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The Structure of Interpersonal Experience

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Abstract
This chapter develops a phenomenological account of what it is to encounter someone as a person, an achievement that many discussions of intersubjectivity presuppose rather than address. I take, as a starting point, Sartre's view in *Being and Nothingness* that our sense of others is pre-conceptual, bodily and involves a distinctive way of experiencing *possibilities*. I concede that Sartre's emphasis on the *loss* of possibilities is too restrictive, but defend this more general view. In so doing, I consider some alterations in the structure of interpersonal experience that can occur in psychiatric illness. I propose that they are best interpreted as changes in a felt sense of possibility that is constitutive of our sense of others as persons.

This chapter sketches a phenomenological account of what it is to encounter someone as a person. I take, as a starting point, Sartre's view in *Being and Nothingness* that our sense of others involves a bodily response that is inextricable from a distinctive way of experiencing *possibilities*. I concede that Sartre's emphasis on the *loss* of possibilities is too restrictive, but defend this more general claim. In so doing, I consider alterations in the structure of interpersonal experience that can occur in psychiatric illness. These, I propose, are best interpreted as changes in a felt sense of possibility that constitutes our sense of others as persons.

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1 Experiencing Persons

Recent approaches to interpersonal understanding tend to focus upon an ability to attribute beliefs, desires and other kinds of mental state to people, their primary concern being whether this depends upon employment of a theory, an ability to 'simulate' the minds of others, or some combination of the two.[1] In this paper, I explore something that has been neglected: our sense of others as persons. One could maintain that this amounts to no more than the recognition that others possess minds or certain kinds of mental state. However, it has also been argued that the concept of a 'person' plays a more fundamental role in our thinking about each other than 'minds' and 'mental states'. For instance, Strawson (1959) maintains that 'person' is a primitive concept – it is not derived from other concepts and therefore resists further analysis.[2] He points out that our thought does not respect a clear distinction between two kinds of entity – minds and bodies. It is not that one entity has arms and legs, while another has thoughts and feelings; the same 'I' has both mental and physical characteristics. Furthermore, the properties attributed to persons do not divide neatly into 'mental' and 'non-mental' categories. Strawson distinguishes between M- and P-predicates, where the former are possessed by material things and persons, whereas the latter are specific to persons. For example, a rock and a person both have weight, but only a person can have feelings of jealousy. Although, jealousy may well be an uncontroversial example of a 'mental state', other P-predicates, such as 'is smiling' and 'is going for a walk', seem to straddle the two categories.

Such a position does not imply that there is a distinctive *phenomenology* associated with encountering persons. However, I think there is. It can be illustrated by those occasional moments of ambiguity when we experience a flickering between personal and impersonal experiences of an entity. Consider looking at a waxwork, first taking it to be a person and then realising that it is not. There is a kind of 'gestalt switch', and sometimes a feeling of ambiguity that is not fully resolved. Perhaps, as Freud (1919/2003) maintained, such 'uncanny' feelings sometimes arise due to conflicting experiences of an entity as animate and, at the same time, inanimate. However, they can also be associated more specifically with the personal / impersonal distinction. For instance, being stared at by a chimpanzee can produce an odd feeling of personal-impersonal indeterminacy, without any disturbance in one's appreciation of it as an animate organism.[3]

As the waxwork example shows, we can of course be mistaken when we experience an entity as a person. But I am concerned with what the relevant experience consists of, regardless of whether or not it is veridical. One might object that there is no generic sense of 'personhood' incorporated into our experience of others. I can experience a given person in any number of ways – I might be indifferent to her, uncomfortable with her, in love with her or afraid of her. These experiences have little in common. However, the diverse ways in which we experience, think about and respond to others do, I suggest, presuppose a more general sense of personhood. This can be illustrated

by reflecting upon forms of anomalous experience where it is absent. For example, in *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, 'Renee' describes how others no longer appeared as persons:

> I look at her, study her, praying to feel the life in her through the enveloping unreality. But she seems more a statue than ever, a manikin moved by mechanism, talking like an automaton. It is horrible, inhuman, grotesque. (Sechehaye 1970, p. 38)

The complaint is not that a perceived property or set of properties has changed. Rather, a *feeling* of the personal, which does not depend upon perception of anything specific, is absent. This leaves Renee with a peculiar experience of others as physically unchanged and yet disturbingly different.

