Temporal Finitude, Embodied Perception and Ethical Call: Synthesising Perspectives of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas on Encountering "the Other"

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Abstract

Phenomenology has consistently concerned itself with the encounter with "the Other" and the implications of this encounter for the self, yet some of the principal expounders of Phenomenology differ significantly in their views. For Martin Heidegger (1962), it serves as a catalyst for the confrontation with the finitude of the self, as defined by one's own temporal and spatial limitations enforced by one's mortality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) moves from this abstract ontological engagement towards a theory centred on the physicality of the perception of and interaction between physical bodies. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) further shifts towards an ethical perspective, which views the encounter with "the Other" not as a catalyst towards authenticity or as a co-creator of meaning, but as a fulcrum by which the self is leveraged beyond its limitations in order to respond to the ethical responsibility it has towards the vulnerability of "the Other". Despite their differences, each of these philosophers offer a valuable contribution towards the understanding of what it means to encounter another being, yet there is want for a synthesis of these contributions. This article aims to compare these differing perspectives to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the encounter with "the Other", and thus highlight the necessity of understanding each philosopher's perspective in conjunction, rather than in conflict, with each other. This article concludes that a comprehensive attempt at a synthesis is both possible and worth revisiting.

About the author

Born in Johannesburg in 2001, I attribute the most important and effective early education I received to my family and parents in particular. Being exposed to — and entrusted with — the knowledge of the giants on whose shoulders we all, philosophers in particular, stand instilled an early and steadfast love for knowledge itself, as well as the curiosity to pursue it. I am currently in my final year of a BA Humanities degree, majoring in English Studies and Psychology while minoring in Philosophy. I plan on pursuing my postgraduate studies in English and to hopefully pursue writing in all forms after that.

1. Introduction

Philosophers of phenomenology and existentialism have always directed their efforts towards answering what some might consider unanswerable questions. This can be said to be the truest calling of philosophy, to bring light to those aspects of humanity where darkness is the deepest and most enduring. One such example is the question of what it means to encounter another being whose alterity is so irreducible that it cannot simply be reduced to one's own perspective. A being such as this is termed "the Other" and is paid particular attention within the aforementioned philosophical fields. In these fields, it becomes a tool with which philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas can mine answers to questions about selfhood, perception and ethical responsibility respectively. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]) engages with the encounter with "the Other" and its relevance to selfhood from an ontological perspective, in which the inherent temporal limitations of the Self become reflected back towards itself through its encounter with "the Other" as a distinct yet similar being. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012 [1945]), Merleau-Ponty shifts his focus away from this ontological perspective to an epistemological one in which the Self perceives and is perceived by "the Other" and outlines the process through which this mutualistic perception constructs meaning for both the Self and "the Other". Lastly, Levinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity* (1969 [1961]) that the Self's encounter with "the Other" precipitates an ethical call towards responsibility that precedes either Heidegger's ontological framework or the epistemological one of Merleau-Ponty.

In this article I argue that, while each of these philosophers contributes something unique towards their respective fields, they ultimately address distinct aspects of the issue at hand. Thus, it is my belief that to adequately answer the question of what it means for the self to encounter "the Other", one cannot rely on any one of these contributions in isolation. The purpose of this article, then, will be to lay the foundation for an attempt to synthesise the perspectives and contributions of the three aforementioned philosophers into a unified philosophy which can provide a holistic answer to the question of the self's encounter with "the Other". This is, of course, a challenging task which I leave open to

any willing to attempt it; and one which I myself will undertake in the future.

2. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*

To understand how Heidegger (1962) conceives of an encounter with "the Other", one must first understand how he conceptualises both the Self and "the Other" within a world in which such an encounter is even possible. In order for an encounter between two such entities to occur, the existence of each as a distinct entity must be presupposed. Heidegger (1962:27) coins the term *Dasein* to describe human beings and the term can be literally translated as "Being-there", which reflects his view that such beings do not exist in isolation — or in a subject-object dualism as in previous Cartesian philosophies — but rather as a Being-in-the-world or *in-der-welt-sein* whose existence is inextricably tied to the world around it. Heidegger's *Dasein* is also a fundamentally social being whose existence is permeated by the norms and projections of the society in which it finds itself — even when it is physically isolated from that society. This aspect is referred to as Being-with or *Mitsein* (Heidegger, 1962:157). This means that any one *Dasein* shares its world with other similar beings and this begins to lay the foundation for the way the Self can encounter "the Other". However, Heidegger (1962:68, 78) suggests that *Dasein* exists inauthentically in their day-to-day life in a way that he calls *Uneigentlichkeit*. This inauthentic mode of existence arises when *Dasein* falls away from its inherent individuality into conformity and anonymity among the crowd, turning from an "I" towards the "they" or *das Man* (Heidegger, 1962:149). The "fallenness" of this concept is no mere poetic choice, nor does it refer to a moral failing, but is used quite literally to describe the way the individual Self forgets its potentiality and is subsumed into the group — an existential process Heidegger (1962:219) describes as *Verfallen*. In this inauthentic existence, there is no distinction between members of the group beyond that which is instrumental, as they all conform to the standards of what "one" does, says or thinks — much like herded sheep (Heidegger, 1962:154–168) — and in this way there can be no meaningful encounter between the Self and "the Other". Therefore, in order for a meaningful encounter to occur, *Dasein* must reach an authentic mode of existence in which it can recognise both its own and thus "the Other's" individuality. This

