Amos Ameh Ichaba

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND SOCIAL COHESION: AN ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Amos Ameh Ichaba

Abstract

This paper is aimed at creating the proper ontological understanding of 'otherness' with the view to demonstrating how such understanding is essential to the reduction of conflicts, killings, misunderstandings and bitterness between persons and societies in order to foster social cohesion. The paper is a consequence of reflections on the perceived increasing hostility between persons, groups, communities and societies across the world. Common commitments are increasingly becoming elusive and one wonders what the fundamental problem could be. This paper therefore raises the following questions: what could be responsible for the widespread hostilities across the world, especially in the 21st Century? Can the possible lack of proper understanding of 'alterity' be the problem? What then is alterity from the ontological point of view? How can the proper ontological understanding of alterity bring about greater social cohesion? Using the critical and hermeneutic methods, this paper, reflecting on Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis, argues that the right ontological understanding of 'the other' as indispensable to the existence and wellbeing of the self in an ontological unity, is fundamental to the achievement of social cohesion across the globe.

Key Words: *Alterity, Intersubjectivity, Social Cohesion, Ontology, Merleau-Ponty*

Introduction

In the quest to satisfy one's interest in a social world of interests, clash of interests becomes almost inevitable. In other words, as each person or group within the society pursue their particular interests, their paths may cross with those of others and when each wants the self's interest to override the interest of the other with whom their paths have crossed, hostilities are brewed. This may account for the most fundamental explanation for the social hostilities, crises, conflicts and even killings that have occurred at various levels throughout the history of mankind.

The 21st Century presents little or no glimpse of hope to a possible end or even reduction of these social hostilities. In fact, new dimensions of the age long problems of racism, xenophobia, oppression and outright self-centeredness have taken root in some societies. A glaring and recent example is the xenophobic attacks in South Africa which left many persons dead and have created dangerous hostilities between the rest of Africa and South Africa. All these threaten social cohesion in favour of social disintegration. Many

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scholars and governments have made efforts to curb these social excesses by way of proffering solutions through scholarly researches and government policies but most of those solutions seem not to address the problem fundamentally. Most of the solutions are not geared towards correcting pervasive misconceptions, prejudices, negative orientations, mind-sets and ideologies which are the fundamental springboards of these social hostilities.

This paper, therefore, is aimed at creating the proper ontological understanding of 'otherness' (with special reference to Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis) with the view to demonstrating how such understanding is essential to the reduction of conflicts, killings, misunderstandings and bitterness between persons and societies in order to foster social cohesion.

The Discourse on Ontology of Alterity and Intersubjectivity

The term *alterity* comes from the Latin word *alter*, which means "other" and in contemporary philosophy, discussions of the other is basically that of the other human being. It is simply the state of human otherness. Intersubjectivity on the other hand, is the nature of the relationship or mutual influence that occurs between human subjects, while ontology is the philosophical study of being. More broadly, it studies concepts that directly relate to being, in particular, becoming, existence, reality as well as the basic categories of being and their relations.

To comprehensively analyse the ontology of alterity and intersubjectivity however, an examination of the ideas of some key philosophers on this subject matter in the history of philosophy is crucial. This will help to locate the contemporary status of the discourse in order to situate the perspective of this paper.

There are basically two approaches to the problem of intersubjectivity. The first is the epistemological approach by philosophers in the Cartesian tradition who construe the subject (the self) as self-enclosed and detached from the other. Since consciousness is defined as a non-temporal, transcendental ego, it becomes extremely difficult to authentically welcome another person and encounter his or her otherness. Consequently, I can know myself and only myself. "Philosophers in the Cartesian or Husserlian tradition therefore understand the self as a hermetically sealed entity, locked away as it were, in its own mind, fully present, unified and self-certain".[1] The second approach is typified in Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger's social ontologies.

