

## Being Online: Relationships of Anonymity and Recognition

*Ben Fleenor, Washington and Lee University*

*Abstract:* Is there something inherent in the structure of our online interactions that stifles interpersonal respect and ferments unethical behavior? This paper uses Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological ontology to explore the prospects and pratfalls of mutually respectful relationships in the internet age. With a focus on ethical *experiences* rather than *rationales*, I argue that Sartre's account of freedom, facticity, and personal identity provides compelling reasons to believe that ethical engagement is premised upon relationships of mutual recognition. When I meet the Other in person, her freedom and its constitutive role in forming my identity is immediately manifest in her gaze and my reaction to it—her status as a subject on par with myself is difficult, though not impossible, to deny. However, anonymous online interactions shield me from the Other's gaze and make her moral personhood all too easy to ignore. I analyze several instances of this phenomena of online moral insensitivity and explain why it is that ethical considerations affect us more powerfully when we are confronted with a human face rather than a screen.

Browsing the internet can be an experience akin to exploring an alternative ethical universe. Basic norms seem to lose their force or disappear entirely: civility declines, hate speech proliferates, and what would be theft in the “real” world becomes casual piracy. “You wouldn’t download a car,” asserted one anti-piracy campaign from the early days of the internet. I am not so sure. Anyone who has spent substantial time online has surely realized that the anonymity afforded by the internet “seem[s] to encourage a kind of frenzied abandonment of social norms, or, in the very least, a decline in civility.”<sup>1</sup> I will be arguing that this phenomena stems largely from the anonymity that internet users enjoy, but not simply because this anonymity provides cover from prosecution and retribution. Regardless of whether we fear punishment or retaliation for traditionally immoral actions, these actions strike us as less morally objectionable when performed online, where veils of anonymity allow us to disassociate our actions from our “real-world” selves.

In his ontological treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, John-Paul Sartre explains that it is our susceptibility to the gaze of the Other that enables us to experience proto-evaluative attitudes such as shame and pride. If I think that I am alone, I can sing without any degree of self-consciousness: “My consciousness sticks to my acts, it is my acts.”<sup>2</sup> If I stop to critique my vocalizations, it is an act of self-surpassing; I grow by putting my past mistakes behind me. But the moment I begin to suspect that someone else hears me, my excellent pitch becomes a point of pride, my obscene lyrics are revealed as shameful. Criticism, real or imagined, sticks to me and defines me. No longer can I freely transcend

<sup>1</sup> Richard Boyd and Laura K. Field, “Blind Injustice: Theorizing Anonymity and Accountability in Modern Democracies,” *Polity* 48, no. 3 (2016), 342.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1953), 348.

my being, because at any given moment I exist for the Other as a given set of facts, as an amateurish and tasteless singer. I recognize that “I am indeed the object the Other is looking at and judging,” and that my being is at the mercy of the Other’s freedom.<sup>3</sup> By becoming an object defined by the judgement of Others, I have discovered an aspect of my being which is fixed by his gaze, and in the process have learned to judge myself.<sup>4</sup>

It is the Other’s objectification of me that establishes me as an ethical agent. The solitary self (which may be as rhetorically real as man in the state of nature) has the freedom to perpetually recreate itself, to continually lose itself in the world through action.<sup>5</sup> But my self-among-others is burdened with descriptions and defined by facticity which my being affirms as definitive through the primordial attitudes of shame and pride, which are the “*recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed the object that the Other is looking at and judging.”<sup>6</sup> Just as the Other reveals my self to me as a singer of certain worth, so too does she support my being as an ethical agent: ethics is essentially a matter of taking up attitudes and projects as a reaction to the foreign freedom of the Other.

Ethical relations, according to this reading of Sartre, are based on intersubjective recognition.<sup>7</sup> Hegel, writing years before Sartre, made a similar argument. He claimed that personal identity must be supported by the free cooperation of others—it would be difficult for me to persist in understanding myself as an intelligent student were I painfully aware that others saw me as dumb, impossible if expulsion from university withdrew the participation of that mediating institution which identifies me as a “student.” Hegel further illustrates, through his “master-slave dialectic,” that oppressive relationships of recognition can undermine the secure enjoyment of identity. The master’s identity cannot be grounded in his slaves’ recognition of him, since this is compelled and therefore cheapened.<sup>8</sup> A modern analog might be the feared employer who can never be certain that his underlings’ praise of him is sincere—he knows that they harbor secret perceptions of him, and that these, despite existing in the minds of others, remain a very real aspect of who he is.

