

Joining In

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(i) *Constructing ourselves as 'we'*

Therefore [the Other] appears as the one who in his full freedom and in his free projection toward his possibles, puts me out of play...by refusing to 'join in'.¹

So, it appears, though another "in his full freedom...puts me out of play" this is by their refusing to "join in" (*mit-machen*). What then if the other did not "refuse" and did "join in"? Another can indicate (by bodily disposition and tone of voice) a shared way of taking things. Don't 'we' thus form a joint subject? Sartre is suspicious of these possibilities and attacks Heidegger's use of being-with, as promising more than isolation, but as proffering 'we' and 'us' as only an undifferentiated mass. What are we to make of Sartre's difference with Heidegger and what do we see, now, as the possibilities of 'joining in'?

There do appear to be relationships between one person and another outside the pattern of domination and appropriation that force both 'actor' and 'victim' into their respective isolated outlooks. We can speak, feel and perceive as 'we who act'. I am 'one of us' when, for instance, others see us as a cohesive group bound, by sympathy, in solidarity:

The "we" subject does not appear even conceivable unless it refers at least to the thought of a plurality of subjects which could simultaneously apprehend one another as subjectivities. These experiences appear a priori to contradict the experience of my being as object for the Other and the experience of the Other's being as object for me.²

In examining how 'we' are collected together, Sartre uses the terms 'us-object' (*nous-*

objet) and ‘we-subject’ (*nous-sujet*). As an ‘us-object’, our togetherness is constructed in the face of an ‘Other’ who unites us by their look. As a ‘we-subject’, our togetherness is constructed as by subjects who define ourselves. We find ourselves connected, take joint control of some situation, share (apparently) a perception of things.

Sartre evokes, adroitly, two images of ‘I’ as one of a ‘we’. His initial images fall nicely between the divide between the ‘us-object’ and the ‘we-subject’. The consciousness of a “spectator at a theatrical performance”:

...is exhausted in apprehending the imaginary spectacle...(H)owever, in the very upsurge...[he] is constituted non-thetically as consciousness [of] being a co-spectator.³

Sartre reminds us how an “enthusiasm...let loose...in a full and enthusiastic hall” contrasts with that “unavowed embarrassment which grips us in the auditorium half-empty” because our awareness of being co-spectators becomes a ‘thetic’—the focus of our attention. That enthusiasm is ‘let loose’ so long as each individual’s awareness of being a co-spectator remains pre-conscious. Our knowledge of the others is vital, but at the level of a ‘non-thetic’ awareness. As co-spectators—for us—involved in watching the performance ‘the play’s the thing’. In watching the play as an audience we share knowledge, tacitly. In being a member of an audience whose business is the play, our vision of others must be peripheral, what we hear from them subliminal except when we join together in spontaneous response at the end.

In his second narrative, Sartre reminds us of chance events that produce a similar effect—a shift from (normal) individualist indifference or antagonism to communal solidarity:

I am on a pavement in front of a café; I observe the other patrons and know myself to be observed. We remain here in the most ordinary case of conflict...the Other’s being-as-object for me, my being-as-object for the Other. But suddenly (there is) a slight collision between a jeep and a taxi. Immediately...I experience my self non-thetically as engaged in “we...[T]he slight conflicts have disappeared...; “we” look at the event, “we” take part.⁴

(ii) *Taking this ‘we’ apart*

Sartre has evoked more than he would countenance theoretically. Promptly, he throws the philosophical taxi into reverse. Like the collision, the effect of the textual action is immediate. When ‘we’ speak, he stammers, there is only an ‘I’ which co-opts the word:

it is clear that the ‘we’ is not an inter-subjective phenomenon...the ‘we’ is experienced by a particular consciousness.⁵

‘We’ might retort. “Yes, Jean-Paul. The ‘we’ is experienced by each particular consciousness that forms part of it! But there is a sharing of perception and feeling nonetheless. If our interest in the accident joins us together then each of us is conscious, certainly, but each of us is conscious of the public incident in being jointly shocked or amused at it. Each person silently breathes ‘we’; neither communality nor individuality is erased.”