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[1] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity, accessed September 11, 2019,
https://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/symposium/files/original/c06572997c8b5374b672aaa639800a34.PDF

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Here, the axiom of Cartesian subjectivity was replaced with a new axiom namely, the first principle of sociality. Since intersubjectivity is implicit in their ontology, it is no longer a problem for them. The impression of the self created by Heidegger and Scheler has a kind of non-self: open, ecstatic and in Heidegger's case, punctuated with a web of social structures.

Notwithstanding the undeniable radicality of Heidegger and Scheler's departure from Cartesian egology, it is unlikely to expand our understanding of intersubjectivity by projecting a social pre-ego in place of the notion of a solitary ego. Sartre makes important deviations from the Cartesian and Heideggerian legacies. The weak points in Sartre's philosophy, however, are precisely those elements of Cartesianism that he retains.[2]

By discarding the transcendental ego, yet, upholding the subject-object duality of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, Sartre is inconsistent in the Cartesian tradition. He thus defines the self as a constituting agent in relation to an object, not as a transcendental operator behind such relations. Sartre, of course, is in no sense a dualist. His thought, especially in *Being and Nothingness,* is sustaining of Cartesianism to the extent that he retains an "ontological separation" between the self and the other. For this reason, Sartre's critique of Hegel is essentially Cartesian.

Sartre's philosophically advanced ideas projected in "The Look" is clearly pioneered by Hegel. Part III of *Being and Nothingness* commences with a chapter on "The Existence of Others," a chapter terminating in "The Look".[3] Sartre's analysis of Hegel makes him to conclude that a negation of solipsism involves upholding a being to being relation between self and other, not a knowledge to knowledge relation.[4] Husserl and Hegel fail, on this account, as Husserl "measures" being by knowledge; Hegel "identifies" being with knowledge, and generally, the other for these thinkers is always an epistemic other. Hegel nevertheless "put the discussion on its true plane".[5]

According to Sartre, one of Hegel's central inadequacies is his epistemological optimism. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel parallels the truth of being with recognition of self-consciousness, a recognition that involves grasping my self as an object. The other fulfils this recognition by acting as a canvas from which the "image" of my self as an object takes form.

[2] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity

[3] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity

[4] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. Hazel Barnes. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 329.

[5] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 330.

I can grasp myself as an object in the other, Hegel says, because my initial approach to the other is as an object.

Hegel describes the I -Other relation as starting with the resistance of pure self-consciousness and consciousness-for-another, or "consciousness in the form of *thinghood"*.[6] At this stage, "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman".[7] Hegel maintains that this relationship is equally reciprocal to the degree that each individual gains independence through their dialectical relation with the other, but as Sartre points out, this relationship can never be identical since there is no transparency between what I am for myself and what the other is for him- or herself.[8]

I thus negate the other by denying his consciousness in order to seize the recognition of myself as I would in front of a mirror. We can thus interpret Hegel's words in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* "The negative is the self".[9] I attain self-knowledge, and in turn self-presence, by cancelling out the essentiality or interiority of the other. Hegel thus considers the other not only as an object, but an object necessary for apprehending the self.[10]

Sartre grossly undermines Hegel's epistemological optimism on ontological grounds. Again, the separation of being-for-itself and being-in-itself is of crucial importance. As consciousness, I cannot flee myself. In Sartre's words, "I pursue myself everywhere, I cannot escape myself, I reapprehend myself from behind. Even if I could attempt to make myself an object ... I should have to be the subject who is looking at it".[11] Sartre understands this prison-cell type of subjectivity as a simple fact of being-for-itself, which is why he posits an "ontological separation" between oneself and another.[12] My consciousness, as it appears to another consciousness, undergoes radical modifications.[13] We are both constituting agents, so there cannot be a passive relationship between us. More prominently, for Sartre, we cannot have a circuitous understanding of each other: "I am incapable," he

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[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A. V. Miller. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115

[7] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 115

[8] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 324

[9] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 26

[10] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity

[11] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 326

[12] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 328

[13] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 327

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writes, "of apprehending for myself the self which I am for the Other, just as I am incapable of apprehending on the basis of the *Other-as-object* which appears to me, what the Other is for himself".[14]