Experiencing someone as a person (hereafter 'personal experience') does not depend upon ascribing propositional attitudes, such as beliefs and desires. As Gallagher (2001, 2005) and others have pointed out, it seems likely that many interpersonal interactions are facilitated by a perceptual appreciation of agency, embedded in a context of shared practice, which does not require the attribution of propositional attitudes.[4] It would be implausible to insist that these interactions involve no sense at all of being with a person and that personhood is only established once propositional attitudes are assigned. One might respond that recognising personhood is not a matter of *actually* attributing propositional attitudes to an entity but of recognising that one *could* legitimately do so. But it is doubtful that possession of beliefs and desires is fundamental to our sense of others as *persons*. We understand non-human organisms, institutions and even certain artefacts in such terms, and it is not clear where to draw the line between metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses. One might instead appeal to a wider range of mental states. Goldman, amongst others, points out that a comprehensive theory of interpersonal understanding or "mindreading" will need to include a lot more than just beliefs, desires, and propositional attitudes more generally. There are "other kinds of mental states: sensations, like feelings and pain, and emotions, like disgust and anger" (Goldman 2006, p. 20). Why should appreciating that an entity possesses these states involve a distinctive way of *experiencing* that entity? It could be maintained that we perceive their behavioural effects or perhaps even the mental states themselves (for instance, it is arguable that certain perceivable expressions of an emotion are partly constitutive of the emotion), and that the relevant perceptual contents are what make personal experience distinctive.[5] However, personal experience is not always associated with perceived expressions, gestures, actions, words or, indeed, any specific set of perceived properties. It can be associated with a diverse range of perceptual stimuli. I might hear the door creak, feel a touch on my back or hear breathing and be immediately struck by the feeling that *someone* is there.

Another possibility is simulation; maybe appreciating someone as a person is associated with a distinctive experience because it sometimes or always involves simulating his experiences and, by implication, having an experience.[6] This would account for the distinctiveness of the personal, because we do not generally *recognise* other kinds of entity by simulating them. So, when you hear the creak at the door, you adopt – perhaps automatically – the perspective of a person at the door. It is unclear, though, how an experience of this kind could constitute our sense of others as persons. As Scheler (1954, p. 10) points out, recognition of someone as a person, and thus a legitimate target for what is these days referred to as 'simulation', is an achievement that simulation presupposes. One would not attribute mental states of whatever type to an entity unless one took her to be an entity of the kind that possessed them. Another objection raised by Scheler is that, although we recognise others as like ourselves in some respects, personal experience equally involves a sense of their distinctness – we react to their experiences *as theirs rather than ours*: "To commiserate is [….] to be sorry at another person's sorrow, *as being his*. The fact that it is his is part of the phenomenological situation" (Scheler 1954, p. 37). We respond to others' predicaments, rather than just replicating them, and our response is not always preceded by replication.[7]

In response, one could distinguish 'high level' from 'low level' simulation (e.g. Goldman 2006), and maintain that experiencing others as persons involves the latter. Hence there is no awareness of the simulation routine that underlies the experience. But before we attempt to account for a kind of experience in terms of low-level simulation, we first need to be clear about what the relevant experience consists of. In what follows, I will suggest that personal experience is constituted by a felt sense of *connectedness* to others, rather than by the achievement of replicating, in whatever way, some aspect of their psychology. Maybe this does depend upon 'low-level' matching, amongst other things, but an appeal to 'matching', 'simulating' or 'replicating' does not explain or even acknowledge the kind of relational structure that makes it distinctive. Simulation is not so much wrong as beside the point. My account will similarly imply that personal experience cannot be explained in terms of an implicit or explicit 'theory', as our sense of what persons *are* originates in a distinctive kind of *feeling* rather than in a body of knowledge.

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2 Bodily Feelings, Possibilities and Other People

In his discussion and defence of simulation theory, Goldman (2006) discusses several ancestors of modern simulation theories, including the work of Adam Smith. His characterisation of Smith as a proto-simulationist is hard to resist.[8] However, consider the following passage, quoted by Goldman (2006, p. 17), which at least gestures towards something different:

> When we have read a book or poem so often that we can no longer find any amusement in reading it by ourselves, we can still take pleasure in reading it to a companion. To him it has all the graces of novelty; we enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer capable of exciting in us; we consider all the ideas which it presents, rather in the light of which they appear to him, than in that in which they appear to ourselves, and we are amused by sympathy with his amusement which thus enlivens our own. On the contrary, we should be vexed if he did not seem to be entertained with it, and we could no longer take any pleasure in reading it to him. (Smith 1759/2000, p. 11)

The passage is revealing because it does not merely describe the 'simulation' of one person by another, but interaction between two people. And there are various things going on. One person certainly appreciates something of the other's experience, but the appreciation is at the same time self-transformative. Engaging with the other person's experience of the book changes and enriches one's own experience of it. Furthermore, it is not clear that there are two distinct experiences of the book co-existing in the same person: an experience of a dull book and a simulated experience of an exciting book. Rather, the book that previously seemed dull has had new life breathed into it through a shared experience. It is 'us' who perceive the book together, shaping each other's experiences in the process. Simulation alone fails to capture the relational and self-affecting character of the experience, which Smith refers to in terms of the "pleasures of mutual sympathy" (1759/2000, p. 10).

