In a common understanding, the term “intersubjectivity” refers to the way individual “subjects” relate to each other (e.g. Zahavi 2014, 97), be it in sympathy and understanding (seeing the worries on the face of someone else) or in diverse conflict-ridden emotions, such as shame or hatred. What is characteristic of phenomenology is not just the fact that it undertakes a description of the different forms of inter-individual encounters, but that it develops a sustained inquiry into what makes these encounters possible. Moreover, this inquiry systematically appeals to the experience of the one involved in these encounters. Even though it does not lessen the significance of a more sociological approach that observes relations among individuals from the third-person perspective (see Merleau-Ponty 2014, 467), phenomenology prioritizes the first- and second-person perspective.

The phenomenological discussion on intersubjectivity, lasting for over a century, can be retrospectively structured along several lines. One of them is the distinction between the theories of intersubjectivity based on experiences oriented towards individual others and the theories based on being-with others (on co-existence). While the former theories (Husserl, Scheler, Stein, Levinas, Sartre) claim that intersubjectivity (in a more restricted I–thou meaning) is a precondition of sociality, the latter (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Fink) affirm the opposite: our concrete encounters are possible only because we already live in a shared (social) world, which implies that we understand another not primarily as a concrete “thou”, but as “anyone”. The exposition in this entry takes this distinction as its guiding line. As we show in the concluding part, this distinction does not exhaust possible modalities of the relation of I and the Other. A concept of renewed importance, the group or plural subject, enters the discussion, casting new light on classic phenomenologists and opening new perspectives on intersubjectivity.

22.1. Experiencing the other (intersubjectivity)

Early phenomenologists such as Stein (1980), Husserl (1960), and Scheler (1973) offer very detailed accounts of the way we refer to other selves and try to understand their behavior. As different as their positions may be, they meet in one general claim: we do experience others. There is the “experience which an ‘I’ as such has of another ‘I’ as such” (Stein 1980, 11). When encountering another person, we do not form a judgment which, at its outcome, substantiates our belief that we have a real person in front of us. Phenomenology is bound to state more precisely what
this fundamental type of experience consists in, and why other accounts, e.g. the argument from analogy, are invalid or insufficient.

The argument from analogy and its criticism is a recurrent topic of early phenomenological accounts (see Scheler 1973, 232–235; Stein 1980, 26–27; Husserl 1960, 111). According to the argument, what is immediately given is our own self (“Ich”) and its experiences (“Erlebnisse”), and furthermore, our own bodily movements, and the bodily movements of another person. The inference goes, in Scheler’s rendering, as follows: “on perceiving expressive movements [Ausdrucksbewegungen] similar to those which we experience in ourselves in consequence of our own individual self-activity [Ichtätigkeit], we infer a similar self-activity in others” (Scheler 2017, 238; 1973, 232). The phenomenological criticism does not deny the possibility of taking recourse to deduction or inference in some special cases (such as when facing completely unintelligible behavior; Scheler 1973, 254; 2017, 260; Stein 1980, 29), but it does deny that our relation to others is based upon inference. First, the expressive movements of others, such as a friendly smile, are understood or grasped [erfasst] from a very early stage of a child’s development, prior to any capacity to form analogical judgments. Secondly, my experience of my body and of the body of the other cannot be compared and cannot serve as the basis for the analogy. Thirdly, the argument from analogy does not attain its goal: if there are similar expressive movements to the ones I make, it follows that “it is my own self that is present here as well—and not some other and alien self” (Scheler 2017, 240). The analogical inference would entail that I localize myself also in the other body; thus, it would not uncover another self, different from myself. Consequently, the presence of the other in front of us is not something we arrive at by an act of thinking (deducing, inferring), it is something we experience. Yet, what kind of experience is this elementary grasping of the other?

a) Appresentation, empathy, and related phenomena
(Husserl and early phenomenology)

