

SARTRE MISCONSTRUED: A REPLY TO MICHAEL LOPATO'S “SOCIAL MEDIA, LOVE, AND SARTRE'S LOOK OF THE OTHER”

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In this paper, I endeavor to provide a critical examination of a recent pioneering work that engages Jean-Paul Sartre's insights in analyzing social media interactions – Michael Lopato's “Social media, love, and Sartre's look of the other: Why online communication is not fulfilling?”. I shall show that in so far as Sartrean insights are concerned in Being and Nothingness, Lopato misconstrued what Sartre really meant with the Look of the Other and love, and is mistaken in appropriating such insights in arguing that online interactions are not fulfilling. I shall proceed by first discussing Sartre's third region of being which is being-for-others which will comprise of the Look of the Other and the two attitudes to retrieve one's freedom. Second, I shall flesh out the arguments of Lopato. Lastly, I shall present my critique of Lopato's arguments which constitutes my reply to his work.

INTRODUCTION

There have been a number of works already that deal with existential-phenomenological issues surrounding the online realm. The most famous work that engaged various existential and phenomenological insights such as that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Soren Kierkegaard is Hubert Dreyfus's *On the Internet*, first published in 2001 and revised in 2009. On the other hand, Lucas Introna comprehensively surveyed current phenomenological approaches to the online realm in “Phenomenological approaches to ethics and information technology” published in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. When it comes to journal articles, following the spirit of Dreyfus's work, there are those who engaged Kierkegaardian insights on online education and community (see Prosser and Ward 2000, 167-180), as well as Sartrean insights on online human

existence, intersubjectivity, and cyber-dissidence (see Lopato 2016, 195-210 and Wilson 2014, 17-35). Another interesting article is an attempt at a dialogue between Martin Heidegger's notion of "idle talk" and Richard Rorty's "conversation of mankind" in reflecting about social networking sites (see van den Eede 2010, 195-206). There has also been a recent master's thesis published online that dealt with digital identity formation and how it affects real world authenticity (see Montoya 2014). Existential insights as extended and applied to practical endeavors, such as psychotherapy, both in the embodied and online world are also emerging (see Rappoport 2012, 220-225 and Tarsa 2016, 382-388). Considering the number of studies that engage philosophical insights and the online realm, I find that it is fitting, for my case, to already adapt a critical attitude/position regarding those engagements. It is because a critical attitude towards these emerging studies will help us in directing the future of this new "philosophy of the internet/online realm." We are able to clarify positions, question assumptions, re-evaluate some conclusions, and contribute further insights for the development of this recent philosophical endeavor.

Now, if one looks into the above-mentioned existential-phenomenological works, there is an underlying commonality with the questions that they ask, that is, they inquire about individual authenticity and genuine intersubjectivity online. Generally, their questions can be formulated as follows: *What is it to be an authentic and genuine human being in the online realm? What do we mean by a meaningful online human existence? How does one establish a genuine relation with the Other online? Is an authentic human relationship even possible online?* One of the scholars who interestingly answered the latter questions about online human relations is Michael Lopato. In his very recent work entitled "Social media, love, and Sartre's look of the other: Why online communication is not fulfilling," Lopato (2016, 197) argues that interactions via social media are not fulfilling and that "for any relationship where a certain kind of love is pursued – which as far as I am concerned here, includes any positive relationship in which I care about the other for the other's own sake – in-person communication is necessary to build and maintain this love." Before arriving at such conclusions, he makes use of Jean-Paul Sartre's insights on the being-for-others as the framework for his premises.

I find that addressing the arguments elucidated by Lopato in his work interesting and important for various reasons. First, his use of Sartre's being-for-others as a framework for his arguments could be mistaken, in a sense that he misconstrued how Sartre links the Look of the Other and Sartre's notion of love. Further, it can also be argued that if Sartre claimed that our concrete relations with Others offline (meaning "face-to-face" or in Lopato's words, "in-person") are conflict-ridden already and that love is doomed to fail, then what is the point of arguing whether online communications and relations can be genuine or not? What is the point of testing Sartre's ideas online? However, the opposite can also be interesting, maybe offline relations are doomed to fail, but online ones could be successful. Second, his distinction between static and dynamic social media can also be controversial. It maybe simplistic in that it is not able to take into account the various forms and features of social media that are emerging right now, features that are merging and overlapping thereby blurring the distinction

between static and dynamic social media. Third, this is the first time that a scholar diverged from the usual existential insights that are used in analyzing online relations such as that of Merleau-Ponty, Martin Buber, and Kierkegaard; hence, extending current insights. His work enriches, as well, interpretations of Sartre's existential philosophy in a sense that Sartre's philosophy of concrete relations with others, pre-dated the online realm. It may be interesting to see what Sartre would say about the online realm in terms of it being another possible region of being and an avenue for human existence both individually and interpersonally, among others.

It is in this regard, that I shall endeavor to do a critical examination of the arguments presented by Lopato. I do agree with Lopato's conclusion that in so far as strictly Sartrean insights are concerned, online communications are not fulfilling. However, I find that how he arrived at such conclusion to be problematic. It is because I find that his analysis of social media *vis-a-vis* Sartre's notion of the Look and the possibility of love is misconstrued. His analysis is simplistic and not correctly contextualized in terms of Sartre's being-for-others specifically the two attitudes in our concrete relations with Others that sprung from the objectifying Look of the Other, of which love is just under one of the two attitudes. In this regard, in keeping with the critical attitude I mentioned earlier, I caution the reader that I do not intend to provide a phenomenological account of how relationships whether love or whatsoever is possible online, or propose a criteria of how online love is also an authentic love.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE ON BEING-FOR-OTHERS

The look of the other and conflict as the original meaning of being-for-others

Sartre's phenomenological description of the Look is grounded on one of his projects in *Being and Nothingness* which is to assure the existence of the Other, taking into consideration the problem of solipsism that has confronted thinkers in the history of philosophy. Sartre's phenomenological description comprise of: (1) The-Other-as-object/seeing-the-Other, (2) The-Other-as-subject/being-seen-by-the-Other, and (3) My-being-for-Others.

