Between Ourselves: Philosophical Conceptions of Intersubjectivity[1]

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The intersubjective is an essentially relational realm: it is the realm that lies between subjects – between ourselves (for we, of course, are among the subjects to whom the term refers) – and as it lies between, so it also represents the realm that is common to all, the realm of what is essentially public and open, the realm of communication and active engagement with others. Through our participation in such a realm we come to know something of how others feel, of what they believe, desire and hope, of who and what they are. Yet within modern philosophy, in particular, our access to such a realm, and so our access to the feelings, beliefs, desires, hopes and identities of others, has been viewed as questionable. The so-called 'problem of other minds' is just the problem of whether we do indeed have access to such intersubjectivity and, with it, to the subjectivity of others, as well as of the nature of that access. The problem at issue here is, of course, primarily epistemological – it concerns our knowledge of others and of their mental lives – but epistemological issues are not the only issues that arise in relation to intersubjectivity and neither is it only in relation to epistemological matters that intersubjectivity emerges as philosophically problematic. The very nature and possibility of intersubjectivity can itself be open to question. To what extent, for instance, is intersubjectivity necessarily tied to language? To what extent is it tied to materiality and the body? What role might be played by the objective world in the structure of intersubjectivity? And might intersubjectivity already be implied in the very idea of subjectivity itself?

Inasmuch as the idea of the intersubjective brings a number of such questions with it, so there is not, within philosophy, any single, well-recognised or clearly-defined 'problem of intersubjectivity' on which discussion can focus (something reflected in the absence of 'intersubjectivity' as a heading in most dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy). Moreover, the terms 'intersubjective' and 'intersubjectivity' are themselves fairly recent introductions into English-speaking philosophical discourse. The second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, contains a moderately sized entry for 'intersubjective,' but its earliest cited appearance is dated 1899.[2] This does not mean, of course, that the idea of the intersubjective must be viewed as restricted to post-nineteenth century philosophy, but it is indicative of the relative newness of the term. Indeed, although the idea of the intersubjective refers us to the realm of the social and the public, it also expresses a particular understanding of the social – one that takes the social as established through the relations between subjects – that is itself characteristically modern. All of this makes, of course, for a certain awkwardness in trying to address the issue of the philosophical understanding of intersubjectivity in any general fashion. Yet the questions that emerge in relation to intersubjectivity are not unconnected to one another and, even if there is no single 'problem' of intersubjectivity, the concept does invoke a small number of closely related issues, the discussion of which goes back well before the nineteenth century.

Certainly, in the broad sense in which it refers to the public realm of our engagement with others, and so to the realm of inter-personal activity and communication, intersubjectivity has often been taken as the defining structure of human being. To live a human life is, on this account, to live a life that is essentially a life in relation to others. Aristotle, for instance, claims that "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god."[3] It is only within an intersubjective, and, more specifically, a political setting that Aristotle regards human reason or language as even possible – for him, as for the Greeks generally, the political and the rational thus go hand-in-hand.[4] Rousseau too, although he writes much later, and from a very different perspective, emphasizes the way in which those qualities that we most often associate with the human – reason, thought and speech – are tied to the development of intersubjective modes of life: "savage man, wandering in the forests, without work, without speech, without a home, without war, and without relationships, was equally without any need of his fellow men and without any desire to hurt them, perhaps not even recognisng any of them individually. Being subject to so few passions, and sufficient unto himself, he had only such feelings and such knowledge as suited his condition."[5] Yet even though, with the development of modern thought, the emphasis on the intersubjective character of human life does not disappear, it does come to seem increasingly problematic – and this is so largely in virtue of the rise of that central idea of modernity, the idea of subjectivity, and the associated tendency to view intersubjectivity as indeed a relation between subjects.

Although the notion of subjectivity clearly has its origins in the rise of an inwardly directed and increasingly personal sensibility that occurred, largely due to the rethinking of the human relation to God, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, [6] it is with the work of the seventeenth-century French philosopher, René Descartes that it is usually taken to have its classic expression. In his Meditations, Descartes asks himself the question, "what then am I?" and he replies, "A thing that thinks…A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions."[7] The idea of the subject is the idea of the thinking self (the 'I' of Descartes' "I think"), the existence of which is foundational for the possibility of experience and knowledge, and to which particular emotions, experiences, beliefs and other attitudes or states can be attributed. Inasmuch as the subject is primarily defined in terms of the capacity for thought – in terms of what amounts to a capacity for introspective awareness – so subjectivity itself is viewed as constituting an internal, private realm of meaningfulness that requires no reference to anything outside itself. The subject is a solitary individual locked within the private space of its own thoughts.