I will not attempt here to develop this fledgling account of recognition ethics into a full-blown theory of ethical *obligation* which suggests that the ontological relationships outlined above compel us to strive for relationships of non-domination and mutual recognition. It suffices for my purposes to suggest that such relationships of mutual recognition tend to be healthier than their oppressive, one-sided counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Here I aim only to examine moral relationships, i.e. relationships characterized by mutual recognition and non-domination, as a possibility rather than as the prescription of a universal law. Specifically, having explained the ability of the Other’s gaze to reveal to us simultaneously his character as a free subject and my possibility of becoming a moral agent, I now wish to explore what happens when that gaze is distorted by anonymous, online interactions. We

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Being and Nothingness”*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Sartre, 350.

<sup>7</sup> T. Storm Heter, “Authenticity and Others: Sartre’s Ethics of Recognition,” *Sartre Studies International* 12, no. 2 (2006), 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

might know, on an intellectual level, that the people we meet online are real, susceptible to pain and joy, and capable of judging us, but do we always experience them as such? If the experience of being seen transforms us into potentially ethical agents, can online invisibility stifle the call to moral action?

Sartre makes it clear that the ontological experience of being looked at and objectified, along with its concomitant certainty of the Other's free subjectivity, is not limited to existence within the Other's literal line of sight.<sup>10</sup> We can be thrust into self-consciousness just as thoroughly by the sound of a snapping twig or the sight of a farmhouse silhouetted on a hill. As socialized beings accustomed to being looked at, we are habitually aware of the possibility of being seen and objectified—we rarely succeed in “forgetting ourselves” or “losing ourselves in the world” for long. We cannot “unbecome” moral agents, because, once exposed to the Other, the personal identity which she helps mediate will forever implicate our being-for-others. But while this ontological entanglement remains a constant, Sartre stresses that we can take up a variety of attitudes, each only as potentially moral as it is ontologically sincere, towards the freedom of the Other that discloses our own being back to us as if displaying our shadow upon a shifting screen.<sup>11</sup>

One of these attitudes, which Sartre calls “*indifference toward others*” has the potential to foster unethical, or at least uncivil, conduct.<sup>12</sup> If recognition of the Other's subjective freedom is the well-spring and possibility of ethics, then solipsism, the suggestion that the Other might lack a subjective experience, must be the antithesis of morality, and it is by practicing a sort of “factual solipsism” that the indifferent attitude seeks to demean and neutralize the freedom of the Other.<sup>13</sup> Under the sway of this attitude, which is a reaction against the jarring experience of having one's own being mediated by the Other, the indifferent man denies the ontological force of the Other's look: others “have some knowledge of me, but this knowledge does not touch me... they express what they are, not what I am, and they are the effect of my action upon them.”<sup>14</sup> This is the attitude that most of us take up with regard to the ticket-collector or the waiter whom we reduce to their function—it may seem like an unobjectionably quotidian perspective, but the truth is that by imagining away the inner lives of these individuals, we are effectively denying them status as moral agents and trying in vain to recapture the total freedom of that hypothetical solitary individual who is never identified with his factual circumstances.

Indifference is often harmless, but often it can lead to disrespectful, if not outright harmful, words and actions. I suggest that the behavior of internet “trolls,” who anonymously post insincere and inflammatory opinions online to provoke outrage, is motivated by an attitude strikingly similar to Sartre's concept of indifference. Such trolls carefully cultivate their online persona; their words are seen by the Other, but their hidden insincerity allows them to create artificial distance between the object of the Other's gaze and their own being. They resist their objectification at the hands of the Other: the “knowledge [of others] does not touch” them.<sup>15</sup> While experiencing himself as insulated

<sup>10</sup> Sartre, 346

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>14</sup> BN 495.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

and preserved in his freedom, the troll simultaneously conspires to strip the Other of her freedom: certain “trigger-words” and techniques of outrage are used to control the Other’s emotions. The Other’s “absolute subjectivity” is reduced to a function and a game, and the result is one-sided liberation for the troll—he is “in no way conscious of the fact that the Other’s look can fix [his] possibilities and [his] body. [He is] in a state the very opposite of what we call shyness or timidity.”<sup>16</sup> The troll is “at ease” and refuses to be “embarrassed by [himself],” because his personal identity is sheltered from the Other’s gaze even as it is built upon his manipulation of that Other.<sup>17</sup>

A few examples should illuminate the dangers of the indifferent attitude. In 2012 the brand Mountain Dew hosted an online poll to determine the name of a forthcoming beverage. The winner, before the poll was taken offline, was “Hitler Did Nothing Wrong.”<sup>18</sup> This is clearly not a statement most people would be comfortable making publicly—said aloud, these words would adhere to a speaker and contribute negatively to his identity in the eyes of others. Yet hundreds of people were able to shamelessly plan and execute the dissemination of this hateful message. Unobserved, this utterance could not adhere to their being or define their identity. Another disturbing trend in trolling crosses the line from incivility to violence: “swatting.” Swatting is when an anonymous viewer of a video live-stream calls the police, threatens or confesses violent crimes, and provides the address of the actual person who is live-streaming. If successful, the “swatter”, along with hundreds or thousands of other viewers, watches live as armed police invade the house of the streamer—one man was even shot and killed by police as a result of swatting.<sup>19</sup> It goes without saying that the practice is blatantly disrespectful and manifestly unethical, but its rapid proliferation testifies to a terrifying consequence of life online—people are somehow capable of overlooking and abusing the humanity of their online peers.