In seeing-the-Other, we do not apprehend him in the same way that we perceive, for instance, the grass, benches, or trees in the park (Sartre 2001, 230-231). When we perceive such objects we apprehend them at a distance from us. On the other hand, enter the Other, all of these objects are suddenly apprehended by me in relation to the man in the park. A new relation of distances is formed where such person is the focal point (Sartre 2001, 231). All of the objects that I first perceived only in relation to a distance from me, becomes regrouped and disintegrated. It seems that "the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole" (Sartre 2001, 232). This hole which is the man I see. Why a sudden difference upon the arrival of a man? It is because I realize that this man too can see these objects including myself the same way that I apprehend and see him and the objects (Sartre 2001, 233-235). I realize that just like him that is an object before me, I too can be

apprehended by him as an object, that is, I too can be seen by him.

This brings us to being-seen-by-the-Other. It is through the Look of the Other that we become aware and apprehend our objectivity before the subjectivity of the Other. The Look of the Other is an awareness and consciousness of being-seen-by-the-Other. And this is best illustrated and experienced through the phenomenon of shame. Sartre (2001, 235) gives an example of a voyeur who out of jealousy, curiosity, or vice glued his ear to the door and looked through the keyhole. In that instant of being so immersed and engaged in what I am doing, I am on the level of non-thetic self-consciousness. I am not reflecting about what I am doing. My own acts find their justification in themselves. I am the master of the situation. I am pure jealousy, pure curiosity, and pure vice. There is no “self” or “I” at that instant. I am pure nothingness, activity, and freedom. But suddenly, says Sartre (2001, 236), I hear footsteps in the hall. At that instant, I suddenly become aware of being seen by an Other. I am suddenly thrown into a reflective mode. A self is suddenly revealed to my consciousness, that is, a self that is being looked at. I become aware of an ego, a self that is thrown out there and known before the Other (Sartre 2001, 237). I am now a somebody before the Other, a voyeur as opposed to just being a pure nothingness or activity earlier. As I apprehend myself as an object before the Other, I apprehend him as a subject or a free being, as one who takes away my freedom and transcendence (Sartre 2001, 238). I am now nothing but a voyeur, a disgrace, immoral. And I realize this by experiencing shame before the Other. All my possibilities are now transcended by the Other, I become a transcendence transcended, a freedom swallowed by another freedom (Sartre 2001, 239).

This leads us to my being-for-Others, or my being according to Others. Sartre (2001, 239) says, “my original fall is the existence of the Other.” With the existence of the Other, my possibilities are all alienated from me. If earlier, I was the master of the situation. I see all of the objects and the situation in relation to the freedom that I am. With the existence of the Other, he is now the master of the situation. I am now seen as one object among other objects in the situation. I am spatialized and temporalized like other objects (Sartre 2001, 241-243). I am out there before the Other, in danger before him (Sartre 2001, 244). I am now part of universal time, the Other’s own time as opposed to me being the master of time earlier. And finally, if earlier I was pure nothingness or freedom, with the existence of the Other, I now have a “self,” an “I,” an “ego.” And my primordial experience of having an “ego” or a “self” with the entrance of the Other is an alienation of my possibilities or freedom (Sartre 2001, 267). This brings us to Sartre’s conclusion that any interpersonal relations is conflict-ridden. Sartre (2001, 340) therefore argues:

While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations... Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others.

And why is this is so? Sartre (2001, 340) writes:

I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret – the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possess me, and this possession is nothing other than the consciousness of possessing me.

Concrete relations with others

The Other taking away and possessing my freedom has implications in the way that I concretely relate with the Other. According to Sartre (2001, 339), there are two opposed relations/attitudes towards the Other. Either I attempt to assimilate the Other's freedom into my own freedom while simultaneously trying to preserve the Other's freedom, or I can altogether attempt to reduce the freedom of the Other as an object (Catalano 1985, 180).

First attempt: Love, language, masochism

In the earlier parts of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre established that the existence of human beings or for-itself is contingent. As a nothingness or freedom, I cannot ground or justify my existence upon an object or an in-itself. Otherwise I cease to be freedom and become an object. In being "I am what I am not and not what I am," I constantly experience my existence as anguish-driven and nauseating. On the one hand, I want to ground my being on to something and finally put an end to the anguish, despair, and abandonment that is my existence. On the other hand, I resist being an object by continuously affirming my freedom. Thus, my existence is both a flight and a pursuit (Sartre 2001, 338). On the one hand, I wish to flee the in-itself, to maintain my freedom. While at the same time, I also wish to pursue it. This existential dilemma is seemingly solved when that which we wish to ground our being is not an in-itself, hence, we do not cease to be freedom when we identify ourselves with it. And no being in this world is free other than myself and the Other. Thus, my project would now be, to identify myself with that freedom which is the Other. "In fact if I could identify myself with that freedom which is the foundation of my being-in-itself, I should be to myself my own freedom" (Sartre 2001, 339). Taking this into consideration and the loss of my freedom due to the Look of the Other earlier constitutes the ideal of love. Love is the attempt to possess the Other as a freedom in order to retrieve my freedom that was lost and finally ground or justify my existence. "This is the basis for the joy of love," Sartre (2001, 347) writes, "when there is joy: we feel that our existence is justified." And how can this happen? Sartre (2001, 345) says in relation to the Look:

From this point of view, my being must escape the look of the beloved, or rather it must be the object of the look with another structure. I must no longer be seen on the ground of the world as a "this" among other "thises", but the world must be revealed in terms of me.

Thus, when my beloved looks at me, it is not anymore a Look that reduces me into a

mere object, I am still an object but a different one. I am an object of a love, a love that is freely given. I am able to justify and ground my existence on the Other because I am now the world for the beloved, I am now his “reason for existence” (Sartre 2001, 343-344). He sees the world and his projects all in relation to me. “Thus I am reassured; the Other’s look no longer paralyzes me with finitude. It no longer fixes my being in what I am” (Sartre 2001, 345). Finally, I am free once again while not having to face the anguish of a nauseating existence and the medusa-like Look of the Other.