From this position, it becomes questionable how such an isolated subject could ever know anything other than itself, and here, of course, the problem of other minds comes readily into view. Although the latter problem is not a major theme in Descartes' thinking – at one point in the Meditations, however, he asks "if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves…yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons?"[8] – it clearly arises out of the more general epistemological skepticism that is itself bound up with the idea of subjectivity. Moreover, the problem of the subject's epistemic isolation, including its isolation from other minds, is underlain by its metaphysical isolation. The modern subject is indeed a solitary being and one whose existence need presuppose nothing beyond its own thoughts – neither other subjects nor a world that must now, of course, be described as 'external' in contrast to the 'internality' of the subject (on Descartes’ account, only the discovery of the idea of God as already existing within him leads Descartes out of this skeptical, solipsistic impasse).

Much of modern philosophy since Descartes can be seen to have been preoccupied either with the implications of such epistemological and metaphysical isolation or, perhaps more significantly, with the question of how to escape from it. For any such escape to be accomplished, however, what must be done is to re-establish a sense of the proper relation between the ‘subject’ and the world and of the proper relations between subjects. Not only does the modern turn towards subjectivity undermine both of those relations, but the fact that they are indeed simultaneously undermined in this way is also indicative of the interconnection between the very concepts at issue. Overcoming the isolation of subjectivity, then, requires an understanding of the inter-relation of the objective and the intersubjective (and so requires an understanding of the nature of intersubjectivity as such) – as well as of the relation of both to subjectivity. That the interconnection between these concepts is indeed of crucial significance here is evident from much of the historical discussion, particularly as it develops in European philosophy from Kant and Hegel onwards, as well as in American pragmatist thinking and in some strands within contemporary analytic thought. It is also evident from a brief consideration of the concepts themselves.

Intersubjectivity depends, above all else, on the capacity of ‘subjects’ to recognize one another as subjects and to be able, to a greater or lesser degree, to enter into some shared form of life – that is, to be able to engage in communication and in coordinated action. Yet this must depend, in turn, on some capacity to identify a set of common objects to which each subject can relate and to which communication and action can be appropriately oriented. At the most basic level, this is apparent in terms of the need for subjects, and their actions, to be somehow present to one another if there is to be intersubjective engagement between them. Thus I can encounter another only to the extent that she figures in my own experience and to the extent that I can identify her as other than myself; I can speak to another only to the extent that my words are present to her as indeed my words and not as her own; I can touch someone only to the extent that I can feel her body and know it as other than mine. In these respects, intersubjectivity depends crucially on the possibility for subjectivity itself to be made ‘objective’ – for thoughts to be put into speech or writing, for desires and beliefs to be put into actions, for persons to be embodied. And, of course, those objective ‘expressions’ must each be available, in some fashion, to both subjects if there is indeed to be communication or engagement between them – imagine, for instance, the difficulty in two people trying to cooperate if neither knew how their actions appeared to the other.

The importance of being able to grasp the subjectivity of others through what is 'objectively' present to us directs attention to the centrality of the active body in the structure of intersubjectivity. It is through bodily activity that we first grasp the presence of others and by means of which we gain insight into their own subjective lives – through the body the internality of subjectivity is brought out into the open-ness of the public world. The role of the body here is something recognised by a number of philosophers, perhaps most notably in this century by Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[9] but also, within analytic thought, in ideas that derive from the work of Peter Strawson and Gareth Evans.[10] It also appears, though in a very different form, in Emmanuel Levinas' account of the encounter with others as essentially based in the 'face-to-face'.[11]

The commonality of 'objectified' subjectivity – of spoken or signed language, of embodied action, of the expressive face or gesture – represents the most minimal form of objectivity on which intersubjectivity depends, but it cannot be restricted to this alone. For me to be able to understand you, it is not enough that I have access to your actions or to your physical presence – I also need to be able to relate those actions, and that presence, to other aspects of my experience as well as to your behavior in general. And the only way to do this is through relation to a common environment and to common objects within that environment. I will not be able to coordinate my actions to yours, nor will I be able to communicate with you, if our activities, our attitudes and our utterances are directed towards completely different and mutually inaccessible objects. Thus, unless we can orient ourselves towards the same objects, and grasp one another as so oriented, we will be unable to orient ourselves to each other. Intersubjectivity is a matter of just such common or overlapping orientation with respect to the environments in which we are actively involved and, in this respect, it necessarily depends on our shared access to an objective world. Significantly, however, access to such a world itself seems, in its own turn, to be dependent on some notion of intersubjective engagement.

The idea that there is such a dependence of the objective on the intersubjective appears in the work of Immanuel Kant, both in his emphasis on the intersubjective character of aesthetic judgment in the Critique of Judgment, and in some of his comments elsewhere. In the Critique of Pure Reason, for instance, Kant writes that: “The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for all human reason.”[12] Kant is not, in this passage, espousing some view of truth as dependent on intersubjective agreement, but rather indicating the way in which truth, and objectivity with it, are notions that stand in an essential relation to intersubjectivity. One might say that it is only when we are able to compare our own beliefs and attitudes with those of others that we can begin to judge what is true and what is false – for only then do we have access to any basis on which such judgments could be made. Otherwise we are presented merely with a set of subjective 'presentations' that can be judged, if they can be judged at all, only against other such presentations. A very similar idea can also be seen to underlie Ludwig Wittgenstein's emphasis on the intersubjective nature of language, and so also of meaning, in the so-called 'private language argument' in the Philosophical Investigations.[13] There the point is that one cannot be sure that one is using words in the same way, and so one cannot be sure what one means, unless there is some intersubjective context that constrains such use.