authenticity — or *Eigentlichkeit* — can be attained as a result of a variety of factors which *Dasein* experiences as a result of its inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1962:78). *Dasein* experiences a "call of conscience" — or *Gewissensruf* — which arises from its necessary preoccupation with its own potential, termed *Sorge* or "care" (Heidegger, 1962:241) and which encourages the Self to live up to its full potential. This potential refers to the ability of the Self to live authentically, meaning to live in a way such that it acknowledges itself as an individual and thus as being individually responsible, particularly when it comes to mortality. Heidegger (1962) suggests that by acknowledging its own individuality, *Dasein* begins to see those around it as equally individual, rather than as a mere background. However, in perceiving those around it — and thus their limitations — as equal, the *Dasein* is forced to acknowledge its own limitations and through this become a "Being-toward-death" or *Sein-zum-Tode* (Heidegger, 1962:277) which can live truly authentically.

This is reflected by the title of Heidegger's work, *Being and Time* (1962), which emphasises the importance of temporal limitation or morality regarding the nature of *Dasein*, yet this is contrasted by the work of Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (2003 [1943]:401) in which he views the encounter between the Self and "the Other" as a clash between conflicting freedoms and the ability of said freedom to negate rather than to reflect and elevate. Heidegger's conception of what it means to encounter "the Other" situates this interaction as primarily an ontological and existential one in which the Self is able to achieve a deeply authentic existence as a result of its interaction with another being that it can recognise as distinct from itself, yet which shares the same spatial and temporal limitations. This also emphasises the necessity of alterity within "the Other" that goes beyond the superficial so that any meaningful interaction with it can occur and this becomes an important foundation for later philosophers' understanding of similar encounters.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

Merleau-Ponty is one such philosopher, however his focus turns away from Heidegger's abstract ontological conception of an encounter with "the Other" towards a more concrete epistemological one rooted in the physical embodiment of both the Self and "the Other"

and the mutual perception that occurs as a result of this. Merleau-Ponty (2012) prioritises the pre-reflective experience of the physically embodied Self as the first entity which the Self experiences and which is experienced by the Self. This means that the Self inhabits a "lived body" or *le corps propre* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:xxxi, xlviii), rather than a disembodied *cogito*, which is already a part of a meaningful world and which is the vessel by which this meaning is communicated. This communication is understood as bodily intentionality and relies on physical cues such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions to express the sentience of the subject which lies within it, as these gestures are a physical representation of mood and intention (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:139). This communication is also pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic as it relies not on conscious cognitive structures but on implicit and tacit understandings of such gestures which emanate from the shared universality of the human experience. However, the embodied Self is not devoid of any conscious aspects as it carries its own future projects, present emphasis and past habits along with it in the form of an "intentional arc" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:137). The intersection of two of these arcs in a physical encounter forms the basis by which the subject of each arc can recognise the other as a fellow subject rather than an isolated object by revealing the individual style and orientation of each. Furthermore, any physical encounter between two subjects always occurs within a perceptual horizon which is shared by both and which forms the implicit background out of which subjects emerge as distinct within the perceiving Self's field of vision. This concept is later extended by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968:144–147) which introduces the aspect of reversibility through the concept of "the flesh" (*la chair*) as a medium of the world through which he who sees and she who is seen, she who touches and he who is touched are intertwined by the reciprocal nature of said medium. In this case, it is impossible to touch without being touched or to see without being seen, and this dissolves the Cartesian barrier between subject and object similarly to Heidegger's *Dasein* (1962) and its intertwinement with the world.

