty [9]

"The Other" is a phrase which has been over-used to the point of near meaninglessness, but within the context of this essay it does have a specific meaning: another consciousness, as it appears to me within my own subjective consciousness. It is used in this way by all the writers that I discuss, and I shall follow their example. The term 'intersubjectivity' is also sometimes used to refer to the area of discussion of the possibility of communication between different consciousnesses.

Non-Phenomenological Attitudes to the Other

The concept of the Other as something problematic yet fundamentally important is something that arises out of the phenomenologists' battle with solipsism. From the idealist and realist viewpoints there is no problem. The true idealist (who accepts solipsism) sees the whole world as subsidiary to his own consciousness; other consciousnesses do not have the same ontological priority, and do not pose a logical threat. On the other hand, to the realist we are all others. I (the subject) join the world stage with all the other 'Is', within which we may be viewed with equal status from an 'objective' viewpoint.

The realist position is the starting point for almost all psychological and sociological analyses of human behaviour, and most discussions about the notions of 'public' and 'private' take place within this arena. A discussion by John Searle (a realist philosopher) will help to illustrate how the problems inherent in a consideration of subjective experience and interaction with the Other are avoided in a realist stance:

> "Consider for example a primitive tribe that initially builds a wall around its territory. The wall is an instance of a function imposed in virtue of sheer physics: the wall, we will suppose, is big enough to keep intruders out and the members of the tribe in. But suppose the wall gradually evolves from being a physical barrier to being a symbolic barrier. Imagine that the wall gradually decays so that the only thing left is a line of stones. But imagine that the inhabitants and their neighbours continue to recognize the line of stones as marking the boundary of the territory in such a way that it affects their behaviour. For example, the inhabitants only cross the boundary under special conditions, and outsiders can only cross into the boundary if it is acceptable to the inhabitants. The line of stones now has a function that is not performed in virtue of sheer physics but in virtue of collective intentionality." [10]

Searle is discussing something that happens mentally. In becoming a symbolic rather than a physical barrier the wall moves from the physical world to the psychic world of the tribe members, but Searle does not touch on what this is 'like' for the tribe members as a part of their conscious being. He talks of the 'symbolism' being 'recognized' by the members, but in terms of their behaviour, not their awareness. When he explains their relationship to each other, he uses the term 'collective intentionality'; an objective abstraction that avoids the difficulty of the interaction of individual consciousnesses. There is nothing in his story that actually demands that the tribe members are conscious at all; all the behaviour described could equally well be performed by machines.

Phenomenology and the Other

The problem of the Other (and the whole richness of thought that arises from it) comes about when one adopts a philosophical position that prioritizes consciousness and subjective experience over the existence of an external world, but does not deny the existence of other beings. The world is constituted by my consciousness of it, and the only mode of existence of my world is as it exists for me. This is a potentially solipsistic position. How, then, do I accept the existence of other consciousnesses on an equal footing to mine? How can they be part of my world, constituted by my consciousness, yet simultaneously separate and equal? 'The Other' represents this conundrum as an abstract entity: for some phenomenologists it is a thorn always threatening to disrupt their main arguments; for others it becomes an area of philosophy in its own right.

The examples that follow are those philosophers whose analyses of 'the Other' are particularly fruitful for my argument. Heidegger is, as Davis explains, more "interested in modes of being rather than empirical encounters" [11], and I have not included him. Merleau-Ponty's views are relevant, but are more properly included in the next section. Husserl, Sartre and Levinas follow in this section.

Husserl

The issue of intersubjectivity (the phrase 'the Other' had not been coined at that time) was something that troubled Husserl, as the acknowledgement of the existence of other equivalent consciousnesses threatened to disrupt his concept of a world as something constituted by the subject's consciousness.

For Sartre, Husserl could not escape the charge of solipsism, nor of being unable to account for the Other as another subjectivity, different from the ordinary objects of the world:

> "Husserl replies to the solipsist that that the Other's existence is as sure as that of the world ... But the solipsist will say the same thing: it is as sure, he will say, but no more sure. The existence of the world is measured, he will add, by the knowledge which I have of it; the case will not be otherwise for the existence of the Other... Because Husserl has reduced being to a series of meanings, the only connection which he has been able to establish between my being and that of the Other is a connection of knowledge. Therefore Husserl cannot escape solipsism any more than Kant could." [12]

Husserl's proposed solution was radical: a second stage of phenomenological reduction which (having stripped away objective assumptions about the world in the first reduction) would now strip away assumptions about consciousnesses, both the subject's and others'. The consciousness would become aware of its own 'empirical self' - an awareness that would put itself on a level with others. The subject would find a fundamental level of what Mensch calls 'facticity':

> "(the self) must proceed beyond objective individuality. The solution, in other words, must come from an examination of facticity per se, facticity as a prior determinant of individual being... (the self) passes beyond the objective individuality which is implicit in words such as 'mine.' It uncovers the ground of such individuality in the impersonal facticity of experience." [13]

This position seems to come uncomfortably close to the description of a metaphysical level of reality from which one can adopt an 'objective' overview of one's own self in relation to others; in other words, a realist view. Alternatively, transcending the individual ego can be seen as arriving at a sort of 'wholeness'; a collective consciousness which lies above the individual.