Hegel's error, according to Sartre, is to assume I could approach the other as an object while simultaneously apprehending myself as an object by way of the other. For Sartre, If I am to understand myself as an object in the other, the other must be a pure interiority, for only a subject is capable of reflecting the recognition of myself as an object (otherwise any inanimate object could give me the recognition I seek). But if I understand the other as a subject, the reflection of myself will blur, as the other is not simply a passive backdrop for my acts and intentions, but is a source of his own acts and intentions. When I recognize the other as subject, the other will thus modify my own sense of self.[15]

Hegel's idea of the other-as-mirror, as Sartre shows, is flawed. The other avails no clear reflection of myself, and as a result, "No universal knowledge can be derived from the relation of consciousnesses".[16] If Hegel is an epistemological optimist, Sartre is an epistemological cynic, a cynicism that is embedded in his ontology. This aspect of his thought becomes most apparent in his discussion of the look.

According to Sartre, "the Other does not constitute me as an object for myself but *for him"*.[17] The other, Sartre believes, is not an other-as object but an absolute freedom. My relation to the other, my being-for others, is directly as a subject of being, not an object of knowledge.[18] Solipsism is not an issue here because individuals relate not as *knowledge-objects* but as *being-subjects*, actively engaging and affecting each other. But this is just the problem. As a being-for-itself, a nothingness, the other is free of determinations, unfixed and unlimited. I experience the other's freedom, Sartre opines, at the cost of my slavery.[19] The other's infinite freedom is precisely what limits my own sovereignty, and the other's look-the moment of my direct or indirect encounter with the other-petrifies me, strips me of my subjectivity, in a word, objectifies me. Another consciousness is like a black hole, drawing all surrounding objects, including myself, into its undeniable gravity. When the other is subject, I am object and when I am subject, the other is object; within this vicissitude we can never encounter the alterity of the other as a subject.

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[14] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 327
[15] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 326
[16] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 328
[17] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 362
[18] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 341
[19] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 362

According to Sartre, any experience of a we-subject, an intersubjective or communal consciousness, is purely psychological, a subjective feeling within the process of individuation that, in his words, "is produced in special cases on the foundation of being-for-others in general".[20] The essence of the intersubjective relation is ultimately conflict and not being-with. Dan Zahavi holds the significant opinion that Sartre mistakenly conflates the idea of intersubjective consciousness with collective consciousness, thus denying any relevance to the we-subject. Sartre is rightly opposed to a position like Scheler's that posits an a priori relatedness linking subjects. This view reduces intersubjectivity to a homogeneous type of pre-subjectivity. But by discrediting the we-subject altogether, Sartre splits any relation between the self and the other, which in turn terminates the prospect of ontological unanimity between them. Ontological unanimity here means a positive encounter with the alterity of the other-positive in the sense that such an encounter does not strip away my own subjectivity. This may occur in an everyday situation, through a conversation perhaps or a simple handshake, preferably when two people are proximate and engaged, not distant or silently gazing at one another.[21]

The intersubjective world, in Sartre's opinion, rests on negation. Sartre recognizes the alterity of the other-his philosophical progress from Husserl and Hegel, and his escape from epistemological solipsism-but this alterity is overbearing. Sartre denies equable relations between people, and to this degree, his opinion of intersubjectivity is rigorously one-sided. He methodically exposes the violent side of alterity but his ontology prevents him from understanding alterity outside of the negative, or what Merleau-Ponty will call positive alterity.[22]

Social Cohesion: Conceptual Clarification

With its origin in the work of Emile Durkheim as early as 1893, social cohesion is not a new concept. However, interest in the notion of social cohesion as a policy tool re-surfaced in the mid-1990s when the governments of Canada, France and Britain and a number of international organizations – the Council of Europe (2000, 2001, 2004), the Club of Rome (Berger, 1998), UNESCO (2002) and others started utilizing this concept in their policy documents. Initial concerns were prompted by fear of the impact of globalization and other aspects of economic change; subsequently, the war on

[20] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 537

[21] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity

[22] Owen Ware, Ontology, Otherness and Self-Alterity: Intersubjectivity in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

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terror and concern over the loyalty of Muslim populations have fuelled discussions on the dynamics of social cohesion.[23] What then, is social cohesion?