In the process of making his initial critique of Heidegger,⁶ Sartre had begun to sketch a story of a bodily consciousness in order to allow that ‘I’ can be perceived by another, and can see another as a conscious being. The story had to be resilient against dualism and against idealism. Also it had to be distinct from any materialism that would absorb the for-itself within the in-itself. He welcomed Heidegger’s approach through ‘being-in-the-world’ for not dividing one person from another by the gulf of body and mind. He objected, though, that being-with is amorphous, and does not recognize ‘being with’ some specific individual. But Sartre has his own troubles in encompassing this phenomenon. They began when his narrator gazed at a specific individual. As the subjective object he needed, neither he nor his ‘other’ would remain stable. Each oscillated between the categories of subject and of object. For hundreds of pages Sartre has projected the other beyond me, then imported that other within again. Now, under cover of exposing Heidegger’s limitations, he returns to Heidegger’s early sketch, perhaps hoping to find something he might have missed.

Individuals must be able to form “a plurality of subjects which...simultaneously apprehend each other as subjectivities.”⁷ Sartre thus reminds us of merely co-optive uses of ‘we’, uses that do not signify a conjoint subject. I say to the waiter “*We* are very dissatisfied.” Another demurs “But no, my dear, speak for yourself.” ‘I’ legitimately declares ‘we’ only on the basis of shared experience—shared grimaces as we tasted the dish or discussed reactions as we dined. It is, thus, all too easy to adopt a formal ‘we’ that lacks experiential content, negotiated consensus or a new frame of mind. ‘We’ then signifies only the speaker’s arrogance. This contrasts, however, with the ‘we’ of exchanged opinion, shared interest and creative relationships, whose intention must be described within the terms of a shared mind within which each thinks, feels and acts in ways beyond the power or skill of each separately. Despite Sartre’s efforts to efface the ‘we’ he first evoked, his writing raises the possibility of a shared outlook, even as he guides the reader through its many pitfalls. He calls attention to the many ways in which ‘we’ form, as subject and as object, but assumes that because at each moment each makes a separate contribution, any ‘we’ fragments into a plurality of ‘I’s.

The Us-object

(i) Deconstructing the solidarity of ‘us’

In revealing a new dimension of the world and myself, the 'us-object' has the relatively stable status of my being-for-others:

We must note that the Us-object precipitates us into the world; we experience it in shame as a community alienation.⁸

As an audience at a play or as spectators of a minor traffic accident 'we' were joined without being humiliated, but Sartre reckons this 'we' to be without ontological status. The next story (explicitly about 'us') changes this tone:

...convicts choke with anger and shame when a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman comes to visit their ship, sees their rags, their labor...their misery.⁹

Sartre articulates a shrewd critique of solidarity formed in response to imposed superior power. He shows its limitations both as a political force and as a category of 'being with' others. He considers, however, only the arrangements in which a third party can destabilize the 'us-object'. He describes the situation that results when 'we' are jointly aware of being 'under the eye' of someone who maintains that structure of power. Each of 'us' is constituted as 'outside oneself':

Thus what I experience is a being-outside in which I am organized with the Other in an indissoluble, objective whole,...no longer distinct from the Other but which I agree in solidarity with the Other to constitute. I must similarly assume the Other's being-outside;...assume myself as engaged outside in the Other, and assume the Other as engaged outside in me.¹⁰

The text moves uneasily. The instability of 'us united in solidarity' contends with Sartre's respect for a phenomenon that has brought him up short. He describes varieties of experiences of 'we', but in a final reductive description of the phenomenon he resists the seductive idea of a plurality of us bonded into a group which is sustained (he insists) by an egocentric mechanism. To show this he presents three of the natural sites of group activity.

(i) Bodily involvement in a communally defined task produces a shared experience of being 'one of us'. Sartre's fine description has a tinge of irony; however 'material' the basis of this association, its externality conveys its fragility:

Materiality puts its seal on our solid community, and we appear to ourselves as an instrumental disposition and technique of means, each one having a particular place assigned by an end.¹¹

(ii) There is inadvertent construction of a bond, within a scene constructed by a 'Third' observer. What I was doing becomes a scene in a painting in which I am one amongst others:

I am walking in the street behind this man and see only his [the Other's] back. A 'Third' looks at me, looks at the road, looks at the Other. (At once) I am bound to the Other by the solidarity of the "Us": we are walking one behind the Other on la rue Blomet on a July morning.¹²

(iii) In a structured society that oppresses me in 'our' situation, I may be subject to an unspecific 'Other'. This 'class consciousness' may take forms beyond communal work. It offers the possibility of going beyond competitiveness between other members of this oppressed class and myself. Sartre recognizes some strength in this account. He exposes the solidarity of the oppressed as vulnerable to what lies outside its orbit:

The...“feudal lord,” the “bourgeois,” the “capitalist” all appear not only as powerful people who command but...as Thirds;...for whom this community exists. It is therefore for them and in their freedom that the reality of the oppressed class is going to exist.¹³

The 'us-object' has only a provisional status, for group solidarity can be undone without any member doing anything. If the 'oppressor' is removed the previously solid group is reduced to warring factions. Another vulnerability in solidarity produces political change:

[I]t incloses within itself a power of disintegration since it is experienced in shame and since the "Us" collapses as soon as the for-itself reclaims its selfness in the face of the Third... The assumption of the "Us"...no longer implies the project of freeing oneself from the "Us"...but rather...of freeing the whole "Us" from the object-state by transforming it into a We-subject.¹⁴

Sartre is prescient about two sources of corruption of solidarity in this 'class struggle'. First, there will be a rooting out of the 'reactionaries' and 'class traitors' who escape oppression by negotiation with their oppressors. Second, solidarity collapses when it acts and succeeds.

In analyzing the vulnerability of the 'us-object' Sartre does not refuse its reality. It is something not comprehended by its own members, however, being produced only by external forces. Sartre also recognizes a 'we-subject', but only as a co-option of a situation by an 'I'. He returns to a further examination of this 'we subject' based on our place in a shared world of technology.

We who have never met

(i) An amorphous communality

[I]t is the world which makes known to us our belonging to a subject-community, especially the existence in the world of manufactured objects.¹⁵

So far, in considering our 'being-with' each other, Sartre has bypassed the possibility that 'we' specific individuals might join together on the basis of shared experience and actions. His logic and phenomenology of seeing and being seen by others would seem, in any case, to have already exhibited such a formation as impossible, leaving only an 'us-object' whose stability is at the mercy of the oppression that establishes it.

In pursuit of a phenomenology of 'we', Sartre observes that we have manufactured the objects we all use. 'We' have made the objects for some 'they' who have used 'us' as instruments. Sartre follows Marx, materialistically, in adapting Hegel's analysis of social relations as expressions of Spirit. These manufactured objects are expressive and indicative of 'our' work. Our "(w)ork, when it is not strictly destined for the ends of the worker himself, is a mode of alienation." The analysis departs from Marx's, however, for whom the 'alienating transcendence' is the capitalist employer. For Sartre, reflecting a later stage in the economy of technology, this alienating transcendence is the consumer. As I use any manufactured object,

I meet upon it the outline of my own transcendence; it indicates to me the movement to be made; I am to turn, push, draw, or lean.¹⁶

The disguised "hypothetical imperative" equally refers to an end "in the world." My own transcendence is signified by the manufactured object that promises individual freedom to those who participate, and I even become "known to myself" as "they"—an image of myself as "any transcendence whatsoever." The subway train promises freedom to move rapidly from any part of a city to another, but becomes a symbol of 'oppression'¹⁷—'mass transit', 'mass movement': 'if I change routes at La Motte-Picquet, I am the "They" who change'. The Paris commuter laments a repetitive life: "*metro, boulot, dodo!*"

Thus reduced to one of a mass of interchangeable human beings my individual transcendence is threatened. As one of 'we who...', I am like the mass produced articles and mass-moving conveyances themselves. Sartre evokes more than this, however: His image, "If alone in my room I open a bottle of preserves with the proper bottle-opener..." reveals not only the anonymity, but the companionable side of mass culture. But in any case, Sartre views this being one of 'we' indistinguishable from a mass 'they' as "of the psychological and not (the) ontological (order)...[I]t in no way corresponds to a real unification of the for-itselfs under consideration." We are not united as alienated under

the appraising view of others, nor are we united by a sense of freedom and power as when 'I' objectify the 'Other' by my scrutiny.