However, Sartre argues that such attempt to possess the Other as a freedom is doomed to failure because one cannot possess a freedom. Only objects can be possessed and the Other is not an object but a free subject. “If I try to control the other’s freedom, to make it subject to my freedom, I fail, because a freedom cannot remain a freedom while being controlled. If it does remain a freedom, I can’t control it” (Detmer 2008, 106). Further, love is doomed to fail because I must continuously do everything for the beloved to look at me with the look of love. In short, I must continuously seduce the Other to love me (Sartre 2001, 347). Hence, love becomes wanting to be loved. At this point, I willingly make myself a “fascinating object” before the Other just for the sake of being continuously loved (Sartre 2001, 347-348).

This feature of seduction in love brings us to language. Seduction is one form of language. By language Sartre does not mean its linguistic definition but simply my behavior and gestures. Sartre (2001, 349) says that I can never conceive and know how my gestures and behavior are perceived, known, and understood by the Other. I can never be certain that the Other apprehended what I really wanted to signify. Thus, what the Other thinks and understands about my gestures and behaviors surpasses me, “each expression, each gesture, each word is on my side a concrete proof of the alienating reality of the Other” (Sartre 2001, 350). Now taking this into consideration and being a “fascinating object,” when will my beloved become a lover for me? It is when the beloved projects being loved (Sartre 2001, 350). However, a new conflict arises (Sartre 2001, 351-352). Both I and my beloved realizes that we are just projecting to each other that we are loved. We realize that our relationship is maintained by seducing each other and assuming an object-state. Both realizes that we just wanted to be loved. Thus, once again two freedoms meet turning the project of love into a failure.

The failure of love through seduction leads to masochism. In such attitude, one attempts to reduce oneself totally into an object (Sartre 2001, 353-354). One accepts that it is one’s being a freedom which is the ultimate obstacle to grounding my existence to another freedom. It is only through the Other being fully a subjectivity and I a total objectivity that my existence will be justified. “I hope that this freedom may be and will itself to be radically free” (Sartre 2001, 354). However, masochism also fails. First, by being an object I am not able to fulfill my project of assimilating the Other’s freedom to my own. Second, by making the Other treat me as an object, I am affirming my freedom, thereby betraying the masochistic attitude (Catalano 1985, 183).

Second attempt: Indifference, sexual desire, sadism, hate

Since, I failed in assimilating the Other’s freedom into my own, I now try to turn

the Other's freedom into an object. One of the ways to do that is to be indifferent to the Other. It is to turn a blind eye about the Other's existence and assume a factual solipsism (Sartre 2001, 356). One acts as if one is alone in the world (Sartre 2001, 356). "I do not even imagine that they can look at me. Of course, they have some knowledge of me, but this knowledge does not touch me" (Sartre 2001, 356). However, this attempt also fails because I still have an implicit comprehension of his existence and freedom, which brings us to the second reason (Sartre 2001, 358). The more that I try to be indifferent about the existence of the Other, the more that I affirm his existence. The more I try to flee from it, the more I become intensively aware and conscious of it. The more the "wandering and inapprehensible look" behind my back becomes dangerous (Sartre 2001, 358).

Another attempt is to incarnate the subjectivity of the Other through his objectivity which is the body which is at work in sexual desire (Catalano 1985, 184). I attempt to limit the Other's freedom through their bodies which is the incarnation of their freedom (Catalano 1985, 186). However, this also fails because "as we attempt to seize the other's body, our body becomes the mere tool of an intention of having each other" and "our freedom thus escapes our prison and sexual desire degenerates into a frenzy activity..." (Catalano 1985, 186). This in turn gives rise to sadism which is "an effort to incarnate the Other through violence, and this incarnation by 'force' must be already the appropriation and utilization of the Other" (Sartre 2001, 375). Through the flesh, which the sadist abruptly and compulsively uses by making the body assume certain positions, the sadist reduces the incarnated freedom of the Other into an object. Again, this attempt shall fail because as the sadist reduced the flesh to a mere thing it becomes totally useless making the sadist "disoriented by this useless spectacle or becomes 'troubled' and desires it sexually" (Catalano 1985, 187), and the sadist apprehends once again the Look of the Other, that he is reduced to nothing but a sadist; thereby, alienating him from all his other possibilities (Sartre 2001, 382).

One last desperate attempt to retrieve my freedom from the Other is to annihilate the Other totally which is at work in hate. It is to "pursue the death of the Other" which implies "a fundamental resignation" wherein the "for-itself abandons its claim to realize any union with the Other" (Sartre 2001, 386). And what I hate about the Other is not a particular characteristic or action by him, but his very existence itself as a transcendence-transcended (Sartre 2001, 387). But this desperate attempt also fails. Sartre (2001, 388) ends, "...even if it succeeded...it could not bring it about that the Other had not been...if the abolition of the Other is to be lived as the triumph of hate, it implies the explicit recognition that the Other has existed."

MICHAEL LOPATO ON ONLINE INTERACTIONS

Two types of social media: static and dynamic

Before he elucidates his arguments regarding human interactions online, Lopato first made a clear distinction regarding the difference between static social media and dynamic social media. Although he is both averse towards both types in general, he has

specific arguments against each type as we shall see later. According to Lopato (2016, 196), static social media “consist of any content which is updated by a user and posted to any sort of virtual bulletin board – whether this information is distributed to the *general* public at large or to a small group.” Some examples of such type are Facebook and Twitter profiles, timeline, walls, photo albums, and blogs. Such social media is static since once the user posts something on his or her wall, it will remain there unchanged like posting in an actual bulletin board where the public could see, unless he or she chooses to modify or remove it. On the other hand, dynamic social media “consist of any website or structure where content, usually private or semi-private in nature, is shared with at least one *specific* Other with the expectation of a quick and personal response” (Lopato 2016, 197). Some examples of such type are conversations in chat boxes, emails, and video-calling such as Skype. Now, this type is dynamic since it elicits some sense of spontaneity as in conversations, compared to static social media where no such spontaneity can always be experienced.

On static social media

Let us now proceed with the specific arguments of Lopato. What is crucial for his argument against static social media is his use of Sartre’s notion of the Look of the Other in arguing that static social media is not fulfilling. He accepts first and foremost that “the existence of a social networking profile – which the Other can access at any given moment, and by doing so, focus his attention on me – constitutes, in at least some sense, a look” (Lopato 2016, 200). However, despite the presence of a Look, he argues that there is a phenomenological difference between an in-person look and a virtual look.