This alone poses no threat to a simulationist account. One could say that the example involves three separate steps: there is the simulation, which causes certain feelings or thoughts, and these then affect one's own experience of the book. However, interpersonal experience does not always respect linguistic distinctions between (i) a person's own experiences of the world; (ii) her appreciation of how someone else experiences the world; and (iii) kinds of feeling that might be causally associated with (i) or (ii). I concede that, in many instances, the three are indeed separate occurrences. However, when it comes to experiencing someone *as a person*, I propose that they are aspects of a single, unitary experience, rather than separate perceptual and/or cognitive achievements that are causally associated with each other. Personal experience consists in a bodily feeling that *is* at the same time (a) an acknowledgement of the other person as a locus of experience and activity distinct from oneself and (b) a change in how one experiences the world. To illustrate how this might is so, I turn to Sartre's discussion of how we experience 'the other' in *Being and Nothingness*.

For Sartre, our most fundamental sense of 'the other' (which I will instead refer to as 'a person') is not a matter of attributing internal mental states, analogising, inferring, hypothesising, deploying a theory, simulating, or anything of the sort. Instead, it consists of a feeling, a change in how one's body is experienced. Take his description of shame:

> I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed. (1989, p. 221)

On one view, what happens here is that I first perceive the presence of another person, then reflect upon what she has seen me doing, and finally experience shame. But this is not what Sartre claims. Instead, he suggests that shame is a reflex-like reaction to a stimulus, which does not depend upon prior recognition that someone is present or upon an evaluative judgement concerning the shameful nature of one's deeds. It is, he says, "an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation" (1989, p. 222). This feeling is not just *associated* with awareness of someone's presence. Instead, it *incorporates* that awareness. Put simply, one cannot feel ashamed without having a sense of being ashamed before somebody. What shame reveals, according to Sartre, is the relation of "being-seen-by-another", "the look" (1989, p. 259). There are two inextricable aspects to this: (i) recognising someone as a locus of experience; (ii) recognising oneself as an object of their experience. 'The look' is not to be interpreted literally, as seeing a pair of eyes. It is not a matter of perceiving that one has actually been seen but of having a sense of being perceived. Hence it is something more abstract, which can be associated with any number of different perceived properties:

> Of course, what *most often* manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling in the branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. (Sartre 1989, p. 257)[9]

How is it possible for something to be a change in bodily experience and, at the same time, a sense of relating – in some way – to another person? Sartre's answer is that a change in bodily feeling can also be a change in one's experience of worldly *possibilities*, and that a certain kind of modification of those possibilities just *is* our most fundamental sense of the personal. He points out that we do not usually experience our bodies as conspicuous objects of experience. When I am involved in a project, my body is that through which I perceive and act upon things, rather than an object of perception or action: "My consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts" (1989, p. 259). When this happens, my body is not experienced as a thing with which I am intimately associated in a unique way, but instead as a kind of structure that the perceived world has. Entities are not experienced solely in terms of their actual features but also in terms of the significant possibilities that they offer me, and these possibilities are determined – at least in part – by a sense of the capacities and dispositions of my body. Hence a

change in bodily experience can at the same time be a change in world experience. Take Sartre's famous example of peeping through a keyhole at somebody (1989, p. 259). The voyeur is absorbed in the perceived situation, in the project of spying. Then, as she hears a creak on the stair, there is a sudden shift in how her body feels. It ceases to be an inconspicuous medium through which she perceives the room and enters the foreground of awareness. As this happens, perception of her surrounding is altered too. The possibilities that the situation incorporated were – in part – a reflection of her bodily dispositions. As her body becomes object-like and awkward, these dispositions change. Hence the possibilities offered by the world change too. The world *looks* different, as significant possibilities that perceived things previously offered, such as 'useable in the context of my current project', are lost.

For Sartre, a feeling of being object-like amounts to a feeling of being an object of perception for someone else, of inhabiting a world that is now configured in terms of her projects and purposes: "I grasp the Other's look at the very centre of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities" (1989, p. 263). As he makes clear, this experiential shift is not primarily a matter of knowing or believing something. It is a change in a felt sense of one's relationship with the world. I do not simply "know" that I am being looked at; I am "suddenly affected in my being"; I "live" it (1989, pp. 260–261). It is not a three-step process of recognising the presence of someone, feeling ashamed and then experiencing the world differently, regardless of the order in which these steps are placed. The three are one and the same.