Sartre discovers only a passive and tacit unity of myself with 'others in general' as the basis of a 'we-subject':

I am engaged with others in a common rhythm which I contribute to creating, [and this is] especially likely to lead me to apprehend myself as engaged in a We-subject... It is motivated rather by the double objectivizing apprehension of the object transcended in common and of the bodies which surround mine.¹⁸

As usual, Sartre evokes more than he sets out to describe. In describing how this unity socialized by technology gives no ontological dimension to a 'we-subject', he discovers a pre-technological figure of 'the rhythmic work of a crew':

...the rhythm emanates freely from me; it is a project which I realize by means of my transcendence; it synthesizes a future with a present and a past within a perspective of regular repetition; it is I who produce this rhythm.¹⁹

Though subtending the process from the point of view of 'I', Sartre lends an attractive appearance to 'group solidarity' and 'group power'. Even if there is no 'ontological' status to it, each of us lends our strength to each. Sartre might question whether we could do so much if 'we' is a "merely psychological symbol of the longed-for unity of transcendences," but he continues to insist that such "material channelling of my transcendence" does not "get me out of my self" nor does it require that others 'get out of themselves'. Furthermore, such "experience of the We-subject in no way implies a similar and correlative experience in others." As such it is unstable, for it is "through the world" that I "apprehend" that I form a part of "we." In concluding that an experience of the 'we-subject' requires no correlative experience in others Sartre fails to ask how I understand this world as socialized by technology if I had no prior comprehension of joining with others in shared intentions.

Sartre details the manifold "instrumental formations" (from simple tools to "buildings with their elevators") in which I may belong to a 'mass we'. (Even 'each plate of glass refers to me my image as an undifferentiated transcendence'.) Anonymous, I joined the others as "we" who look up "suddenly" at the sound of a traffic accident. Anonymous, we in the drama audience were involved in the play. Sartre suggests that joined thus anonymously 'we' become only dispersed. I become 'anybody', which reduces to 'being nobody'. Sartre concedes how easily 'I make myself anybody when I try on a pair of shoes or uncork a bottle', but claims that "the experience of this undifferentiated transcendence is an inner and contingent event which concerns only me."

There is a striking difference, however, between the (transient) communality in which I join with strangers in watching a play, and the bare connection I make in opening a jar of preserves, whereas Sartre sums all his brilliant variation of images as

‘demonstrating’ only the fundamental egocentricity of ‘we’. He has not asked what can be made of ‘us’ when we who know each other’s names join in our common concerns and differences. Do ‘we’ dissipate into a cluster of ‘I’s, deluding themselves in the performance of a shared mind?

(ii) *Particularity within anonymity*

In his recognition of how anonymous individuals become ‘we at the drama theatre’ Sartre has relied upon the audience’s implicit knowledge. In becoming ‘we who watch the play’, we know a good deal about each other. We care enough about the play to have paid money, and to have made the effort to be at this specific place. No one may enter the theatre during a scene. There are motives involved in our all being here at this one place, at the one time. As the lights dim we leave behind our private acts—coughing, conversation. Each of us begins to become acquainted (from gasps, yawns and applause) with ourselves as this audience. I am a ‘we’ because I can concentrate as a member of a closely packed group whose co-presence lends the performance a vital dimension of its spirit. Only because each ‘I’ becomes part of a ‘we’ can the play be performed and not merely rehearsed.

Though we don’t know each other as individuals, such a unity of ‘we at the theatre’ is not “only a purely subjective impression which engages only me” as Sartre insists.²⁰ Sartre’s pleonastic “subjective impression” prompts us ask what this impression is. As a ‘transparency that reveals only its objects’ (as he said at the outset of *Being and Nothingness*), an impression is of something by which the subject is impressed. That we have an impression of ‘we’ is no cause for alarm about ‘subjectivity’.

Sartre writes of the emergence of ‘we’ as an “inner and contingent event” that concerns only each self as a separate entity, thus creating the impression of superficial eruptions of a ‘we’ within a set of hitherto disparate individuals. “The experience of the We-subject” cannot be primary, he declares,²¹ since it presupposes a ‘twofold’ prior recognition of the existence of others. First, my use of a manufactured object places me as one of indefinitely many others who can use it in this way. Though, “by my very act (of using an EXIT sign) I *recognize* the Other’s existence [and thus] set up a dialogue with the Other,”²² it is not as part of a “we” that I use these things. It is “...necessary that that Other be first given in some other way.”²³ The second part of the ‘twofold’ recognition is that it is “...necessary that first there should be some awareness of what the Other is in order for an experience of my relations with Others to be realized in the form of the *Mitsein*... ‘I am with—.’ Very well. But with whom?”²⁴ Sartre’s own way of looking at the Other does not take account of this pertinent question, however. His ‘Other’ slips away, never remaining as a specific other person who challenges me. Instead, I structure my own consciousness as ‘before the Other’. Sartre’s Other, no less than Heidegger’s *Mitsein*, lacks reference to the experiences of specific others.