Social cohesion has proven to be a difficult concept to define as it has been defined from various perspectives based on various orientations and biases. Social cohesion within the context of this paper however, simply refers to "the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other in order to achieve set common goals and objectives".[24] It involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.[25] A cohesive society therefore, is one where there is a common vision and sense of belonging for all communities; the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued. Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities and strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.[26]

Ontological understanding of Alterity/Intersubjectivity and Social Cohesion: Reflection on Merleau-Ponty's Reversibility Thesis

The breakdown of social cohesion across the globe, especially from the latter part of the 20th century to the 21st century is capable of breeding animosities and stalling development if not properly tackled. Although this breakdown in social cohesion can be considered as a response to divisions and cleavages within societies, related to factors including economic downturn, tensions associated with migration, religion and ethnic or cultural conflicts, a lasting

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[23] Andrew Markus and Liudmila Kirpitchenko, "Conceptualizing Social Cohesion", in *Social Cohesion in Australia,* ed. Jupp J, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 22

[24] Christian A. Larsen, *The Rise and Fall of Social Cohesion: The Construction and De-construction of Social Trust in the USA, UK, Sweden and Denmark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 15

[25] Judith Maxwell, Social dimensions of economic growth, accessed December 5, 2019, http://www.ipe.ualberta.ca/en/Eric%20J%20Hanson%20Memorial%20Lecture/*/media/economics/EventsAndS/Hanson/Hanson-Maxwell-Text.pdf

[26] Ted Cantle, *Interculturalism: The Era of Cohesion and Diversity*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 57

solution to the problem will have to address a more fundamental dimension. The position of this paper therefore, is that we need to examine the nature of our relationships by examining the ontological nature of otherness as well as intersubjective relations in order to deconstruct the notion that the other person is a completely distant other. In connection to the earlier discourse on alterity and intersubjectivity therefore, the ontological reversibility thesis of Merleau-Ponty will be adopted for this analysis in view of social cohesion.

In his earlier works and most prominently *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty captured his intersubjective ontology in his *reversibility thesis* grounded in his concept of 'the flesh' which he defined as a prototype of Being, the original and ultimate component of all there is.[27] For better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis, his examples within as well as between bodies are crucial. Consider first the popular case of the body proper relating or returning to itself, as in the example of touching the hand which palpates environing objects with the other hand.[28] When my right hand comes into contact with the left hand palpating something, its activity easily reverses into the passivity of an organ being touched by the other hand. At the crossroads of touching and of being touched, my sensible body manifests itself both as a tactile "agent" and a "patient," distributing active and passive roles among different bodily parts.

The same compresence of tactile activity and passivity is unveiled in a body-to-body encounter with another person in an example of shaking hands. When my bodily organ touches an organ belonging to the body of another person, or more specifically, when the other returns my handshake, my shaking hand is being shaken as well and the activity of touching is present together with the passivity of being touched. It follows that the handshake exhibits the same kind of reversibility that is manifest within the sensible dynamics of my own body, and that the latter provides a ready model for the former. The handshake too is reversible, I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching".[29] The handshake seems to extend the sentient sensibility of a carnal auto - relation onto a relation with another incarnated self. The other person appears to turn the intra-corporeal reversibility of my right hand touching the left hand into an inter-corporeal exchange, playing out the reversal of touching and being touched between two bodies.