Sartre

For Sartre, the Other expresses itself in the 'Look'. The look of the Other has the power to bring about in me an increased and altered awareness of my own self:

> "But all of a sudden I hear footstep in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure - modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective cogito. First of all, I now exist as myself for my unreflective consciousness. It is this irruption of the self which has been most often described: I see myself because somebody sees me - as it is usually expressed." [14]

The look is not necessarily visual:

> "What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that someone is there; it is that I am vulnerable" [15]

Nor is it actually attached to the organ of perception:

> "The Other's look hides his eyes; it seems to go in front of them." [16]

Importantly for this discussion, the look may be perceived in situations where the body of the other is not present. The window of a farmhouse, in Sartre's example, although it represents only the physical eye, may also act as the cause of the "apprehension of a look turned towards me". [17] The ability of an object to represent the Other in its absence is something I will return to.

Levinas

The phenomenologist who truly faced up to the problem of the Other head-on was Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is credited with first introducing German phenomenology into France, but while the philosophy of Heidegger, and especially Husserl, is central to the development of his own thought, he accuses the Western philosophical tradition - including the German phenomenologists - of brushing to one side the problem that acknowledgement of the Other represents:

> "Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the other in which the Other, by manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. Philosophy is afflicted, from its childhood, with an insurmountable allergy: a horror of the Other which remains Other. It is for this reason that philosophy is essentially the philosophy of Being; the comprehension of Being is its final word and the fundamental structure of man." [18]

Levinas's concern is properly to address the true 'Otherness' of the other - its 'alterity'; a radical quality that arises out of the confrontation with the Other's own subjective consciousness. He sees a continual danger of reducing the Other to mere other - an object of the constituting consciousness - and losing its essential difference. As Davis explains:

> "To preserve the Other as Other, it must not become an object of knowledge or experience, because knowledge is always my knowledge, experience always my experience; the object is encountered only in so far as it exists for me, and immediately its alterity is diminished." [19]

Levinas introduces the 'visage' (face) as a method of representing the Other while preserving its difference. The face of the Other is, for Levinas, both a real face and something more - an "epiphany or revelation rather than an object of perception or knowledge." [20] The face both is and isn't a normal object of experience. It is a part of my consciousness-constituted world, but it is also a pathway to another universe - to the Other's world, something which is so different that it is beyond my comprehension. Whereas Sartre's 'look' brings me to a different understanding of my self, Levinas's 'face', properly understood, brings me to a contemplation of the paradox of the consciousness of a world of other consciousnesses - that it is, to conventional logic, impossible. Davis concludes: "only by discovering the irreducibility of the alterity of the Other can I understand that I am neither solipsistically alone in the world nor part of a totality to which all others also belong." [21]

The Private Encounter

The purpose of examining theories of 'the Other' is not just as a preliminary to the concluding section, but to suggest an explanation of the experience of a 'private encounter'. The recognition of the presence of another subjectivity seems to be the essential component of every experience that we might call 'private', although the word itself doesn't seem to do justice to the depth and subtlety of such experiences. It may be that all the theories above contribute to the whirl of mental activity, not to say confusion, that occurs in the presence on an Other. How this extends from the mental to the physical arena is the subject of the next section.

Section 3: **Self, Other, Space**

"The quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between mental space (the space of the philosophers and epistemologists) and real space creates an abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social spheres on the other."

Henri Lefebvre [22]

The final part of this essay is the description of how mental space of the type that I have been describing - space that stands for the relationships between the primary subject (I) and other subjects - can be teased out into the physical world which, for each of us, forms the other component of our being. By this I mean that I must find a relationship between my mental conception of Others, and my experience of the world of objects and the physical space around them.

I will then try to describe how my experience of 'the Other' is translated into my experience of spatial privacy, and vice versa; in other words I will try to find a way of describing the almost ineffable experience - part spatial quality, part human encounter - of private space in terms of the equally difficult description of my relationship with the Other.