In admonishing Heidegger, Sartre writes that "...if the Other were not given elsewhere the experience of the "We"...would give birth only to the apprehension of pure object-instruments in the world.²⁵ Could not we admonish Sartre in return?

If the Other were not given elsewhere as a specific individual perceivable without objectification, I would not experience being with a specific person...And if a specific individual is thus perceivable then the experience of the "We" subject need not break up into separate experience of separate individuals.

(iii) Being myself with others

Certainly Sartre takes an interest in the significance of finding oneself as 'one of many' in a world infused with technology. He compares an unthinking use of manufactured objects with a deliberate use of a non-manufactured object. In taking up a stone to use as a hammer I gain a "non-thetic" (peripheral) sense of myself as a person. I learn of my own ends, and of my "inventiveness." Sartre casts his observations of how 'I' relate to how 'we' use technology at an oblique angle to the way each 'I' forms part of a 'we'. It is thus that he displaces 'we' from the centre of concern. He reads my sharing in a common technological culture as only an alienation of my own freedom to use and create the world. Yet his example belies his theory. Even within so desolate an action as opening a can of preserves in my solitary room, the can-opener suggests the 'common touch'—as ready for another hand as for my own. I am part of an interdependent society whose possibilities can emerge despite anonymity.

We should recall how, in describing how I am released from isolation when one of 'we who are shocked at a traffic accident', Sartre evoked a genuine, if evanescent communality. Sartre, after Heidegger, has begun a proto-post-modernist reading of technology and community. What takes us aback is the persistence, nevertheless, of his reductionism about 'us' and what 'we' can do. Sartre is unaware of the 'common touch', this 'commonality' of technologically mediated anonymity. Rather, he subverts our feeling as fast as he elicits it. He alerts us that each individual experiences this commonality as part of an 'undifferentiated we'. Such experiences are not foundational of the 'we' who join in a common anonymous life. Then his tone becomes even more severe. This 'we' is only an 'I' dragooned into conformity in the use of manufactured objects. There is a mood of an oppressive regime rather than a shared life. The rules for using...manufactured objects that 'put me in the presence of the Other' are "...rigid and ideal like taboos."

Notoriously, Sartre's 'I' is never in the co-operative company of those others. The 'us-object' is a unity formed as a temporary strategy to escape the dominating regard of some Other, and reduces me to the status of an object. Sartre insists that the 'we-subject' has its foundation in my "being placed in the presence of the Other." This 'we-subject'

disintegrates as each consciousness strives to dominate. We might argue that the 'we subject' can achieve a greater stability. Why must objectification have been part of the process of our perceiving each other when we constructed ourselves as 'we who...'?

Sartre concedes that it is the 'other', after all, who speaks to us when we read "EXIT" and "ENTRANCE" at a railway station. The Other's hypothetical imperatives 'show through' the printed sentence. Though as an undifferentiated member of the mass public, I am "aimed at" by this 'Other'.²⁶ Is there, then, a shared community, however scarified, which has a foundation elsewhere than the site of contention between one individual and another? Sartre defends his reductive analysis by describing my response to a public sign as a response to a threat to my freedom:

I am not using it (the EXIT sign) in the absolute freedom of my personal projects. I am not constituting a tool by means of invention; I do not surpass the pure materiality of the thing towards my possibilities.²⁷

In the same breath, though, he indicates the sign's role as helpful mediation:

[B]etween the object and me there has already slipped in a human transcendence which guides my transcendence. The object is already *humanized*... (It is) by my very act (of reading and being guided) that I adapt myself to the human order.²⁸

In his efforts to read the presence of an Other in the signs and technology of mass culture, Sartre is swinging between contradictory tendencies. If "by my very act I recognize the Other's existence" as humanizing the objects I use and the signs to which I respond, by this same act I am threatened by others. It is as if I am coerced rather than assisted in joining a "we who know our way around our city."²⁹

"All of this Heidegger has said, and very well," Sartre avers. And then he doubles back, fearing he has promised too much. Heidegger has given 'unwarranted reassurance' about this 'we' whose Da-sein takes the form of *Mit-sein*. We infer too much from the fact that in our everyday transactions with things and public signs there is a common 'we'. I could not take my place in this society unless the "Other (had) first (been) given in some way." Without the primary relationship of 'Other' to 'me' I would not distinguish a hammer from a stone with which I hammer. I might even correctly use a manufactured thing, by happy accident, with no sense of being part of a common 'we who employ the things of our world'. Sartre detaches his imaginary 'follower' of a sign from the significance of the it, by detaching him from the influence of his perceivable environment. He invokes the Stoic madman who says 'It is day' while having no regard to whether it is night or day, but only "by virtue of inner resources of his madness,"