In phenomenological descriptions, authors often emphasize that it is through perception that we relate to others. According to Scheler, “I do not merely see the other person’s eyes, for example; I also see that ‘he is looking at me’ and even that ‘he is looking at me as though he wished to avoid my seeing that he is looking at me’. … in certain circumstances I can directly perceive [unmittelbar wahrnehmen] his lying itself, the very act of lying, so to speak” (Scheler 2017, 261; 1973, 254–255, English transl. modified; see also Scheler 1973, 21). Such a claim presupposes, nevertheless, a specific notion of perception. If we understand by perception a complex composed of simple sense data (of color, shape or sound), then there is no perception of the other. Nevertheless, we can distinguish sensations from perceptions and claim that perception is not a simple result of the—so to say “incoming”—sensations, but an act, an (intentional) awareness of something. In perception, sense data are “taken” (“gefasst”) or “grasped as” (“aufgefasst als”) presenting to us the perceived object, event or person (Husserl 2001, 103). Consequently, if I say “I hear”, this does not mean, “I am having sensations”, but “I am perceiving”, i.e. I relate to something. “I do not see color-sensations but colored things, I do not hear tone-sensations but the singer’s song, etc. etc.” (Husserl 2001, 99). In a similar way, in our perception of other people, we can perceive “the anger or the sadness” that we “read on someone’s face” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 25). Or, as Scheler puts this: “it is in the blush that we perceive shame, in the laughter joy” (Scheler 2017, 10). Thus, the question is: what makes this particular type of perception specific, i.e. different from other cases of perceptual experience, such as hearing a melody or seeing a chair?

The classical answer was elaborated by Husserl in his theory of appresentation. Husserl calls appresentation an operation by which consciousness makes co-present something that is not
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immediately present. When perceiving an object, I understand the unseen back side of it as being co-present with its front side. When encountering a body, I transfer the meaning “lived body” from my own body to another one, i.e. I grasp the other body as capable of feeling pain, of seeing the same objects as I do, and of executing voluntary movements. This “apperceptive transfer” is based on the similarity between the two bodies, of “that body over there with my body” (Husserl 1960, 111–112). The other body is grasped as a lived body precisely because I make another ego co-present to that body. There is a similarity at the basis of the transfer (two bodies) and its outcome (my ego—the other ego). This is why Husserl speaks about assimulative apprehension (“verähnlichende Apperzeption”; Hua I, 141). The other I encounter is another self, alter ego; the “first” ego being myself.

This is not a judgment based on analogy, “not inference, not a thinking act”, because the other is apprehended immediately, “at a glance” as another person standing in front of me (Husserl 1960, 111). Appresentation is the way the other is given to me in my experience. Nor is appresentation to be confused with empathy. When encountering someone else, we do not transpose ourselves into the other self; we do not need to put ourselves in the shoes of the other. While empathy tends to abolish the difference between myself and the other, appresentation maintains both the presence and the distance of the other: the pain and the joy of the other can never become my own pain and joy, and yet I can perceive his or her pain and joy. It follows, for Husserl, that the experience of the other has its own kind of verification or falsification: the experience of the other is an experience that can never be “fulfilled”; it is a “transcending experience” (Husserl 1960, 114), an experience that “never demands and never is open to fulfillment by presentation” (Husserl 1960, 119). Scheler, in a similar way, decisively refuses to assimilate the experience of the other to empathy: “we not only know that there are other individual mental selves, but also that we know we can never grasp these adequately in their unique individual essence” (Scheler 2017, 242; 1973, 236; also 1973, 20–21). True, empathy is an experience that is closely connected to the experience of the other, yet it is not through empathy that the experience of the other is possible. What Husserl calls “appresentation” is a more primordial experience of the other and it is on the basis of this experience that both empathy and analogical inference are possible.

By his phenomenology of intersubjectivity, Husserl intends not only to describe interpersonal encounters, but to account for the conditions of objective knowledge. I perceive the world as accessible for anyone, as being “actually there for everyone” (Husserl 1960, 91). This “thereness-for-everyone” (Husserl 1960, 92; “das Für-jedermann-da,” Hua I, 124) is implied in the very concept of objectivity. This is a deep conviction of Husserl: objectivity presupposes intersubjectivity. To be clear, in this idea of intersubjectivity, the other is not just another person I encounter in the world. It is another subject for whom the world exists, for whom objects have their meaning as natural objects, cultural objects, and so forth. The other is an other transcendental ego. Consequently, the intersubjectivity Husserl has in mind is a “transcendental intersubjectivity” (Husserl 1960, 130; Zahavi 2001).

b) Being exposed to the Other’s gaze (Sartre)

Sartre’s reception of Husserl’s work is ambivalent. He admires Husserl’s attempt to evade solipsism in conceiving the Other as “the indispensable condition for the constitution of a world” (Sartre 1978, 233). Yet he immediately finds fault with this conception: solipsism can be defeated only on condition of showing that the transcendental field itself is affected by the Other. Not only did Husserl not take this path, he retained the transcendental ego. In this context, Sartre highlights Hegel’s solution as superior: in this conception, the very field of consciousness, its genesis, depends on another consciousness. “Thus Hegel’s brilliant intuition is to make me
depend on the Other in my being” (Sartre 1978, 237). Despite criticizing Hegel’s conception of the self as a “barren and abstract” identity (Sartre 1978, 239), he does adopt the insight that the relation to the other creates an indispensable layer of consciousness.