Are there any grounds for accepting Sartre's view that (a) a change in our bodily phenomenology can at the same time be a change in possibilities that are integral to the perceived world and (b) such a change constitutes our sense of others as persons? We can do so without also accepting his more specific emphasis upon a certain kind of interpersonal encounter. It is routinely pointed out that Sartre's approach over-emphasises confrontational relations. For example, Merleau-Ponty complains that it best captures those awkward occasions when "each of us feels his actions not to be taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect's" (1962, p. 361).[10] However, the more general view that this emphasis presupposes is, I think, right. And it is not specific to Sartre. Phenomenologists consistently emphasise that bodily experience and world experience are inextricable, offering a range of illustrations in the process. For instance, Husserl (e.g. 1973, 2001) stresses that the body is not just an object of perception but also an organ of perception, and that our bodily dispositions are reflected in the kinds of possibility that things offer. Possibilities, he says, can appear variably "enticing", and the degree to which they entice us is symptomatic of an experienced "affective force"; it is through the perceiving body that we experience their pull (2001, p. 90). Merleau-Ponty (1962) adopts a similar view, according to which the body as perceiver cannot be phenomenologically dissociated from a structured system of possibilities that we experience as integral to the world:

> To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving. (1962, p. 326)

There is also empirical support for such a view.[11] Hence I think it is plausible to maintain that certain changes in our bodily phenomenology also amount to changes in world experience (Ratcliffe 2008). As for the claim that our sense of others as persons involves a change in the perception of possibilities, this too is not exclusive to Sartre. For instance, Merleau-Ponty observes that "no sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance" (1962, p. 353). In other words, there is a shift in one's sense of the possibilities that things offer; now they are perceived as offering possibilities for him too. And again, the view has least some empirical support. There is evidence to suggest that the experienced significance of entities depends, to a degree, on perception of what others are doing, and is influenced by factors such as their expression and direction of gaze. This effect is something perceptual and unavoidable, which is present from an early age (Gallagher 2009, p. 302).

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3 Interpersonal Connection

Something Sartre emphasises, which is not sufficiently acknowledged by simulation and theory theories, is that recognising someone as a person is invariably self-affecting; it involves a change in the experience of one's possibilities. But this can take various forms, some of which are quite different from what Sartre describes. Take his example of walking in the park and seeing a figure on a bench. You feel, he says, the pull of the world away from you and towards him. The park ceases to be a realm of significant possibilities *for you* and becomes *his* park, where you take your place among his objects (Sartre 1989, p. 254). Now contrast this with J. H. van den Berg's example of showing a guest around the town where you live:

> ….one can learn to know another best by travelling with him through a country or by looking at a town with him. One who often shows the same town to different people will be struck by the ever new way in which the town appears in the conversation that is held about the sights during such a walk. These different ways are identical with the people with whom one walks, they are forms of subjectivity. The subject shows itself in the things….. (1952, p. 166)

Here, the significance of one's environment is not stolen by one's companion. Instead, the possibilities it offers are enriched by the experience of relating to him; new life is breathed into one's surroundings.[12] We do not live in a world of fixed systems of possibility but in a realm where our relations with specific others reshape the ways

things appear, sometimes fleetingly and sometimes in enduring ways. The interpersonal world is a dance of changing possibilities, some of which are experienced as 'mine', others as 'belonging to someone else' and others as 'ours', the three being inextricably linked. All interpersonal experience retains a sense of the other person as distinct from oneself and, with this, of certain possibilities being hers and others one's own. But experience of *being with* another person also involves *our* having possibilities and our transforming a shared space of possibilities together. Elsewhere, van den Berg also offers this example:

> We all know people in whose company we would prefer not to go shopping, not to visit a museum, not to look at a landscape, because we would like to keep these things undamaged. Just as we all know people in whose company it is pleasant to take a walk because the objects encountered come to no harm. These people we call friends, good companions, loved ones. (1972, p. 65)

Experience of our surroundings can vary considerably, depending on who we are with. It can be shaped by non-localised and pervasive feelings of discomfort, threat, vulnerability, openness, connectedness, ease, calm, safety, tension or effortlessness. The other person need not say or do anything specific; the simple feeling of being with another person can at the same time amount to enrichment of one's world or impoverishment of it. And this feeling is not just a matter of connecting with other persons; there is also an experience of connecting with them *as* persons.[13]

Given this emphasis on how we *affect* each other, it is clear that *interaction* between persons better exemplifies the structure of personal experience than seemingly detached, unaffected contemplation of one party by another. Feelings of connectedness not only determine how we perceive a person; they also shape how we interact with him. And these feelings can be enhanced or diminished, depending on how the interaction progresses. Several philosophers have criticised both 'theory' and 'simulation' theories for over-emphasising detached, spectatorial contemplation of one party by another, and have stressed the extent to which interpersonal understanding is not merely associated with interaction but somehow dependent upon it (e.g. Gallagher 2001; Ratcliffe 2007; Hutto 2008; de Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Although I am sympathetic to this emphasis upon interaction, it is important to stress that the experience of interacting with another person need not be explicitly focused upon him, or upon the task of interpreting him. As pointed out by van den Berg, it is often more a matter of how the *shared world* is experienced and transformed. There is a pervasive feeling of being with someone that shapes perception of one's surroundings when in his presence.[14] Furthermore, a sense of others as persons is not constituted by interaction. We usually appreciate someone as a person *before* we initiate any kind of interaction with her, and it is the nature of this prior appreciation that I seek to articulate. Even so, reflecting upon the phenomenology of interaction can help illuminate the structure of