However, this does not mean that "the Other" can ever be transparently perceived by the seer or toucher, as it retains an inherent "opacity" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012:340) which is in itself necessary to preserve the alterity of "the

Other" — an endeavour which has been proven to be vitally important to any meaningful encounter with "the Other" through the investigation of Heidegger's conception of such an encounter in the previous paragraph. This contrast between reversibility and opaqueness are the pillars of Merleau-Ponty's conception of an encounter with "the Other", as he suggests that while the subject may mutualistically perceive and be perceived by "the Other", there is an inherent limit to how deep this perception can go. This limit is a necessary symptom of the fact that both the perceived "Other" and the body in which it finds itself are subjects in the world, rather than objects, in the same way that the perceiving entity is a subject. Thus, neither can perceive the other in totality as this would mean absorbing the difference of the other into one's own perspective which would objectify and de-alter it to the point at which it is no longer divergent enough to truly be considered "the Other". This is important in two ways: firstly — and perhaps semantically — if "the Other" was reduced to an object that could be totally possessed, then a true encounter between it and the Self would be impossible; and secondly, the space that arises between the knower and the known as a result of the enduring opaqueness of both becomes the space in which ethical responsibility can exist. This is because this space forces both entities to acknowledge the independence of the other, which in turn protects their freedom and allows a genuine dialogue of mutual meaning-making to occur. This ethical consideration also becomes the focus of further philosophical investigation into what it means to encounter "the Other".

4. Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*

The philosopher to take this next logical step is Emmanuel Levinas (1969). Levinas's understanding of an encounter with "the Other" holds the previously mentioned ethical considerations close to its heart, positioning them as pre-cognitive in the same way that Merleau-Ponty (1962) positions perception of the body-subject. Levinas views this encounter as one dictated primarily by ethics — rather than authenticity or perception — and this is reflected in the title of his work. By "Totality", Levinas (1969:43) means the tradition of Western philosophical models to prioritise comprehension above all else, leading to the reduction of "the Other" into its own conceptual frameworks by observing

and categorising it until it has been mastered and thus deprived of its true alterity. In this instance, human relation only goes as far as its understanding allows and that which cannot be understood is abandoned at best and attacked at worst. Levinas (1969:41) contrasts this with the term "Infinity": that which refuses categorisation or comprehension and thus exceeds "Totality". This "infinite" (Levinas, 1969:41) encounter transcends language and cognition and imposes upon the Self an ethical relation of infinite responsibility without reciprocity, in which "the Other's" vulnerability and irreducible difference call into question and strip away the Self's ontological security. This ultimately results in the precipitation of a mode of relation between the Self and "the Other" which is grounded in an obligation that no ontology can exhaust or justify. For Levinas (1969), this encounter is instantiated in the face-to-face relation, wherein the visage of "the Other" — more than a mere configuration of features — is an expression of alterity that issues a call to responsibility. This call compels the Self to recognise "the Other's" absolute uniqueness and to respond with justice and hospitality, situating ethics as the "first philosophy" (Levinas, 1969:304), the foundation upon which all subsequent social, political, and epistemic structures must rest. In this asymmetrical relation, the Self is exposed and vulnerable in a way that mirrors the exposure of "the Other" and this calls the Self to stand in or substitute itself for the vulnerability of "the Other". This uproots the Self's narcissistic tendency to assimilate experiences into a coherent totality, revealing the process by which the Self's very identity is constituted in and through this ongoing ethical response. Importantly, Levinas (1969) insists that this ethical relation cannot be reduced to choice or contract, for it is beyond any deliberation or mutual recognition: a pre-cognitive summons that occurs prior to any exchange of information or assertion of rights, aligning it with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account of bodily perception as a primary mode of engagement. This thereby shifts the focus of philosophy from ontology to ethics, from being to responsibility.

By privileging the ethical over the ontological, Levinas (1969) reframes subjectivity itself: rather than viewing the Self as an autonomous substance or knowing subject as in a Cartesian system, he conceives of it as fundamentally relational, meaning that its freedom involves the capacity to respond to the infinite responsibility an

encounter with "the Other" subjects it to. Thus, Levinas (1969) encourages an approach to each encounter not as an occasion for mastery, but as a sacred obligation to acknowledge and uphold the irreducible dignity of "the Other" which is crucial to the ability for the Self to engage with it in any meaningful way. He believes that these meaningful encounters serve as invitations for beings to transcend their totalising mentalities (Levinas, 1969:21) and exist more ethically as "infinite" beings (Levinas, 1969:284, 289–294). Whereas Heidegger (1962) situates "the Other" within the existential structures of *Dasein*'s thrown-ness and Merleau-Ponty (1962) grounds intersubjectivity in the reversible flesh, Levinas (1969) insists that true alterity exceeds any horizon of visibility or comprehension, evidence of an infinite "Other" whose very self-presentation generates an obligatory duty that cannot be refused.

