

An Examination of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"

This paper examines and interprets the following quote from Jean-Paul Sartre's, "Being and Nothingness."¹ 'It is shame or pride which reveals to me the "Other's" look and myself at the end of that look. It is shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know*, the situation of being looked at'.² It will also discuss whether the distinction between living and knowing is useful for understanding relations to other people and will conclude with Sartre's own description of the duality of the "self" and the "Other."

In Emmanuel Levinas conversation with Philippe Nemo in "Ethics and Infinity,"³ Levinas acknowledges that the "look is both knowledge and perception" and that "access to the face is ethical,"⁴ but it would be best "not to make contact with the eyes as to do so implies a social connection to the Other."⁵ Levinas goes on to explain that "a relationship to the face can surely be dominated by perception"⁶ because what the "Other" perceives to be the truth dominates the perception of what the "Other" is looking at. The face reveals the true "Other," it is naked and exposed, revealing a testimony of truth. As the hands of another can, somewhat limitedly, reveal the "Others" truth of worth, in a material sense, the face is perceived, in all its revelations. I say a material sense by means of how the hands of another may shows signs of wear due to manual labour or the smoothness of refined pampering. The hands, unlike the face, are unable to hide their truths. The skin and percept of the face will display its nudity and allow the "Others" gaze to know its truth, when it is unaware of another's look.

In understanding Sartre's statement that "shame and pride reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look," it is important to know the differing rolls the "self" and the "Other" represent. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)⁷ mused over the ego and the "self", the ego being the "Other", the peeping tom, the observer. The "look" is in pure reference to "myself."⁸ The Other observes the "self" as an object to be looked at and judged.⁹ Shame is the shame of "self," it is the recognition that the "Other" is looking and judging.¹⁰ Pride is the look of respect or self worth reflected by the perceived attention forwarded by the "Others" look. The body views itself through the perception of another and thus their own perception of "self" at the end of that look. Although different, the reflective look transposed through one look to another, gives off its reflective response as if the "self" viewed its reflection in a mirror, and although the person looking back differs from the person looking in, the look, whether it be of shame or pride, is reflected, one to the other. The perception of self that is the "look," briefly portrays the truth of self until the ego realises it is being looked at.

¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*. Vol. 326 of University paperbacks, (United States: Routledge, 1969.)pp.261:12-13

² Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and nothingness* (Routledge. United States. 1969) pp:261:11-13

³ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: The Face*. (Duchesne University Press. Pittsburgh. 1985)

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: The Face*. (Duchesne University Press. Pittsburgh. 1985) Pp.85:9-11

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: The Face*. (Duchesne University Press. Pittsburgh. 1985) Pp.85:14-15

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: The Face*. (Duchesne University Press. Pittsburgh. 1985) Pp.85:17, 86:1

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for literature, but declined to accept it.

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-bio.html

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and nothingness* (Routledge. United States. 1969)pp259:1-2

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and nothingness* (Routledge. United States. 1969)pp.261:15-16

¹⁰ Kim Atkins. "self" and subjectivity: *The Look*. (Queensland: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.) pp. 99

“It is shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know*, the situation of being looked at.”¹¹ It is shame which makes me live and not know, for to know is prideful and through pride I do not live. Pride is the mask shame displays to deceive the “Others” look from knowing. I say that it is shame that makes me live because it is a driving emotion; it highlights awareness of our inadequacies or inadequacies, it makes “me” an object. The object I allow myself to become through the Others look, bears a mutual relation with other objects that surround me such as the walls, doors and even the keyhole the Other views myself through.¹² Pride is only a mask that shame displays. It is shame which makes me live and not know the situation of being looked at, because pride proclaims knowledge that I do not have and in doing so, I claim to know what I do not know. If I look in a mirror long enough, I may see what the Other sees, but my perception of self will always differ from the perception of another, even when that perception is myself looking at myself because the mask I so prominently wear, deceives even me.

“The face escapes from being to correlate with knowing.”¹³ It is important to be able to distinguish between living and knowing because the reflective nature of the observed insinuates that the “self” lives and the “Other” knows and because the “Other” knows, it lives, meaning that the “self” and the “Other” (look) are the ego. We are not aware of ourselves until we notice we are being watched by another. The face, the part of a human that is used to refer to a person, escapes, from existing, from being, to convey a mutual relation with knowing, a conscious design and purpose. The face defines who a person is on a tangible level of existence, a level of existence which relies upon the senses to exist. The face of a human, displays the reactions and responses that the five senses construct. To understand knowing of an unconscious design, the face flees from its confines to an unconscious state of being, whilst retaining, on the conscious level, the illusion of remaining. On this unconscious, intangible level, the face understands knowing, thereby understanding the experience of living.

When the “self” is unaware of being looked at, truth is displayed upon the face of self. This truth reveals the sum of the “self’s” experiences and is a truth that the wearer rarely sees themselves. The “Other”, the observer, is able to view truth of the “self” because the “Other” is viewing the “self” in secret, as one who peeps through a keyhole. When the “self” is unaware of the “Others” observations, the “self” wears no mask thereby revealing truth. We perceive ourselves in the way we are being perceived, thereby objectifying ourselves, because the gaze of the “Other” is objectifying. The “self” also knows due to the dualist nature of man and the part duality plays in reflections between the “self” and the “Other,” to explain the whole and the duality of the whole. The contradictive nature of a human being reflects the conflicting duality of the “self” and the “Other,” which also make up the contrasting differences creating the one, the “self.” It is useful to understand the distinction between living and knowing but not essential for understanding relations to other people.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s descriptions of a “being for itself” (self) and a “being for another” (Other), depicts one being with two points of reference, the classic duality of the human being. The use of the word duality appears to be a word utilised when the lack of a better explanation is available. Sartre avoided using the term dualism through the use of the following phrases: “When the self is unaware that another is looking at it, it is a being in itself (en-soi) and for-itself (pour-soi), the subconscious and consciousness respectively. When the self realises that

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and nothingness* (Routledge. United States. 1969)pp.261:12-13

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and nothingness* (Routledge. United States. 1969)pp.261:22-23

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: The Face.* (Duquesne University Press. Pittsburgh. 1985) Pp.87:1-5

it is being looked at, it becomes a being for another (for-others (pour-autrui)).”¹⁴ Sartre referred to the ‘self’ and the ‘Other,’ as objects highlighting the duality of human beings, yet Jean-Paul Sartre described human duality more effectively than most.

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¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre. Edited by Edward N. Zalta.2:Ontology:4-5 (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2004.) lines:45-46