Mental and Physical Space

Spatiality is already present in intentionality (see page 8). The idea that being is contained in the 'stretching out' of the subject of consciousness (the ego) to the object of consciousness implies a spatial dimension at the point of being itself. This mental space is the primary space - ontologically prior (see page 6) to the perceived geometric space of the phenomenal world. It is present in any mental act, whether perceptive or reflective. It is in itself the relationship between the ego and the contents of consciousness.

In encountering another consciousness (the Other) my own mental space, in which the Other is an object, is put in some relation with my knowledge of the Other's mental space, in which I am an object. This, as I have argued, is the basis of the 'private encounter', though it is not (at this stage, anyway) a description of a worldly, physical encounter with the Other, but still something in the mental realm. It applies equally to an imagined encounter as to an actual one. I contain within my consciousness not just the immediate objects of perception, but the potential for imaginary interaction with other objects and other consciousnesses, and in mental terms the space in which this takes place, and the complex of relationships with the spaces of imaginary Others is just as valid as the immediate space of the here and now and my relationship with the real Other in front of me.

From this perspective, the notion of space can be seen as something which originates in the mental realm of relationships with the objects of the phenomenal world, and in its richer and more complex form, in intersubjective relationships with Others. This is the realm in which we form our most fundamental qualitative concepts of space, and the terms in which we experience space at this level are far removed from objective descriptions of space in what Lefebvre called the physical and social spheres.

This is not to say, as Lefebvre does, that there is an abyss between the two. Each philosopher discussed here provides a route from the mental to the physical in their own way, while retaining the essential subjectivity of analysis. What is important in this argument, though, is that as the analysis draws out from the mental sphere to the physical and social, it is still the mental relationships that provide the basis of experience, as of course has to be the case given their ontological priority.

Phenomenological Expansion into Physical Space

Of the phenomenologist philosophers that I have discussed, only Husserl had any doubt about the existence of a world outside consciousness. From Heidegger onwards phenomenology accepted, even took as its core principle, the rootedness of the subject in the world, and perhaps apart from Levinas all its proponents accepted the possibility of the description of space in an objective manner.

The relationship of mental to physical space has several components. The first and most obvious is how space is perceived. The second is how I as the subjective consciousness use space: in other words how my psyche expresses itself spatially, and how it 'spills out' into the manipulation of objects around me. Thirdly, and related to both of these, is how I interpret space and the objects in it as parts of the worlds of Others: how the physical world acts as a communicative entity between subjectivities.

For most phenomenologists since Heidegger it is the body which provides the 'interface' between subject and world, not just literally as the skin between inside and outside, but in a more difficult sense as the linkage between my subjective experience and the Other's subjective experience.

For Sartre, body and world together comprise a necessary part of intersubjectivity:

> "It is through the mediacy of the world that they (thinking substances) communicate. My body as a thing in the world and the Other's body are the necessary intermediaries between the Other's consciousness and mine." [23]

For Merleau-Ponty, it is the relationship between our awareness of the body as a mental phenomenon and its existence in the world that forms the basis for an analysis of intersubjectivity:

> "Between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system. The other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body in its wake." [24]

He goes on to describe how the Other appears to exist in my world, as more than mere 'other':

> "Round the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in ... Already the other body has ceased to be a mere fragment of the world, and becomes the theatre of certain processes of elaboration, and, as it were, a certain 'view' of the world. There is taking place over there a certain manipulation of things hitherto my property. Someone is making use of my familiar objects. But who can it be? I say that it is another, a second self ..." [25]

Merleau-Ponty is not describing any actual action on the part of the Other. The 'manipulation' he refers to happens merely in virtue of the Other's presence, as I realise that what I had thought of purely as components of my world are parts of his world as well. But then the scene develops, and the Other does take action:

> "But this alien life, like mine with which it is in communication, is an open life... It annexes natural objects by diverting them from their immediate significance, it makes tools for itself, and projects them into the environment in the shape of cultural objects." [26]

The Absent Other

The last part of Merleau-Ponty's story is an important link to the development of an idea of private space as a physical representation of an 'absent Other'. I have already suggested that the more abstract concept of 'private' in general terms can be connected to an encounter with the Other, and the realization that there is another subjective world which overlaps mine. The final stage in my analysis revolves around another realization - that my subjective world and the Other's have access to some of the same physical objects, which we can both view in a shared 'objectivity', and which have the potential to form some communicative connection between the Other and me, even in the Other's absence.

Unfortunately, at this crucial stage in my argument the available literature seems to thin out, but some tentative connections can be made between other writers' general observations and my more specific point.