personal experience. Interaction can take all sorts of different forms, and these do not just involve *different* ways of experiencing others; some clearly involve a *greater* receptivity to the personal than others. For instance, handing money to a cashier and saying 'thank you' does not involve the same level of personal engagement as looking into someone's eyes and sincerely saying 'I love you'. Hence we can approach the phenomenology of personal experience by first identifying which of these incorporate the most pronounced sense of the personal and then characterising what it is that makes them distinctive in this way. Appreciating someone as a person, I suggest, need not involve *actually* participating in the relevant relation. But it does require recognition of its *possibility* (along with that of other relations which are – by comparison – impoverished in some way). By analogy, recognising something as a cup need not involve actually drinking from it, but one would have no sense of what cups were if one did not recognise the possibility of drinking from them.

One approach is to maintain that second-person relations embody recognition of the other as a person, in a way that third-person 'I-she/he/it' relations do not (e.g. Gallagher 2001). However, it is not enough to distinguish second-person interaction from third-person observation and prioritise the former. First of all, some second-person interactions are rather impersonal compared to some third-person observations. Compare saying 'no thanks' to someone who attempts to sell you something on a busy street to watching one's child participating in a school play. The former might be a habitual response that involves virtually no acknowledgement of personhood. One encounters a token of the generic social type 'salesperson', rather than a unique individual, a 'who'. In contrast, watching one's child perform involves both a strong feeling of connectedness and also a much greater sense of him as a specific individual, a 'who'. Unlike recognising something as a coffee cup or a frog, an appreciation of being in the presence of a person is not just a matter of recognising that a nearby entity belongs to some type. In the cup or frog case, it does not usually matter that this is a particular cup or a particular frog. Any individual would instantiate the kind just as well. But engaging with someone as a person is different. There is a receptiveness to the fact that someone is a 'who' rather than just a 'what'. Openness to someone as a person is thus very different from experiencing pragmatically indistinguishable members of a kind. Hence it does seem right to emphasise a certain *kind* of second-person relation, where one addresses a 'you' rather than scrutinises a thing. However, we need to be more specific than this. Personal experience is not at its most pronounced in those second-person interactions where one is guarded, defensive, reserved or uncomfortable, where one feels disconnected from the other person, where she seems somehow lacking, and so on. We can also disregard those cases where the exchange is brief or heavily constrained by norms and roles, although this is not to imply that a truly 'personal' relation must be or even could be completely unconstrained by norms either.

A plausible account of what is common to those relations where we are most open to others as persons is offered by the Danish philosopher Knud Løgstrup (1956/1997).

He maintains, as I want to, that relating to someone as a person involves being receptive to the fact that we have the potential to alter each other's world:

> By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his or her world not by theories and views but by our very attitude toward him or her. Here lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands. (1997, p. 18)

He stresses that we have an unavoidable effect upon others, as they do upon us. Their gestures or expressions, however subtle, permeate us and affect us in ways that we cannot easily resist. It follows, Løgstrup says, that relating to someone as a person involves inescapable responsibility for her:

> A person never has something to do with another person without also having some degree of control over him or her. It may be a very small matter, involving only a passing mood, a dampening or quickening of spirit, a deepening or removal of some dislike. But it may also be a matter of tremendous scope, such as can determine if the life of the other flourishes or not. (1997, pp. 15–16)[15]

How does one 'shape' another's world? In referring to a world that can be large or small, threatening or secure, Løgstrup seems, like Sartre, to be talking about the possibilities it offers. A felt sense of being with the other person, which evolves as the interaction progresses, is at the same time a change in the possibilities that one's world offers. Specific possibilities might become more or less inviting – something that looked enticing before may appear less so now. However, changes might be much more encompassing in scope. Following an unpleasant encounter with someone, an air of threat or discomfort can pervade everything; the world as a whole takes on a different tone.

Løgstrup's emphasis is different from Sartre's. He identifies a kind of habitual trust as central to the personal.[16] Engaging with someone as a person involves being open to the transformative possibilities that she offers. Hence, in genuine communion with persons, "we deliver ourselves over into the hand of another" (1997, p. 14). 'Trust', in this sense, is not an explicit attitude, but a kind of felt, bodily openness to the other person. For Løgstrup, a fully rich interpersonal interaction involves mutual openness and mutual responsibility. It also involves at least some sense of vulnerability, as one could not be affected by someone in this sort of personal way without also being rendered more generally susceptible to her influence, to other forms of relation. In addition, Løgstrup stresses that personal relations do not take place in a social nowhere,

emancipated from all norms and conventions. It is only in a context of established norms that interactions can take place in as structured and secure fashion. Norms, although they can facilitate evasion of the personal, also serve to regulate a relationship, preventing a form of over-exposure to each other (1997, p. 19).