I might use an object or sign without reading its manufactured significance. I might

take the corridor marked EXIT because I like the colour of the sign. On a bush track someone has constructed THIS WAY in wattle bloom. I may choose the left fork attracted only by the scent of wattle. Inadvertently, I use a thing 'in the right way', or I may read what it says, find it irrelevant to my choice and go that way in any case. (author's interpolation)

Sartre alleges that my experience of myself as a 'we-subject' "is based on the original experience of the Other." This a separate issue from the question whether there is an 'ontological' status to 'we', however. Each of us who participates as part of a 'we-subject' needs his or her own level of awareness and understanding, but even if such awareness were "only a secondary and subordinate experience" as Sartre claims, it might be vital and irreducible to experiencing things as a solitary individual, revealing aspects of people and world otherwise out of reach.

Finding a name

(i) Understanding oneself as joining in

I am always already in a world whose manufactured character announces my participation in it 'communally'. Does this (perhaps anonymous) understanding presuppose a more fundamental encounter with the 'Other'? As Sartre has hinted, someone within that environment might have learned to copy what others do, not reading its social significance. But does such a person lack a level of awareness gained only in close dealings with others? This awareness and understanding of an otherwise blind conformity may be gained without the 'original confrontation with the Other' that fascinates Sartre, perhaps. He has overlooked much of what was built up for him in a shared communality, mediated by the metro, shops, factory floor, hotels and armies. For us, sixty years later, this anonymous communality proceeds within and across commuting cars and their road-enraged occupants, the replacement of bush by motels and shopping malls, the emergence of share-market hyperspace, and the incidence of 'smart' bombing to halt accelerating atrocities of body upon body.

Yes, then. In my sense of being part of an anonymous 'we who...' I owe an irrecoverable debt to close encounters with specific individuals—parents, friends, teachers, competitors. All the same, Sartre mis-represents this reliance. His insistence on how 'I' make an object of the other sharpens the question of how my 'one-on-one' experiences relate to my being 'one-of-a-we'. Vague recollection, blissful and traumatic, of childhood. Interrelating with others in their world of objects and machines. Empathy with those, close, who continually used it. At the same time, a social 'we' derives only

from original personal encounters? Experiences and events I can scarcely recollect, and whose reportage involves a maze of narrative? To recover a 'past that never was'? (author's interpolation)

Sartre brings out how a manufactured social world, as sign, may fail to engender an idea of 'we' as a subject. Material signs of a common life help me understand myself only as a "pure exemplification of the 'human species'." I may be a human 'transcendence' in this aspect—a being that can make something of its own 'facticity' and that of the world in which it is cast. This transcendence, however, is undifferentiated. Sartre suggests that to find oneself as part of a 'We-subject' one has to "discover oneself as any body in the centre of some human stream." This requires that I exist amongst others in a bodily fashion. The implicit subliminal awareness of others when joined in the rhythm of a social activity is real enough. It is not enough, however, "to enable me originally to know as Others the Others who make part of the We." But Sartre is making a large assumption here. Would a 'we' or an 'us' that did not break down into individuality have to found my understanding of other individuals as such? (A possibility haunts the technology of communication—'we' might form a community in which 'I' never was confronted by any individual 'other'.)

Sartre's bodily metaphors of 'upsurge' reveal that for him the promise that 'I' might be with 'another', each as experiencing and experienced subjects, lies within an unselfcritical masculine imaginary of sexual reciprocity. According to his analysis of the situation in 'Concrete relations with Others' the promise of such reciprocity cannot be fulfilled, and yet it gestures towards a site of broken dreams, producing an image of an (impossible) intercourse of bodily consciousness. A promise that we might meet, whether in a café, in philosophical theory or in bed, each as a consciousness fully apparent in our bodily expressions and actions. Sartre would expose the promise—in life as in theory. The falsity of the promise sentences us to the daily necessities mediated by technology. That communality is condemned as a fraudulent surrogate of an encounter always deferred to the next chapter.