The in-person look is nothing but the Look of the Other which Sartre is talking about. “In an in-person look, the fact that I am being looked at demands some stimulus which signifies to me that I am in the presence of an Other. Whether this consists of footsteps in the hall, the rustling of the leaves in my vicinity, or direct eye contact...” (Lopato 2016, 200). All of which make me consciously aware of the presence of the Other. What is crucial in this respect for Lopato, is the presence of a “stimulus,” a term which Sartre does not use, and I being conscious of being looked at by the Other. On the other hand, in a virtual look, Lopato (2016, 200) argues that I am not conscious of each specific particular instance of the Look of the Other, but only that the Other can look at me; hence, I am generally unconscious that my social media profile is being looked at by the Other. To illustrate, he gives examples like not being always alerted by social media that someone is looking at my profile, especially on the very moment it is viewed. Another is, although I can be alerted by social media and apprehend that my profile can be looked at by the Other, I may be focused on other activities throughout the day, making me unconscious of being looked at (Lopato 2016, 201).

Another difference between the in-person look and the virtual look is that in the former, Lopato (2016, 201) argues, “in order to perceive the look, and thus be affected internally by the look, I must perceive the presence of a particular Other” and that this presence and Look of the particular Other is a Look at my “holistic self,” as Lopato

would coin it. Myself and my body is wholly an object and bare before the Other. On the other hand, in a virtual look, the Other only looks at a representation of myself and this representation need not be live or I am not actually engaging in, such as a Facebook post which I have posted weeks ago. In his words, such a representation of myself “does not contain my being-for-itself, but merely a snap shot of my being-in-itself, it is not capable of being-for-itself...” (Lopato 2016, 201). Thus, the Other does not apprehend my being-for-others but only a part of it.

Lopato ends his analysis of static social media with the implications of such differences which constitutes his argument against online interactions in static social media. First, as was noted by Lopato earlier, the “self” or “I” which is the object of the virtual look of the Other is not my “holistic” or “entire” being-for-itself. It is only a part of it. It is only a list or an aggregate of qualities that I chose to share online through my posts. Note that it is a fact that one does not post everything about oneself online. Lopato even notes that what we post or share online are qualities which we deem as likeable both by myself and others. It is because of this that Lopato (2016, 202) argues that the shame or pride that I experience before the virtual look of the Other is a shame or pride of the qualities of myself that I only chose to share or post. They are qualities only of that representation of myself. Hence, the virtual look of the Other is a Look only to my representation which I chose to share or post. And this is problematic for Lopato (2016, 202) since it diminishes my vulnerability before the Other which is a necessary feature for my capacity for intimacy with the Other. Vulnerability, as Lopato (2016, 203) understands it, is to allow myself to be totally looked at by the Other, hence myself is thrown out there before the Other. My self is an object out there for the Other. But in static social media, instead of allowing such to happen, I attempt to prevent such kind of Look by only choosing which aspects of me should be looked at by the Other. Hence, instead of apprehending the Other as a freedom or subject which objectifies me, I apprehend in a virtual look the Other as an object. I am the one who is free, who chooses which parts of me should be objectified. And if I apprehend the Other as an object, it prevents me from engaging in any form of intimacy such as the relation of love before the Other. As Lopato (2016, 203) puts it, “I have cheapened the relationship by ceasing to view the Other as a subject in his entirety, as I have limited the Other to seeing a subset of my being-in-itself – specifically a public subset which requires no intimacy with me to see.” With that, Lopato (2016, 204) concludes that “to experience love of any sort, my communications must extend beyond social media – and must necessarily not be based or grounded in social media either.”

Another implication of the differences between a virtual and in-person look is on the subject which “performs” the Look itself. According to Lopato (2016, 204), if we do not apprehend the Other (people who view our profiles such as our friends, relatives, colleagues, and the public in general) as a subject, who then is the “Other” which we apprehend as a subject? According to Lopato (2016, 205), it is the social media that we are using itself which is the Other-as-subject. It is because I am necessarily bound by the restrictions and format of the social media I am using. I allow and expose myself, my being-for-others to how such a social media organizes its world, that is, as a business acting as an agent. I am acting as if it is a subject. Hence, Lopato (2016, 205) concludes

that “I am not loving the people with whom I communicate on Facebook – but Facebook itself. And, of course, since the software is not capable of being-for-itself, it is not capable of loving me in return.” Therefore, online interactions via static social media are not fulfilling.

On dynamic social media

There is a seeming solution, however, to the problems posed by static social media and that is the use of dynamic social media. In dynamic social media, “I can ask the person anything that I want, I can share whatever I want, and each of us can use his own terms and organize the world in his own way” (Lopato 2016, 2015). Yet there is another problem that will be encountered. There is an ontological gap between directly experienced social reality and indirectly experienced social reality (such as dynamic social media interactions). According to Lopato (2016, 206), in directly experienced social reality, where people actually meet and where glances actually meet, one can actually apprehend how the Other looks at me and understand what it means. I am able to understand the Other’s categorization of the world and my own possibilities before the Other which is necessary if I am to love the Other (Lopato 2016, 205-206). On the other hand, in dynamic social media interactions, the Other only bases his understanding of the conversation based on his own categorization and situational frame. The focus is the content of the conversation. Both I and the Other are detached from each other and from the circumstances that we are talking about. Hence, Lopato (2016, 206) contends that I am not exposing my being-for-others to the Other in a sense that my response to the Other’s Look is with respect to my own categorization of the world and not his own, which in turn makes me not apprehend him as a subject. I only have a logical estimation not a phenomenological apprehension of the judgement and Look of the Other. What an old friend, for instance, looks at me is the “I” which was I when we met in person and not my present “I” anymore. In case he apprehends my present “I,” it is only the “I” which I reveal in the process of chatting with the Other which again may have the possibility of not exposing my whole being-for-others to the Look of the Other. In this regard, Lopato (2016, 207) concludes that dynamic social media does not solve the problem that confronts static social media earlier.