I think something along these lines is right. The vulnerability that Sartre emphasises is an aspect of personal experience, but – as Løgstrup makes clear – there is a balance between this and an openness to self-transformative possibilities. It is this kind of balance that characterises our richest engagement with others *as* persons. Hence I propose that our sense of being in the presence of a person consists in a felt receptiveness to the potential for such a relation, along with that of various privations of it. How might we further support such a view? I will conclude by suggesting that we can do so by reflecting upon various changes in the structure of interpersonal experience that can occur in psychiatric illness. By appreciating what is lacking in such cases, we can gain insight into what an intact sense of the personal consists of.

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4 Pathologies of Interpersonal Experience

Consider the experience of severe depression. Although it takes various different forms, a theme common to almost every autobiographical account is the loss of felt interpersonal connection. What people complain of is not just its absence but a painful feeling of absence. There is a felt need for something that at the same time presents itself as unobtainable:

> A paradox of depression is that sufferers yearn for connection, seem bereft because of their isolation, and yet are rendered incapable of being with others in a comfortable way. […] Much of depression's pain arises out of the recognition that what might make me feel better – human connection – seems impossible in the midst of a paralyzing episode of depression. It is rather like dying from thirst while looking at a glass of water just beyond one's reach. (Karp 1996, pp. 14–16)

The problem is not just that one *actually* fails to connect with a large number of persons, perhaps even all persons. Rather, the kind of interpersonal connection that people more usually take for granted now seems *impossible*, irrevocably gone from the world. This is closely associated with the complaint that one is trapped, imprisoned, or cut off from everything and everyone by some impenetrable substance. One of the most famous statements of this is that of Sylvia Plath: "wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (1966, p. 178). The same theme features in almost every first-person account of depression. For example:

> I couldn't feel anything for [my husband]. I couldn't feel anything for the children. It was like being inside a very, very thick balloon and no matter how hard I pushed

> out, the momentum of the skin of the balloon would just push me back in. So I couldn't touch anybody, I couldn't touch anything. (Interview with a 50-year-old woman on healthtalkonline.org; accessed 27.10.2008)

The precise nature of the 'enclosure' varies from one description to the next. It might be soundproof glass, a prison, a deep pit, a tunnel or a wall (Rowe 1978, p. 30). But much the same experience is conveyed in every case: a sense of being irrevocably estranged from others, which is inextricable from a more general change in how one experiences the world. Experience ordinarily incorporates a sense of the contingency of one's own perspective and its susceptibility to change. This is largely due to a potential that is integral to our experience of other persons, that of shaping and reshaping our world in unforeseen ways. With a sense of interpersonal connection gone from experience, the world no longer incorporates that potential. It is somehow small, closed and diminished, bereft of openness and dynamism. Hence, in just about every autobiographical account, the predicament of isolation in some inescapable and unchanging prison is tied up with the theme of being cut off from others. Associated with this are complaints of anomalous bodily feeling, a loss of vitality and movement. These corporeal changes are often described in such a way as to indicate that they are inextricable from alterations in interpersonal experience and world experience more generally (Fuchs 2005; Ratcliffe 2009b). Such experiences suggest an inversion of Sartre's view: being totally insulated from the possibilities offered by others is the death of one's possibilities. What other people ordinarily offer is not merely the potential to take away one's possibilities. The world is experienced as a dynamic space of significant possibilities in virtue of our potential and actual relations with them.

A loss of interpersonal connectedness like this can also amount to a diminished sense of others *as* persons. The phenomenologist and psychiatrist Eugene Minkowski (1970, p. 189) describes how, when certain kinds of felt contact with other people are lost, the potential for other kinds of relation can become all-encompassing. He discusses one patient suffering from what he terms 'schizophrenic melancholia'. The possibility of feeling connected to particular individuals was gone from experience, and his world was shaped by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt. The patient felt guilty *before oth*ers, and thus retained some sense of relatedness to people. But this was his only way of relating to them. Consequently, they ceased to be distinctive individuals and instead became indistinguishable persecutors or judges:

> He no longer perceived the personal and individual worth of men; for him they were only faint, disfigured silhouettes cut out of the general ground of hostility. In fact, he was not persecuted by living men but by men who were transformed into persecutors and were only that. He no longer saw the total, complex life of the human being. Men had become schematic manikins. (1970, p. 189)

He offers the following description by another patient who was suffering from some form of depression:

> When I go out, the men that I see give me the impression of being phantoms. When I hear their voices, I am surprised that they are able to speak. I am astonished, and I admire others' ability to do things. [….] I have the feeling of being alone. Conversation with someone seems to me something from far away, airy, intangible. My words no longer correspond to my thought. I am condemned not to be understood. (1970, pp. 329–330)

Here too, there is a clear association between a loss of felt connection with others and an impaired sense of them as persons, but the estrangement does not take the more specific form of guilt.