Merleau-Ponty talks of "projecting them (tools) into the environment in the shape of cultural objects". [27] A 'cultural object', perhaps, is something which I and an Other can mutually identify as having an equivalent meaning within our own subjectivities. It can therefore 'stand for' something, or take on a representative role, in a way which each of us will understand. This is not the 'empathic' form of tool-use which, as Heidegger suggested, leads towards an unconscious sharing of Being in the World. Rather, it is an encounter with a deliberately placed object which has the effect of making me aware of the radical 'Otherness' of another presence through a recognition of the object's significance in both our subjective worlds. As such, it can stand for the Other: an encounter with the object has some, if not all, of the qualities of an encounter with the Other.

Other writers also debate this relationship between object and Other, though never quite directly in terms of the object's capacity to 'stand for' the Other. Sartre, as I have suggested, hints that the 'look' may be present in an object rather than a being. Levinas's 'visage', an entity that is not quite physical, may be present, as Critchley puts it, as a 'trace':

> "the crucial motif of trace... Being present only as remnant of somebody who has passed ... the trace of the other marks and even constitutes the other's face. The other enters through a back door." [28]

Aron Gurwitsch, a contemporary of Heidegger and strongly influenced by him, develops a concept of overlapping 'horizons' of different subjectivities, with shared 'things':

> "As a consequence, 'things' are encountered by virtue of the world in which they are at hand for others - a world which is always already also mine beforehand ...
>
> (If we) enter into these horizons (the situations of others) and what is 'co-included' in them, then we not only arrive at the present situations in which fellow human beings previously only 'co-included' are at work, we also attain to the situations of our present being together with fellow human beings." [29]

What emerges from all these examples, albeit rather hazily, is a picture of physical space and the objects within it as the site of interaction between overlapping consciousnesses. An object is only 'for' each consciousness in the way that it constitutes, and is constituted by, that consciousness. However, in certain circumstances the object can suggest not just how it is for me, but how it is for an Other, and in doing so it brings me into some kind of presence of the Other. This being brought 'into the presence' of an absent Other is, I suggest, the experience of private space.

The Experience of Private Space

The point that I have been drawing towards is a description of the experience of private space. I have already suggested that the private encounter may be described as the situation where I am forced to confront the alterity of the Other, and come to a realisation of another subjectivity in some relationship with mine. The point is, can some of the quality of an actual encounter be generated by my interaction with the physical environment after its manipulation by the Other, but without the Other's presence?

To the extent that I share a cultural background with the Other, I can recognize that a particular environment represents a singular manipulation - a manipulation made by a particular Other with a particular intent - even if I cannot identify the Other himself. To explain the experience of this, I will return to the park bench:

I pass by a park bench. Its presence does not disturb me, and I know that if I want to I can sit on it. But suppose that the bench has an empty sleeping bag on it. My perception of the bench is changed. Now I am reluctant to sit on it, even if there is space (and even if the bag is clean). This is not because of some objective analysis of territoriality - I know that I am fully entitled to sit on the bench, and in any case the chances are that the bag owner will not return for a while, if at all. But I am undergoing some kind of change of conscious awareness in the presence of the bag....

The reason I am reluctant is that the bag sits there in lieu of some other presence - the presence of an Other. The ghost of the bag owner hovers around the bag, not creating a boundary, but suggesting an encounter, and the suggested encounter seems to have almost as much potency as an actual one. In the presence of the bag, my own world - the world of my subjective consciousness - is thrown into some relationship with another world.

But what is the nature of this almost-encounter? Experience tells us that all the descriptions of the encounter with the Other have something of the truth about them: Merleau-Ponty's 'vortex', sucking my world of objects into its own sphere; Sartre's 'look' (the bag looks on behalf of its owner) which forces me into an unusual self-awareness; Levinas's radical alterity, provoking me into a wonderment of the unapproachable difference yet equivalent subjectivity of the bag-owner; perhaps Husserl's super-transcendental ego which unifies me and the bag-owner in some truly fundamental realm. All these seem possible merely in the presence of the bag, and they all (or something like them) might pass through my mind and catch me in a way that the empty bench would not.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has not been to establish that there is an experience of privacy in certain situations; that observation itself is unquestioned. The intention has been to identify a direction within phenomenological writing which might explain what the experience is, and the role that space (and the objects in it) play in generating that experience.

It seems that the function of physical space in mediating the overlap of essentially mental entities - the subjective worlds of individual consciousness - may, in spite of the paradoxes inherent in the relationship, be a rich area of study. As well as providing a way of examining the nature of 'private' without necessarily putting it into opposition with 'public', it may also help to illustrate the role that space can play in defining objectivity as an area of overlap of different subjectivities within a common culture. From this perspective the private spatial experience is the birthplace of the objective view: the point at which two subjectivities are forced not only into a realisation of each other's existence, but into an acknowledgement that physical things also have a place in the other's world.

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