Already it appears that “indifference” is too mild a term for the anti-ethical attitude that online anonymity facilitates. Fortunately for our analysis (and disconcertingly for internet users), Sartre catalogs another, more extreme, attitude which likewise seeks to misrepresent the Other’s freedom and centrality to personal identity—sadism. Attentive readers will have noticed that the attitude of indifference contains a fundamental contradiction: the troll cannot succeed in constituting the Other as object or function once it becomes apparent that they are free to resist or succumb to the troll’s provocations.<sup>20</sup> However, the manifest reality of the Other’s freedom is not something that necessarily prevails in the consciousness of the sadist or troll, for they remain capable of embarking upon a project to circumscribe and control that freedom—the sadist by compelling his victim to identify fully with bodily pain, the troll by manufacturing the conditions for outrage—even if such a project can never fully negate the Other’s

<sup>16</sup> BN 496.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Everett Rosenfeld, “Mountain Dew’s ‘Dub the Dew’ Online Poll Goes Horribly Wrong,” *Time*, August 14, 2002, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/08/14/mountain-dews-dub-the-dew-online-poll-goes-horribly-wrong/> (accessed December 31, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Matt Stevens and Andrew R. Chow, “Man Pleads Guilty to ‘Swatting’ Hoax That Resulted in a Fatal Shooting,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/barriss-swatting-wichita.html> (accessed December 31, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Sartre, 526.

freedom.<sup>21</sup> The ethical insensitivity of an anonymous web user may not be strictly identical with either the attitude of indifference or sadism, but it certainly shares undesirable characteristics of each. The most troubling difference, however, is that while sadism and indifference are undermined by the embodied gaze of the Other and the ontological reality it reveals, the ethical insensitivity of the web user threatens to persevere in the absence of any concrete experience of the Other's subjectivity.<sup>22</sup>

Other modern philosophers, political scientists, and psychologists expound on this idea of decreased ethical sensibility which is hinted at by Sartre's ontological analyses. Emmanuel Levinas, in differentiating the semantic content of utterances from the "contact and sensibility" that accompanies face-to-face dialogue with the Other, and by identifying the latter as the basis for ethical relationships, provides us with equally strong grounds for worrying that online interactions might stoke our egoist tendencies.<sup>23</sup> For Levinas, something quite similar to the looking/looked-at dyad explored in Sartre's work inspires "an ethical urgency that unsettles our egocentric existence," and we can extrapolate that the absence of this dyad in cybernetic communication threatens to undermine the experience of responsibility that ultimately motivates ethical action.<sup>24</sup> Political scientists Richard Boyd and Laura Field likewise warn that "an acute failure of recognition" characterizes anonymous action, "as one's unsavory private actions fail to be registered in one's public persona."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, psychologist John Suler identifies the phenomenon of "dissociative anonymity" as a major contributor to what he calls the "online disinhibition effect": anonymous actors "don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche."<sup>26</sup>

Of course, the internet is not inherently evil, and anonymity does not necessarily transform caring people into immoral monsters. Sartre's "gaze" can manifest in different mediums, and the ethical "proximity" theorized by Levinas can arise even in cybernetic contexts. People are certainly capable of embracing the other-affecting aspects of their online lives as constitutive of their personal identities, thereby laying the groundwork for healthy, i.e. ethical, relationships of mutual recognition. Whether mutual recognition occurs or not in online communities will often come down to the depth, duration, and sincerity of community members' engagement. In an online support group for cancer patients, for example, we might expect to find that a participant's sense of self-worth is substantially increased when others direct gratitude or encouragement towards his anonymous persona, or decreased if he inadvertently gives offense.<sup>27</sup> But we should not

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>23</sup> Richard A. Cohen, "Ethics and Cybernetics: Levinasian Reflections," *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 1 (2000), 30.

<sup>24</sup> Lucas D. Introna and Martin Bringham, "Reconsidering Community and the Stranger in the Age of Virtuality," *Society and Business Review* 2, no. 1 (2007), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd and Field, 350.

<sup>26</sup> John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 7, no. 1 (2004), 322.