Despite such ontological gap, there is something meritorious about dynamic social media. Lopato (2016, 207) says that compared to static social media, dynamic social media is closer to traditional embodied forms of interaction. It is because, first, the virtual look in dynamic social media is a Look that I am conscious of. In the process of chatting with the Other for instance, I am aware that the Other’s attention is on me since the Other chooses to reply to my messages spontaneously. Although, there can be instances when the Other chooses to do other tasks simultaneously while chatting with me, it does not diminish in me the awareness of being looked at by the Other. However, Lopato (2016, 208) argues that precisely that I am aware that the Other can do other tasks while talking to me, affirms the ontological gap discussed earlier, that there can be instances that despite having a conversation with the Other, I can apprehend that the Other may or may not be looking at me. Second, although I can be bound by some

restrictions imposed by the social media I am using, I am not apprehending Facebook itself as a subject. In chatting with the Other, the information which I spontaneously share are not forced to be organized by the world of the social media used. It is the Other which organizes what I spontaneously share in chatting. Thus, what I apprehend as subject is the Other. However, Lopato (2016, 2018) argues that although I apprehend the Other as subject, I cannot understand how the Other is looking at me. I am inserting my own biases and situational frame in apprehending the Other's Look. In fact, we are not having the same situation or experience since the Other is on the other side of the gadget. Thus, I am not apprehending the Other as a subject in this regard. Therefore, Lopato concludes that still dynamic social media does not solve the problem of not apprehending the Other as a subject which is a pre-requisite to what he claims as an intimate relationship.

A CRITIQUE OF LOPATO'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST ONLINE INTERACTIONS

Some preliminaries

I shall now present my critical examination of Lopato's work by demonstrating that, in so far as Sartrean insights are concerned in *Being and Nothingness*, Lopato misconstrued/misinterpreted what Sartre really meant with the Look of the Other and its relation with love, and is mistaken in appropriating such insights in arguing that online interactions are not fulfilling. However, I find that before I proceed with such critical examination, I must first address some immediate issues that may arise out of my claim regarding Lopato's work. First, am I claiming that my own elucidations of Sartre's being-for-others in the earlier section is a faithful interpretation of Sartre? If the answer is yes, then what justifies me in saying such? If the answer is no, then what justifies me in thinking that my interpretation is as authoritative as others in critiquing Lopato's? Second, it seems that my claim is implying that there is only one faithful interpretation of Sartre's ideas. And so the question is, is there really only one faithful interpretation of Sartre's ideas through which we evaluate recent interpretations such as that of Lopato's? If the answer is yes, then whose interpretation is that? If the answer is no, then what justifies us in questioning the faithfulness of Lopato's interpretation of Sartre's ideas? Third, granting that Lopato may not have been exact or faithful in interpreting Sartre's ideas, it can be argued that he was just doing a hermeneutic of Sartre's ideas, that is, he attempts to use Sartre's ideas to examine a contemporary phenomenon – social media interactions. And that he is not making any claims or conclusions that his interpretation is correct or faithful. Therefore, invalidating the merits of a critical examination which operates on a critique of faithfulness of interpretation such as mine.

To the first one I reply that my exposition of Sartre's being-for-others can be considered as a faithful interpretation, if not a fair exposition, of Sartre's ideas. However, I have to qualify that if by faithful one means an exact and authoritative interpretation *par excellence*, then I humbly submit that mine is not. But if by faithful we mean

that it is consistent and coherent with the existing and established interpretations on Sartre's ideas, I can modestly assure that it is. What guarantees the merit of my exposition and succeeding critique is that it can be cross-checked with the established and existing interpretations on Sartre's ideas and one will find that my exposition is consistent and coherent with such secondary sources (see Catalano 1985, 149-191; Daigle 2010, 72-85; Detmer 2008, 92-110; Dolezal 2012, 9-28; Gardner 2009, 126-148; Rae 2012, 75-88; Warnock 1965, 63-87; Webber 2001, 180-194; Zahavi 2001, 211-226). What is peculiar with Lopato's work, on the other hand, is that he only consulted two secondary sources on Sartre (that of Luna Dolezal and Gavin Rae), thereby possibly putting into question its consistency and coherence with long-held interpretations on Sartre's ideas. Therefore, by virtue of being consistent and coherent with existing interpretations on Sartre, I can say that, in one way or another, my exposition of Sartre's being-for-others earlier can be used as a lens through which we examine Lopato's work.

This brings me to the second issue. I answer that there is no one ultimate faithful interpretation of Sartre's ideas, but given the span of time when Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness*, for instance, and our contemporary era, there have been a number of what we can already claim as established and recognized interpretations on Sartre whose convergent interpretations can be used as a working lens to assess emerging interpretations such as that of Lopato, for instance, which in turn could help Lopato himself and others to assess their own.

Lastly, with regards to the third one, I think when we make a hermeneutic, for instance, by trying to make sense of a certain phenomenon (in the case of Lopato, social media interactions), one should still be faithful to the philosopher's ideas that one is using, at least with the core or fundamental ideas. Even though it can be said that Lopato was innovating Sartre's ideas, I think one could not innovate in the first place without being faithful, first and foremost, with the core ideas that which one aims to innovate. A case in point is Rae's "Sartre on authentic and inauthentic love" which incidentally is one of the only two secondary sources which Lopato consulted. In his work, Rae (2012, 75) provided a fresh perspective on Sartre's notion of love by arguing that "while Sartre's account of love relations in *Being and Nothingness* is famously conflictual, his *Notebooks for an Ethics* offers a far more positive account." What is peculiar about such work of Rae is that despite its innovative take on Sartre's account of love, he was faithful to the core ideas of Sartre. Before he arrived at the conclusion that it is possible to look at Sartre's notion of love in a positive light, he did not misconstrue the relation of the concepts of the Look and love in *Being and Nothingness*. As opposed to Lopato, wherein the way he arrived at the insight that Sartre's notion of love can be viewed positively, he unfortunately misinterpreted the relationship of the concepts of the Look and love. I think it would have been better for Lopato if he followed Gavin's footsteps of arguing about the relation of the Look and love through *Notebooks for an Ethics* rather than through *Being and Nothingness* which he misconstrued. Lopato's interpretations are more consistent with the former than with the latter. But apparently, Lopato (2016, 198) was insistent in repeatedly saying, "...I will examine Sartre's views in *Being and Nothingness*..." and "...examine the effects of social media in the look of the Other, as theorized by Jean-Paul Sartre...."