Wittgenstein and Kant both direct our attention to the importance of intersubjectivity through emphasizing the normative element that is necessary in making possible judgment as well as language and thought. Often such normativity is taken to consist in a need to abide by certain rules or conventions. If this were so then it would suggest a view of the intersubjective as itself structured in terms of certain regulative or conventional constraints on behavior. It is certainly true that many philosophers have tended to think of the intersubjective in this way (many readers of Wittgenstein, for instance, adopt such a view), but it is arguable whether this is, in fact, the right way to think, either about the normativity that is involved here or about the nature of the intersubjective itself. There is something of a parallel here with an old problem that arises in political theory. Social contract theorists such as Hobbes argue that the transition from a state of nature to one of civil society is brought about through the establishing of a contract or covenant among individual persons. In response, Rousseau argues that no contract or convention could be sufficient to achieve such a transition on the grounds that unless there were already some sort of agreement in place, it would be impossible even to formulate a contract.[14] The more general lesson Rousseau teaches is that contract and convention always depend on some priorly established agreement. If this holds in political theory, it holds even more strongly when it comes to language and thought, and to the intersubjectivity on which they depend. The normativity of the intersubjective cannot, then, consist in priorly given rules or conventions – such rules or conventions are not, in any case, needed. Intersubjectivity does indeed require that we adjust our behaviour to that of others, but such adjustment is a matter of awareness and response to an ongoing situation, rather than to some already established model. Intersubjective engagement is not a matter, then, of marching to a plan already choreographed in advance, but more like an improvisational dance in which each dancer responds both to the music and to the spontaneous movements of the other dancers.

What we have been doing in these few paragraphs is to provide some brief exploration of the structure of intersubjectivity, as well as the relation between intersubjectivity and objectivity, and the relation to embodiment and action. It should already be evident, however, that such an exploration carries us beyond these concepts alone and does, in fact, lead us back to a reconsideration of the nature of subjectivity itself. If ideas of truth and objectivity, and the possibility of language and meaning, are dependent both on intersubjective engagement and access to an objective world, then the idea of the subject as a solitary, inward-looking individual must be mistaken. Inasmuch as the subject is indeed a thinking subject, then it must also be engaged with other subjects and with the world. Thus we find that Martin Heidegger refuses to attach any sense to the idea of the solipsistic subject envisaged by Descartes – Heidegger's Dasein is already 'being-in-the-world' and such being-in-the-world is also always a 'being-with' and a 'being-alongside'. Similarly, in the work of Davidson subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity are seen to form a single tri-partite structure, in which all three elements are mutually interdependent.[15]

If there is no single 'problem of intersubjectivity' within philosophy, this may be because the idea of intersubjectivity is entangled with a number of other concepts and in a number of different problems. The intersubjective realm is indeed the realm of common engagement – of common action and communication – that lies between subjects, but in being so it is also the realm in which subjectivity is articulated and defined, and in relation to which our grasp of objectivity also develops. In this respect, the intersubjective realm is not only the realm in which encounter with other people and with the world is possible, it is also the realm in which we encounter ourselves.[16]

Notes and references

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[1] Jeff Malpas is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. The third in this series of philosophical entries, edited by Marcia Cavell, will be on meaning. The author is professor Ernest LePore of Rutgers University.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1989)– there is no entry for 'intersubjective' at all in the first edition of the dictionary. It is noteworthy that although 'subjective' has a slightly longer history, the contemporary sense of the term, in which it is associated with the mind and with consciousness, first appears only in the seventeenth, and then, more commonly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (prior to that time it had the sense of 'weak' or 'submissive' – see the entry for the term in the Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn.).

[3] Aristotle, Politics, 1253a27-29.

[4] See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn. 1998), pp.23-27

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on Inequality, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 – orig French edn. 1755), p.104. Rousseau also provides an account of the development of human psychological life that sees it as origininating in the feeling of 'self-love' (amour propre - love of one's own welfare) and its thwarting by the actions of others.

[6] Richard Popkin describes the shift at issue here with particular reference to the rise of skeptical modes of thought in The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). It is significant that the rise of skepticism occurs in close conjunction with the development of the idea of subjectivity.

[7] Meditations on First Philosophy, 28; in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. II, ed. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.19.

[8] Meditations on First Philosophy, II, 32, in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol II, p.21.

[9] See The Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp.346-365.

[10] See, for instance, the essays collected in José Luis Bermudez, Anthony Marcel, and Naomi Eilan (eds.), The Body and the Self (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 1995).

[11] See Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

[12] Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), A821/B849.

[13] Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), §243-322. The argument in these sections has generated much controversy, see especially Saul A. Kripke's, Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

[14] See Rousseau, XXXXXXX.

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[15] See especially Davidson, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.153-66.

[16] For more on the developed in this essay see my Place and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).