Other kinds of alteration in the structure of interpersonal experience that can occur in psychiatric illness (and, more specifically, paranoid schizophrenia) *do* resemble what Sartre describes. For example, R. D. Laing remarks upon how "in psychotic conditions the gaze or scrutiny of the other can be experienced as an actual penetration into the core of the 'inner' self" (1960, p. 113). He quotes one patient as saying "I can't go on. You are arguing in order to have the pleasure of triumphing over me. At best you win an argument. At worst you lose an argument. *I am arguing to preserve my existence*" (1960, p. 45). Here, the sense of mutual influence is replaced by one-way influence from other to self, and the openness-vulnerability balance is skewed towards the latter. The other does indeed become the death of one's possibilities, an existential threat before which one is defenceless. Here too, there is a diminished sense of others as individuals; they are reduced to their roles in conveying threat. *Who* someone is becomes of little consequence. Laing also observes that the feeling of being perceived is not, in the more usual case, a matter of threat. Rather, it is something that human existence requires:

> The need to be perceived is not, of course, purely a visual affair. It extends to the general need to have one's existence endorsed or confirmed by the other, the need for one's total existence to be recognized; the need, in fact, to be loved. (Laing 1960, p. 128)

He goes on to say that, if you cut yourself off from others in some way in order to escape the threat, you lose a life-affirming connectedness in the process.[17]

Because the experience of being with another person is self-affecting, we sometimes *feel* that something is not quite right when interacting with a person whose own sense of the personal is lacking. We all complain, from time to time, of being unable to relate to a specific individual or connect with her for whatever reason. A person might be distant, aloof, shy or self-obsessed. But I am thinking of those rarer instances where one

is left with a feeling that something essential to the personal is lacking. For example, there is the 'praecox feeling' that sometimes characterises interaction with schizophrenic people, where one has an uncanny sense of the other person as somehow alien. Peter Hobson describes a not dissimilar experience that can occur when interacting with autistic people:

> A person can *feel* that there is something missing when relating to someone who is autistic – it is as if one is in the presence of a changeling, someone from a different world – but this escapes the net of scientific methods. (2002, p. 49)

I propose that feelings of oddness like these are at least partly attributable to absence of the sense that one could enter into certain kinds of mutually transformative relation with the person; there is something she ought to offer but fails to offer. This is exemplified by another case that Minkowski describes. He reports not failing to understand the patient but feeling that he understood him too well: "I know all about him"; "the psyche of the patient is too well understood" (1970, pp. 177–178). According to Minkowski, what this patient lacked was any sense of an open future in which he might actualise significant possibilities. The future appeared only in the guise of threat and he thus lived in a nostalgic and somehow closed world. This, Minkowski says, is something he could *feel* when interacting with him:

> The individual, separately so brutally from becoming, can experience it only as a hostile force. And we, confronted by this psyche, flattened and reduced to a single dimension, have the impression, in listening to the patient speak, of being constrained to read an open book, as if there were nothing behind the pages of that book. (1970, p. 179)

The book is open because it is complete. The patient is not oriented towards the future in any way, towards the possible. Instead, he wallows in the past, in what is already actualised. Hence, instead of his being a locus of possibilities and thus a potential influence upon one's world, he seems more like an object in that world, oddly complete and thus somehow diminished as a person. This example is especially interesting because it contrasts with the familiar view, common to both theory and simulation theories, that interpreting others involves solving an epistemic problem – one acquires knowledge about someone's psychology in order to predict or explain her behaviour. On this view, if one somehow had the good fortune to know everything about the psychology of another person, it would make no difference to the ontological status of that individual as a person. But Minkowski's description, which also resonates – in my view – with many kinds of less extreme and more everyday interpersonal experience, suggests otherwise. Not knowing everything about a person is integral to our sense of her as a person. The reason for this is that persons are not merely

experienced as objects within one's world – a sense of their *being* persons involves an appreciation of their potential to reshape one's world, to transform to varying degrees the possibilities it offers. Hence one cannot know everything about them, as they could not then open up new possibilities and would therefore not be experienced as persons. The lack of knowledge and sense of unpredictability that is so central to our experience of others is not principally a matter of ignorance about the ingredients of their heads. It is constitutive of our sense of personhood. A person is intrinsically unpredictable (to an extent, at least) in a way that a rock is not, because the former is never fully inserted into one's own world and points instead to something beyond it.[18]

All the descriptions of anomalous interpersonal experience mentioned here, along with numerous others, complement Sartre's view that our sense of the personal has a bodily, *felt* phenomenology and is at the same time a sense of the possible. They also suggest that a fully rich experience of the personal approximates the kind of relation described by Løgstrup, in so far as anything that interferes with one's sense of being able to enter into such relations also diminishes one's sense of the personal. Thus the phenomenological study of psychiatric illness can, I suggest, serve to support the view that a sense of others as persons incorporates an appreciation of the potential to enter into a kind of self-transformative relation with them, involving a balance of openness and vulnerability.