Now before we get lost in bordering into issues concerning principles of hermeneutics and applied philosophy, I think it is now time to commence my critique of Lopato's work. I believe I have already sufficiently addressed, in one way or another, the doubts on the merits of a critical examination that operates on a critique of interpretation.

On Lopato's arguments against static social media interactions

On the differences between in-person look and virtual look

As was noted earlier, one of the differences between an in-person look and a virtual look is that, in the former, I am consciously aware of the presence of the Other; while, in the latter I am generally not consciously aware that I am looked at virtually, since I may not be alerted by the specific social media that I am being looked at, at the very moment such Look is taking place or that even if I am alerted, I may be focused on other activities; thereby preventing me to be aware and be affected by such virtual look. At a certain point, I agree with Lopato in claiming that, indeed, both the in-person and virtual look constitute a Look, though the latter is a different type of Look. What I find problematic is Lopato's claim that in the virtual look, I am not consciously aware that I am being looked at; hence, I am not aware of the Look of the Other online.

I find it mistaken for two reasons. First, for Sartre, just the fact that one is aware of the possibility of being looked at is enough to constitute a Look. In fact, to the point that it is not important if there is really an actual person that is looking at me at that moment for me to phenomenologically experience shame and thereby apprehend myself as being looked at and objectified by an Other. Hence, in the context of social media, alerts or notifications are not important for me to apprehend a Look. In fact, even if one disables those alerts, I would still apprehend a Look, in fact, a more intense "degree" of Look since it may be possible that one of the reasons why I disabled such alerts is that I am trying to flee from certain notifications where I could feel shame from the fact that this particular Other looked at my post or profile.

And in relation to this, a second reason why I do not agree that in the virtual look I am not consciously aware of it, is that even if I am engaging in other tasks throughout the day, I may still be bothered by the possibility of an Other looking at my profile or post. In fact, some people choose to keep themselves busy in order to flee from the toxicity that social media brings, one of which is the virtual look of an Other who one hates in social media or from someone who one cherishes and yet is being ignored by that someone in social media. The latter fleeing from the reality that such cherished Other did not even bother to look at my post or like it. More so, it is also a common experience that some people choose to do other tasks and abandon social media because they wish to flee from the fact that a message to someone was only ignored by an Other, as in the phenomenon of being "seen-zoned." Therefore, Lopato is mistaken in arguing that the virtual look in static social media is a Look which I am not conscious of.

Another difference between an in-person and virtual look in static social media is that in the former, the Other is said to be looking at my "holistic being-for-others." I am totally vulnerable and in danger before the Other's Look. On the other hand, in a virtual

look, the Other is only looking at a representation of my being-for-others, oftentimes, a representation that I only deem as likeable or good which I chose to share and post online; hence, the Other is not holistically looking at me. Once again, in the context of Sartre,¹ it is not important, in fact, he does not make a distinction between the Other looking at my “holistic self” or my “entire being-for-others” and a “representation of my holistic self/entire being-for-others.” For Sartre, the phenomenon of shame or pride or fear before the Other does not concern itself with such distinctions. The fact that I am looked at and such Look elicited in me shame or pride or fear thereby apprehending myself as an object before the Other-as-subject suffices. Sartre is not concerned at all if only a portion of myself or my “holistic self” that is looked at in order for me to experience shame and thereby apprehend the Look of the Other which guarantees his existence.

Other hand, if we try to operate on the distinction made by Lopato (that is, if he insists on such distinction), we can argue that the very shame or pride or fear, that I experience and that which Sartre is referring is actually shame or pride or fear of a specific part of my self, a representation of my being-for-others as Lopato would put it. I am ashamed of myself being a voyeur before the Other. I am proud of myself being an achiever before the Other. I am afraid of myself being looked at by the Other as a coward. One can argue that being a voyeur, achiever, or coward is just a part of this entire being-for-others of mine as Lopato would put it. Therefore, the Other looking only at a “representation of my being-for-others,” of which Lopato is averse of, is in fact faithful to what Sartre really meant and this so called “holistic self” by Lopato is a mistaken view.

One can even question such assumption by Lopato that there is this being which is an “entire being-for-others” or a “holistic self.” If we follow Sartre, when he seemingly talks about a holistic self or a whole or a completeness, he means that my being-for-itself is reduced to a being-in-itself, meaning the Other looks at me as if being a voyeur is the be all and end all of me, being a voyeur is now the essence of my existence. I am completely and wholly a voyeur and a voyeur alone. Therefore, in this respect, Lopato is mistaken in his distinction.

On the implications of the differences between in-person & virtual look

What I find gravely problematic with Lopato is his elucidation of the implications of the difference between an in-person look and a virtual look in static social media. I argue that he misconstrues and misinterprets Sartre’s notion of love vis-à-vis the Look of the Other. As was established earlier, Lopato argues that the virtual look by the Other in static social media is a Look only at a representation of my “entire being-for-others.” Further, he notes that such a representation is oftentimes only the one’s that I deem lovable or likeable which I chose to share or post online. Hence, Lopato continues, this implies that the shame or pride or fear that I experience is a shame or pride or fear only of those posts which I choose to share which is the aggregate of those qualities which I deem possibly likable before the Other. This then, according to Lopato, diminishes my vulnerability before the Other, which in turn is a necessary condition for my capability

for intimacy, especially for love. It is because since I only chose certain qualities to be looked at by the Other, I am secured or safe from certain judgements or Look of the Other at my qualities that I chose to hide. Therefore, I have the freedom or, shall we say, the power to hide these qualities that I deem unlikeable and I wish to hide. What will be the implication of this? In this “set-up,” it is I who is the subject and not the Other. The Other is simply an object. I am treating him as such since I am not throwing myself out there to be vulnerable before the freedom-capturing Look of the Other. It is I who has freedom and power over the Other here. And if I do not apprehend the Other as subject, Lopato argues that, I will not be able to engage in an intimate relationship with the Other which necessitates apprehending him as subject.