We need not be one body in order to be of one flesh; reversibility is a carnal auto-relation operative within the flesh as a whole, where my body and

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[27] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 140

[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 176, 133

[29] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 187, 142

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the body of the other "are like organs of one single intercorporeality". In other words, my body and other bodies (whether celestial or of other persons, plants, vehicles) are viewed in terms of their belonging to the whole of Being or Flesh, governed by the principle of reflexivity. This indicates an ontological fusion (in the prototype of Being he calls Flesh) of subjectivity and objectivity evident in the relations of the plurality of being.

Situating the reversibility thesis of Merleau-Ponty within the social context, it becomes clearer that ontologically and fundamentally, alterity or otherness does not refer to a distant other with no serious unity or connection with the self. Rather, the other inexorably shares the same Being (Flesh) with the self, in which case, this Being becomes their ontological unity. This reversibility thesis also suggests a mutual and reciprocal openness of the world of the self on the other in an encounter to the extent that activity and passivity of encountering and being encountered become inseparable. Within the Merleau-Pontean reversibility thesis, no self enjoys any ontological advantage or privilege over the other. In an encounter between three people for instance, there are three 'selfs' and two 'others' for each of the three 'selfs' all of who are reversibly unified to the point where none of the three can strictly be called 'the self' and none strictly called 'the other'. The only distinctive attribute of each of the persons becomes their respective identities.

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that ontologically and fundamentally, human beings are unified in the expression of their respective beings. Social distances and hostilities evident in contemporary times are not ontological but artificial. They are consequences of an era that has misunderstood, misplaced and even lost the fundamental meaning and purpose of being. If the Merleau-Pontian reversibility thesis is understood, appreciated and internalized, why would aborigines consider immigrants as unwanted and completely alien and would want to send the immigrants out of their country or even kill them? Why would an ethnic group consider another ethnic group as the cause of their woes and would embark on a project of eliminating them? Why would one region subdue and oppress other regions of the same country because of some temporary advantage they enjoy over other regions? Why would adherents of one religion contemplate torturing and even killing other human beings considered not to share the same creed with them?

It is urgently imperative therefore, to reemphasize the unity of the Being we share as humans, which should underlie the relationship that should exist within and between persons, groups, regions and societies in view of social cohesion.

Conclusion

It is expected that a century when Information and Communication Technology has increasingly turned the world into a "global village", should also bring with it greater degree of social cohesion. The reverse, however, has been the case as indicated in the introductory part of this paper. But given the inevitability of social cohesion for peaceful and progressive coexistence, the world is left with no alternative than to identify the root cause of the breakdown of social cohesion in contemporary times and accordingly uncover potent and durable means of restoring it. It is in line with this germane assignment that this paper suggests an ontological solution with the Merleau-Pontean reversibility thesis as a model. As indicated above, the self and the other are not completely separate and independent beings but share a commonality of being in their interactions at an ontological level. In a similar manner, Martin Buber distinguished between the "I – Thou" and the "I – it" relationships. The "I-Thou" relationship is a form of relationship that demands the engagement of the whole being in a relationship and sees the other as much valuable a subject as the 'I'. On the other hand, the "I-it" relationship is the type of relationship whereby the self does not involve his or her whole being in the relationship and sees the other as an object in which case, the other becomes a means to an end. For Buber, therefore, the "I-Thou" relationship is dialogical since all subjects share a "unity of being" while the "I-it" relationship is monological as it undermines this unity of being. A massive reorientation in this direction will be fundamentally useful in the quest for the restoration of social cohesion. It should be noted at this point, that as persons, we were first human *beings* before belonging to a nation, religion, region, class etc which makes our *being* more fundamental and important than those secondary identities we acquire beyond the being we share with the rest of humankind. If this consciousness is properly integrated into the minds of humans, the mental foundation for social cohesion would have been laid; the mental distance between the self and the other would have been sufficiently minimized and a fundamental cerebral unity between humans necessary for social cohesion entrenched. In the final analysis, this paper considers this problem of social disintegration as a social problem which solution can begin from a reminder of our ontological sociality.