(ii) *'We, you and I'*

It is true that 'being-with' others in the rhythm of joint activities and shared understanding does not amount to knowing them personally and individually. When we are placed amongst others we get to know them in our interactions and from observing how they interact. Thus we begin to know others as individuals. Sartre would be right to insist that I discover myself as one body amongst others in this stream of socialized activity, but not that each must first know the other in agonistic encounter. Sartre argues that my involvement as 'we' could not be prior to my understanding of 'I':

(i) The ‘we-subject’ cannot be a primary phenomenon. An individual would have to know him or herself in relation to a specific individual first.

(ii) anyway, even if the ‘we-experience’ were primary it would not follow that I could transform that experience into an experience of particular persons.

This appears to be ‘kettle logic’.³⁰ Contra Sartre, I need effect no such ‘transformation’. To establish the ‘*Mit-sein*’ as an original category does not make it the sole foundation of the ‘I-subject’. Sartre has been trying to show that the ‘*Mit-sein*’ can be founded only in the ‘I-subject’ and the way that it contends with an individual ‘other’. What if, however, the anonymous ‘we who use these things...’ and the ‘we who are joined as witnesses of an accident’ are each separate categories? Consider, too, ‘you and I, we are going to...’ This might be in another category again. None of these appear to be simple derivatives from original ‘one on one’ encounters. Indeed, such ‘we-formations’ may help to generate Sartre’s preferred ‘reciprocal upsurge’ between individuals. Not that these various categories of ‘we’ should then be treated, in reaction, as the sole and real foundations of every grasp I have upon myself as an ‘I-subject’, either. My encounter with myself may be ‘equiprimordial’ with my formation with others. All of these possibilities may have equal status, and the legitimacy of any one of them would strongly inflect—and deflect—Sartre’s emphasis on individual encounter as grounding communality.

What ‘we’ experience may lie outside the range of any single one of us. Alone, I can be, perhaps, only an indifferent spectator of a calamity. Joined by exchanged glances, signs of incipient behaviour indicating concern, I can act on the basis that ‘we’ cannot stand by and see this happen.

I may form an intention with someone to explore some path that I could not take alone. Once forged, the bond is irreducibly shared, and its conditions exceed the ethics of simple contracts.³¹ Only negotiations that put the shared mind to rest releases each of us. I feel distressed and disoriented if let down in a shared intention, shattered by a unilateral withdrawal from the shared action. It feels as if ‘I’ could never recover from the disorientation; having lost the concept of my separate contribution. I may keep some frame for the shared intention in order to safeguard myself against the ‘loss of ego’ implicit in shared consciousness; I recover in re-creating an individual mind for myself. Though at any moment a shared bond may unravel, what had been created will not reduce to a continued negotiation by the two initially separate minds that formed it. The mangled remnants of a just exploded shared mind emerge as separately wrangling parties. To stress the unhappiness of this consciousness is to highlight the distinctiveness of the shared intention before it collapsed.

“Joining In” is excerpted from *On Being Nothing: Looking Back at Sartre* (forthcoming).

Notes

1. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Methuen: London, 1976) 287.
2. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 413.
3. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 413.
4. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 413-414.
5. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 414.
6. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 244-251.
7. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 413.
8. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 415.
9. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 415. Perhaps female convicts would choke in their own way when subjected to such a visitor. It is the philosopher's business then to ask what this imagery of male shame achieves.
10. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 418.
11. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 419.
12. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 419.
13. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 421.
14. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 421-422.
15. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 423.
16. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 423.
17. My neo-logism. "Op-pression" is just one kind of 'pression'.
18. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 424.
19. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 425.
20. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 426.
21. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 426.
22. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 427.
23. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 427.
24. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 428.
25. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 428.
26. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 427.
27. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 427.
28. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 427.
29. Sartre's sentence ends with a more gentle promise, however, that in negotiating my way through the city of manufactured objects, signs and metro "I set up a dialogue with the Other."
30. Freud's term for a kind of evasive logic which would run like this: "I didn't even see your wallet, and anyway if I did see it I didn't touch it. Well, if I did touch it certainly I didn't take it. Taking it wouldn't amount to stealing it anyway since I know you so well it could only have been borrowing it." And so on.
31. I heard this point made in a subtle paper read by Margaret Giles at a colloquium of the Graduate School of CUNY in New York, 1995. A mood of frenzied denial of the possibility of a shared mind prevailed in the discussion that ensued.