At this point, most of the established scholars on Sartre (see Catalano 1985, 149-191; Daigle 2010, 72-85; Detmer 2008, 92-110; Dolezal 2012, 9-28; Gardner 2009, 126-148; Rae 2012, 75-88; Warnock 1965, 63-87; Webber 2001, 180-194; Zahavi 2001, 211-226) would agree that one could already see how Lopato misconstrues important Sartrean concepts and their connections with each other. But allow me first to give light as to why Lopato provides us with such a conclusion. Such conclusions rest on his understanding of the relationship of the Look and love. For him, the former is a necessary condition for the latter. Lopato (2016, 199) in a lengthy footnote writes:

The look is necessary to promote love because in love, we seek to be able to see ourselves the way the Other sees us. Given that the look represents the very possibility of seeing ourselves in this way, it is ultimately something that we do, in some sense, seek from the other. Because the look inherently involves vulnerability, it is sometimes avoided, as there is a certain risk that the other will continue to view me as an object—and that he will use me for his means. However, this vulnerability can invoke a certain unique benefit as well. Because the Other sees the world differently than I do, it is in understanding the Other’s judgment about ourselves that we perceive new possibilities we have not previously thought of—possibilities which we can later invoke when we become subjects in the same (or other) relations. It is in this way that Sartre’s conception of love, despite its difficulties, plays a fulfilling role in our positive development. Love may, as Sartre claims, be doomed to a masochism of offering ourselves as an object for the other, but this does not mean that this masochism does not benefit ourselves later as subjects. It is from this objectification by the Other that we gain a greater awareness of who we are and what we can do when we are on the other side of the look, with other people—as a subject.

Now we fully understand why Lopato arrived at such a conclusion regarding static social media interactions. But is his conclusion correct? Is it a faithful interpretation and appropriation of Sartre’s notion of the Look and love? To that I answer in the negative. In the first place, it is clear with Sartre that our concrete relations with Others are primordially conflict-ridden. He does not subscribe to false hopes where a genuine intersubjective relation with the Other is possible and we have seen why in our earlier

discussion. This is my first point regarding Lopato's conclusion. He is making it sound that in the context of Sartre, genuine intersubjective relations with Others are possible where conflict is not a primordial feature.

The second point that I would raise is that he is mistaken in saying that, in Sartre's context, the Look is a necessary condition for love. He missed an essential step in Sartre's discussion as to how Sartre arrived at love. As we have learned earlier, love is just under one of the two attitudes by which I attempt to retrieve my freedom from the Other which was lost because of the possessiveness of the Look of the Other. Therefore, love, in fact, is the attempt to prevent or end such a Look. In love, I aim that the medusa-like freedom-capturing Look of the Other be transformed into a look that does not reduce me as freedom into an object. In other words, love, in the context of Sartre, is a "rebellion" against this Look of the Other. Love is the demise of this Look. Therefore, in this regard, Lopato is mistaken.

The third point that I would like to raise is regarding Lopato's assertion that to apprehend the Other as a subject is an essential or necessary feature of love. In the context of Sartre, that is correct. In my project of assimilating the Other's freedom to my own freedom, the Other has to be free, has to be a subject. In addition, I want to love a freedom, not an automaton nor someone who is forced. However, what is wrong is Lopato's assertion that once we apprehend the Other as freedom, together with the other necessary conditions that he has elucidated in that lengthy footnote, it will guarantee that love or an intimate relationship will begin. However, in the context of Sartre, it is precisely when the Other is a subject that will lead love to its demise. It is the moment when both realizes that they are playing seduction with each Other (that each other assumes a fascinating object-state in order to maintain the so-called intimate relationship), and that finally two freedoms or subjects meet and once again collide with each other when love fails. Therefore, at this point, Lopato is again mistaken.

Lastly, I think Lopato is mistaken to his (and what I think is his) ultimate assumption which is, that love is possible. In strictly Sartrean terms in *Being and Nothingness*, of which all the Sartrean insights and concepts that Lopato appropriated all can be found, love is not possible but doomed to fail from the beginning, the reasons for which we have painstakingly fleshed out earlier.

Another implication of the difference between an in-person look and a virtual look is that the subject of the Look is distorted, meaning, the Other which I apprehend as subject is not my friends, or family, or my beloved, but the social media itself. It is Facebook which I treat as subject, since I allow myself to be organized by the "subjectivity" of the social media as a business acting as an agent. However, I find this conclusion of Lopato problematic. If we go back to our concrete experiences in social media, I do not think that people would agree with Lopato. In my social media interactions, I am neither thinking nor apprehending Facebook itself the way that I apprehend and interact with those people in Facebook which is my friends, family, colleagues, and the like. It is the people in Facebook not Facebook itself (not the company sustaining or operating Facebook) that I apprehend in my interactions. Lopato is going beyond phenomenology, if we look into the footnote that supports his assertion as he (2016, 205) is already subscribing to explanations/laws beyond concrete experience, as in,

Jose Marichal (2012) describes, on page 37 of his work *Facebook Democracy*, a concept called “Zuckerberg’s law,” in which the amount of sharing on Facebook is expected to double every year. Marichal goes on to note that “Zuckerberg’s law... is more than a philosophical musing, but a market necessity for Facebook...”

Lastly, granting Lopato’s conclusion earlier that in static social media, I am only sharing a representation of my “holistic self” or my “entire being-for-others,” then this would imply that I am not apprehending Facebook itself as a subject. Following the reasoning of Lopato earlier, it is only when I am able to allow the Other to apprehend myself in my entirety that I am an object before a subject. But in this case, I am only sharing a representation of myself. Therefore, Facebook just like my friends, families, and colleagues, is not a subject but an object in my social media interactions. Lopato in this sense is contradicting his earlier conclusions in saying that I apprehend Facebook as a subject in static social media.