5. Summary and Synthesis

These three philosophers' conceptions of what it means to encounter "the Other" may seem to be indifferent to — if not in conflict with — each other, however there are some points of agreement and overlap. Firstly and fore-mostly: for Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, the encounter with "the Other" is not a secondary event which the isolated subject engages in optionally but rather the necessary event through which the Self is constituted (Zahavi, 2001:151, 153–158). For Heidegger this occurs ontologically through *Mitsein* or Being-with (1962:157), for Merleau-Ponty this occurs phenomenologically through embodied perception (1962) and for Levinas this occurs ethically through infinite responsibility (1969), however the underlying principle is the same in each case where the nature of "the Other" is described as that which fundamentally interrupts and redefines the Self's existence. Secondly, Heidegger's *Mitsein* (1962:157) and Merleau-Ponty's "inter-corporeity" (1968:141) share in their conception of the intersubjectivity of human society being inherent and built in to it, rather as some higher-order activity which only some get to engage in (Zahavi, 2001:152–154). Both philosophers believe that there is no primarily solitary consciousness which then engages secondarily with the world around it, but rather that this consciousness is inherently and inextricably connected to the world in which it exists. This means that for Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, selfhood and otherness are mutually

co-given from the start and engage in a necessary interaction which contributes to the development of both. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) conception of embodied existence forms the basis for Levinas's (1969) understanding of the way the Self encounters the visage of "the Other" and subsequently experiences an overwhelming ethical call to responsibility (Zahavi, 2001:159–163). However, in this instance Merleau-Ponty's contribution of embodied perception cannot provide the full account for Levinas's ethical argument and thus is a prime example of how these philosophies need to co-exist with each other in order to truly and effectively answer the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" to its fullest. This perhaps calls for an examination of the question itself to identify the specific aspects of it which need to be answered. One must then first begin with the Self — or the entity which encounters "the Other" — and what precisely is meant by this. While all three philosophers move away from the Cartesian notion of an isolated mind, ego or *cogito*, they do not move away in the same direction or at the same speed. Heidegger's (1962:27) *Dasein* remains rather abstract in its preoccupation with its mortality and the ontological *Geworfenheit* it experiences within a network of other *Daseins*, yet Merleau-Ponty's (2012:xxxi) embodied Self is as concrete as one can get in his focus on the reversible experience of *le corps propre*. Levinas (1969:302–304) yet still portrays the Self as a hostage or prisoner to "the Other", at the mercy of its ethical call and the only conception of the three which sees the relationship between the Self and "the Other" asymmetrical. One must then move to "the Other" and perform a similar analysis. In Heidegger's (1962) world, "the Other" serves either as a faceless and formless background into which the inauthentic Self can sink or as a mirror by which the authentic Self's true nature can be reflected back towards itself. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) account rejects "the Other" as a purely mentalist entity and acknowledges its ability to reverse the direction of perception by touching that which touches it and seeing that which sees it. Levinas (1969) positions "the Other" as being in an asymmetrical position to the Self in which it can — through the irrevocable alterity of its face — command the Self to heed the claim to responsibility it makes over it. Therefore, if each philosopher conceptualises both the Self and "the Other" in a unique yet equally useful

way, the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" can only be answered by a synthesis of all three.

6. Conclusion

While none of these philosophies paint an individually complete picture of what it means to encounter "the Other", this is perhaps their strength. By narrowing their focus to a particular aspect of said encounter, they each provide a rich and deep account of that particular aspect which — when stitched together — could provide a holistic and complete philosophical answer to the proposed question. Heidegger's focus on the necessity of authenticity to facilitate a meaningful encounter between the Self and "the Other" in *Being and Time* (1962), Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the embodiment of both Self and "Other" and how this relates to the way they perceive each other in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and Levinas's prioritisation of ethics and the call to infinite responsibility experienced by the Self towards "the Other" in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) each address a unique and important aspect of this encounter and its implications for both the Self and "the Other". However, there is little scholarly attention towards an attempt at unifying these individual contributions into something that has a *gestalt* effect in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

With this article, I aimed to at least begin the process of rectifying that, by first outlining how each philosopher approaches the question of what it means to encounter "the Other" and then laying the groundwork for what a synthesis of the ideas of these philosophers might look like in the hope that they provide a more satisfactory answer to the question at hand when viewed in conjunction — rather than in conflict — with each other.

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