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Footnotes

1 See Ratcliffe (2007, Chapter 1) for a survey of ‘theory’ and ‘simulation’ accounts of belief-desire psychology.

2 See Ratcliffe (2009a) for a more detailed discussion of Strawson's work and its significance for current debates about 'folk psychology'. See Lowe (1996) for a recent defence of the view that 'person' is metaphysically primitive. Others have defended a broadly Strawsonian view of persons on developmental grounds (e.g. Hobson 1993, 2002; Reddy 2008).

3 I do not wish to deny the possibility of non-human persons. However, for the purposes of this paper, I remain agnostic over whether animals such as chimpanzees are indeed persons.

4 See also Ratcliffe (2007) and Hutto (2008) for defences of this view.

5 Many philosophers have argued that we are able to perceive, to some extent, the mental states of others. See, for example, Scheler (1954) and, more recently, Gallagher (2001, 2005).

6 See Goldman (2006) for a detailed recent discussion and defence of simulation theory.

7 See, for example, Zahavi (2007) for a good account of Scheler's work and its importance as a corrective to assumptions made by both theory and simulation theorists.

8 See, for example, Smith (1759/2000, p. 4).

9 In fact, even when the look *is* manifested by a pair of eyes, one does not perceive the eyes as objects but as openings onto the person's situation, a situation that includes oneself (Sartre 1989, p. 258). And the look presumably does not depend upon specifically *visual* perception either, as it is essential to a sense of the personal that people without sight also possess.

10 As Sartre recognises, even experiences like this do not involve a sense of being wholly object-like. The look does not extinguish an awareness, shared by both parties, of the objectified person's potential to set up a new system of possibilities: "the Other-as-object is an explosive instrument which I handle with care because I foresee around him the permanent possibility that they are going to make it explode and that with this explosion I shall suddenly experience the flight of the world away from me and the alienation of my being" (Sartre 1989, p. 297).

11 For example, Declerck and Gapenne (2009) address the concept of 'affordance' (Gibson 1979), which they accurately describe as "actually perceived possibility" (a description that fits equally well with the accounts offered by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty). They discuss various sources of evidence for the view that motor dispositions affect perceived properties of the environment such as distance. See the chapters in this volume by Rietveld and Romdenh-Romluc for further discussion of affordances. See also Gallagher (2005) for a detailed account of how bodily dispositions shape perception, and for discussion of a wide range of relevant empirical evidence.

12 Leder (1990, p. 94) offers a similar example, involving walking through a forest with a friend. He remarks on how "we are cosubjectivities, supplementing rather than truncating each other's possibilities. I come to see the forest not only through my own eyes but as the Other sees it". He calls this process "mutual incorporation". Such descriptions are complemented by work in developmental psychology. See, for example, Tronick et al. (1998) for the view that bodily, affective interaction between people can serve to somehow "expand" one's state of consciousness, a process that Tronick claims is central to cognitive development.

13 As Colombetti and Torrance (2009, p. 509) observe, there is a "basic feeling of being connected" to another person that characterises interpersonal relations, a feeling that varies considerably in its degree and quality. Various authors have pointed out that *feelings* of connectedness shape a child's relations with others from a very early age. To quote Trevarthen (1993, p. 151), "expressions of the self 'invade' the mind of the other, making the moving body of the self resonant with impulses that can move the other's body too". This, he says, remains so in adult conversation, which "is full of an immediate interpersonal vitality that goes beyond, or beneath, the words" (1993, p. 159). For similar views, see, for example, Stern (1985), Hobson (1993, 2002), Gallagher (2005, 2009) and Reddy (2008).

14 See also Gallagher (2009) for discussion of this distinction.

15 This is something that Gallagher (2009, p. 303) also recognises, in remarking on how "the presence of others calls forth a basic and implicit interaction that shapes the way we regard the world around us".

16 Thanks to Owen Earnshaw for pointing out to me the relevance of Løgstrup's work.

17 One might worry about the reliability of Laing's account, as the experience he describes may be partly or wholly an artefact of his own interpretation. But such concerns are, in my view, unwarranted. People with paranoid schizophrenia sometimes do describe exactly this kind of change in the structure of interpersonal relations. See Ratcliffe and Broome (2012) for a discussion. Laing is not the only one to have applied a Sartrean approach to the phenomenology of schizophrenia. See, for example, Lysaker et al. (2005, pp. 343–4).

18 We find similar themes in Levinas (1961/1969).

Part 4
Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity: Ideality, Language and Community