<sup>27</sup> Introna and Bringham, 171.

take for granted that mutual acknowledgment of the Other's subjectivity and freedom will occur even on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, where users often shed anonymity and share photos of themselves. Studies by philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray have suggested that photographed faces lack a certain motility and liveliness, and that they therefore fail to disclose the subjectivity of their subjects as vividly as embodied encounters.<sup>28</sup> Lest we think that the problem is solved by the advent of online video-chatting, we need only recall the numerous victims of "swatting", many of whom were doubtlessly observed for hours on live video-streams by their tormentors before ever being victimized. The lesson to be gleaned from these incidents is that every form of digital separation brings with it a threat of decreased moral sensitivity, for electronic mediums of communication are consistently outperformed by face-to-face encounters when it comes to establishing the interdependence of the Other, my experienced identity, and the Other's perception of me.<sup>29</sup>

The ethical insensitivity that I have warned against is not unique to online relationships. The failure of mutual recognition and the objectification of the Other is mundane and ubiquitous, stemming from both anonymity, stereotyping, and willful ignorance of the plight of others.<sup>30</sup> My point is simply that it is easier to maintain such anonymity and willful ignorance on the web than in interpersonal encounters. Anyone who has walked past a homeless beggar has experienced the power of the Other's gaze to spark mutual recognition. If I make eye contact with this bedraggled fellow on the street corner, the *intellectual* question of whether to help him or not remains unchanged. But if I for a moment acknowledge his gaze with my own, rational reasons for withholding my aid wither in an explosion of empathy. Without a doubt, here is a person, existentially identical to myself in terms of his freedom, who suffers, whose suffering becomes a mirror and occasion for me to discover my own ethical character. All this strikes me not as intellectual knowledge, but as an experience of obligation.<sup>31</sup> I have been called to account for myself, not by dry moral platitudes but by a transformative experience of recognition that momentarily succeeds in destabilizing my ego-centric perspective. Were I to meet this same man online, his unspoken plea might be experienced merely as a tab to click out of, a clump of pixels to be scrolled past—my obligation would be too abstract and mediated to disturb the foundations of my being, to bind me to an act of choice that becomes constitutive of my identity.

My concern in this paper has been with morality as an idiosyncratic experience rather than as a rational formula. I have argued that our experiences of obligation to others are conditioned upon recognition that these others are free beings like ourselves, whose perceptions of us play a definitive role in fixing our identity. My approach does not foreclose the possibility of "doing ethics" as traditionally conceived, as Hegel and Sartre demonstrate that certain relational attempts to ground identity are self-defeating—only mutually affirming, non-dominating relationships provide a sustainable basis for personal flourishing. Unfortunately, many online interactions, particularly those that occur

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Katherine J. Morris, *Sartre*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 124.

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Lucas D. Introna, "The (Im)possibility of Ethics in the Information Age," *Performance and Organization* 12 (2002), 75.

anonymously, fail to rise to this standard, since they appeal only minimally to our ethical sensibilities due to the online actor's ability to disassociate herself from her cultivated virtual persona. Like Sartre's indifferent, "factual solipsist," the web user disingenuously supposes that the face seen by other people is not her own. This all too frequent breakdown of mutual recognition online does not preclude the possibility of ethical conduct, but it certainly does deaden our *experience* of ethical obligation by establishing artificial distance and erecting veils of anonymity between persons.

### References

- Boyd, Richard and Laura K. Field. "Blind Injustice: Theorizing Anonymity and Accountability in Modern Democracies." *Polity* 48, no. 3 (2016), 332-358.
- Catalano, Joseph S. A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness." Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985.
- Cohen, Richard A. "Ethics and Cybernetics: Levinasian Reflections." *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 1 (200): 27-35.
- Heter, T. Storm. "Authenticity and Others: Sartre's Ethics of Recognition." *Sartre Studies International* 12, no. 2 (2006), 17-43.
- Introna, Lucas D. "The (Im)possibility of Ethics in the Information Age." *Performance and Organization* 12 (2002), 71-84.
- Introna, Lucas D. and Martin Brigham. "Reconsidering Community and the Stranger in the Age of Virtuality." *Society and Business Review* 2, no. 1 (2007), 166-178.
- Morris, Katherine J. *Sartre*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- Rosenfeld, Everett. "Mountain Dew's 'Dub the Dew' Online Poll Goes Horribly Wrong." *Time*, August 14, 2002. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/08/14/mountain-dews-dub-the-dew-online-poll-goes-horribly-wrong/> (accessed December 31, 2018).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1953.
- Stevens, Matt and Andrew R. Chow. "Man Pleads Guilty to 'Swatting' Hoax That Resulted in a Fatal Shooting." *The New York Times*, November 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/barriss-swatting-wichita.html> (accessed December 31, 2018).
- Suler, John. "The Online Disinhibition Effect." *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 7, no. 1 (2004), 321-327.