On Lopato’s arguments against dynamic social media interactions

There is one major point that we can criticize Lopato on when it comes to his argument against dynamic social media. Actually his argument against this type can also be applied to static social media. It so happened that he just made this particular argument more special to dynamic social media in order to show that the seeming solution that dynamic social media could give with regards to the problems in static social media is a failure. Again, according to Lopato, although dynamic social media is better than static social media, there is an ontological gap between directly experienced social reality in in-person interactions and indirectly experienced social reality in online interactions. Therefore, according to Lopato, dynamic social media interactions cannot be as fulfilling as in-person interactions.

Actually this ontological gap between offline/in-person interactions and online interactions is a problem that has always confronted philosophers of the internet/online realm. Hubert Dreyfus, a pioneer in doing philosophy about the online realm also encountered such a problem that an earlier paper of mine recognized and gave much attention to through a critique of Dreyfus’s Kierkegaardian analysis of the internet (see Jose 2018, 83-84). In such paper, I provided a preliminary framework by which we could address the problem of the ontological gap (see Jose 2018, 85-86). I argued that in analyzing the assumptions and positions of philosophers of the internet, we must consider if they are operating under the assumption of the continuity or discontinuity of the online and offline realms.² By discontinuity, I simply mean that there is an ontological gap; while, by continuity there is none. Now, if the position of the philosopher is that of continuity, then that philosopher of the internet is justified in judging the online realm using criteria/standards from the offline realm such as ethical and existential insights. On the other hand, if that philosopher is operating under the discontinuity position, then he is not justified in imposing offline standards to the online realm since they are totally separate entities. Otherwise, such philosopher will be, metaphorically speaking, judging an apple using the standards of an orange and vice-versa.

Now, applying this framework to Lopato's argument, what is his position? It is very obvious and he explicitly stated that he is operating and accepting that there is an ontological gap or a discontinuity between in-person social interaction and dynamic social media interactions. Now if that is the case, applying the framework I propounded, then Lopato should be ready to accept as well that it is possible that dynamic social media interactions have a different set of criteria or standards for authenticity, standards or criteria that may not be in congruent with that of the in-person social interactions. But is Lopato aware of such? Definitely not. It is because he is still expecting that dynamic social media interactions should conform to the standards of in-person interactions. This is very evident in his comments about the "categorization of the world," "situational frame," "disconnection to circumstances," and "logical versus phenomenological apprehension" among others. He is putting dynamic social media interactions at a disadvantage for the reason that it cannot reach the standards of in-person interactions. However, as we have seen from my framework, it should not always be the case since there is a possibility for a separate or distinct criteria, one that does not rely on standards/criteria from the offline/in-person interactions. In fact, it would be very unfair to impose unto dynamic social media interactions a standard that it cannot and will never attain.

In fairness to Lopato, he recognizes a merit of dynamic social media interactions and that is, compared to static social media interactions, it is closer to traditional embodied in-person interactions. There are two reasons for that. First, in dynamic social media, the Look is a Look of which I am conscious. Second, since in spontaneously chatting with my friend for instance, I am not restricted to a particular format, I do not apprehend the social media itself as a subject. However, when it comes to the first, Lopato cautions everyone that although it is a Look that I am conscious of, there can be times when the amount of attention that the Other gives to me is appropriated to other places or tasks as in chatting with me while doing something else. Hence, there is still an ontological gap. Now, when it comes to the second, Lopato uses the same line of reasoning that he employed in static social media. Even if I do not apprehend the social media itself as subject, I still do not apprehend my friends, families or colleagues (which are the Other) as subject, for the same reasons elucidated by Lopato before, regarding me sharing only a representation of my "holistic self." It is quite easy to reply to both arguments. The first one could be addressed by our argument about the discontinuity position which we have elaborated earlier. For the second one, if we follow through Lopato's reasoning he will arrive at the same one about one of the implications of static social media on vulnerability, intimacy, and love. All of which we have already addressed earlier and the same criticism can be applied to this case.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, we have demonstrated that, indeed, Lopato misunderstood and misconstrued Sartrean insights in applying it as a framework for his analysis of static and dynamic social media interactions and in arguing that both types are not fulfilling. I was able to explicate such claim by fleshing out the possible issues

that my critique might face and by addressing such issues respectively. And then I proceeded with my critique which dealt with both Lopato's arguments on static and dynamic social media. When it comes to the former, I provided various reasons as to why I do not agree with his claims regarding the virtual look in static social media and elucidated some problems that such a view of his faces which constitute my reasons why I think he was mistaken in such regard. I also provided various reasons why I think his elucidation on the implications of the difference between in-person look and virtual look is problematic. And then I proceeded with a critique of his arguments against dynamic social media with special attention to his ontological gap argument. However, despite such problems with regard to Lopato misconstruing a number of Sartrean concepts, one must not forget that the merit of his Sartrean analysis of social media rests on the fact that it paves a way for a re-examination and reflection of our very own existential experiences on social media interactions that are prevalent in our contemporary era which constitutes a significant contribution to the on-going interest of philosophy to the online realm. And whatever debates or disputes that may arise relating to his work and to critiques of his work, such as this one, will be considered as contributions to the further development of the emerging philosophy of the internet.

NOTES

1. By "context of Sartre" here and the succeeding ones, I do not mean the historical milieu of Sartre. What I simply mean is "in the context of Sartre's philosophy" or "in so far as Sartre's philosophy is concerned" or "in so far as the existing and established interpretations on Sartre's philosophy are concerned."

2. Aside from that, I also suggested that we should look into the position of the philosopher of the internet regarding human to human versus human to nonhuman online interaction and the forms of relationship established (see Jose 2018, 84-86). It is interesting to note that, if we consider such distinctions in Lopato's arguments, we can see that what he argues about apprehending Facebook as a subject in static social media operates under the human to nonhuman interaction distinction and not in the human to human interaction; hence, some conflation is at work in his analysis. Future scholars might want to delve deeper into this issue in the light of my preliminary framework. In addition, Lopato himself admitted that he is limiting his analysis to purely online to online interactions which according to my earlier paper is just one of the five possible forms of relationships online (see Jose 2018, 86). Lopato and future scholars would benefit from considering as well how their respective philosophizing about the internet have implications on such other forms or how such other forms have implication in their philosophical framework about the internet, specially that if their philosophy is not able to accommodate such other forms, then they can be susceptible to being judged as unsound and inconsistent.

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