Hegel’s influence is apparent in two respects: as to the conflictual nature of intersubjectivity and as to the essential role of the other for the self. By qualifying the relation to the other as conflictual, Sartre safeguards the possibility of the self’s freedom vis-à-vis the other. The I and the Other share “no common measure” (Sartre 1978, 60, 240 et al.), and thus both of them are free in essence, or they are free as long as being what they are, i.e. consciousness. Freedom means, for Sartre, primarily the impossibility of a consciousness being subdued by another, since consciousness is essentially a negating activity: “I am my own nothingness” (Sartre 1978, 260).

Despite this essential freedom stemming from the fact that “nothingness” cannot be subdued, as shown in the “key-hole scene”, the relation to the other is essential, nonetheless. Moved by jealousy or curiosity, the protagonist of this philosophical narration spies through a keyhole (Sartre 1978, 259). Being completely one with his action, the spectator is pure consciousness without ego, a “non-thetic consciousness”. Once the other emerges behind the spying figure, disclosing his or her illicit behavior, an ontological catastrophe occurs: Consciousness, this free, translucent being-in-act, petrifies into an object, and henceforward owes its foundation to someone else: “I am pure reference to the Other” (Sartre 1978, 260).

The situation of the consciousness caught in the act is that of “shame”. Shame is a self-reflective emotion, but it is self-reflective as related to the other. Only now, in this self-reflecting vis-à-vis the other, the ego emerges, the ego being this self-relation as witnessed by the other, a self-relation that robs the consciousness of its transparent, translucent and, therefore, free activity.

Shame, itself a “relation of being” (Sartre 1978, 261), introduces a new ontological region, the being-for-other, a region that is essential to any self, while at the same time beyond its control. This fact that the other’s gaze is alienating and uncontrollable leads to the discovery of a “backstage” (Sartre 1978, 262) of one’s freedom, of “a shadow” (Sartre 1978) essentially belonging to me while thwarting my freedom. In this sense, others might be conceived even as “hell” (Sartre 1989). More importantly, shame is the key testimony for solipsism to be wrong. If the other was not present, I would not feel ashamed. In Sartre’s understanding, then, while solipsism cannot be answered on the level of knowledge, it is refuted on the level of being.

In later years, in his Critique of Dialectical Reason, Sartre sets himself, inter alia, the objective of formulating a non-alienating conception of intersubjectivity. It is noteworthy that he revokes none of his theses in Being and Nothingness. Instead, he uses the figure of the third (le Tiers) as a mediating link between the I and the Thou, a mediating link that constitutes a fleeting but nonetheless sufficiently stable shared dynamic. Two people form a dyadic relation, but a group, the elementary social unit, is constituted only once a third emerges; this dynamic stands at the beginning even of the unit Sartre calls a “group-in-fusion”, a plural subject he illustrates with the storming of the Bastille (Sartre 2004, 351–363). Once every member of a crowd fleeing the police realizes that “the other two” fleeing the police with him not only engage in a shared activity but share a common objective with which he or she as the third identifies, a group, a positive reciprocity is formed. This perspective totalizes the group without objectivizing it (Sartre 2004, 370). Thus, the group is transformed qualitatively from a mob into a revolutionary group, and a flight is transformed into a free act opening up a new horizon of a possible co-existence.

c) Transcendence of the Other (Levinas)

The problem of intersubjectivity motivated Levinas to challenge the Western history of philosophy in its entirety. If Heidegger conceives of the history of philosophy as a history of the forget-
fulness of being, Levinas captures it as a history of the forgetfulness of the Other, a forgetfulness with fatal consequences (Levinas 1990, 291). The Other is subsumed, in a Husserlian manner, either under the concept of the self (ego) or, in a Hegelian vein, under a universal social We. Either way, the basic philosophical effort is “an egology” (Levinas 1979, 44). While the other is viewed from the first-person perspective singular or plural, Levinas introduces what has recently been characterized as a second-person phenomenology (Crowell 2016).

In both cases of the first-person perspective, the otherness of the Other is destroyed (Levinas 1990, 292). Destruction is neither a symbol nor a metaphor. For Levinas, war and philosophy share a common principle (Levinas 1979, 21): both dynamics aim at an assimilation of the Other into one’s own categories. With this emphasis, an ethical dimension enters Levinas’ project: philosophy is to be conceived of not as an ontology, thus not as a discipline finding (first-person) universals to subsume the individual, but as an ethics whose aim is to maintain a vigilance to the absolute transcendence of the Other.

This primacy of ethics is not a natural vocation. Originally, consciousness is born of the world and its nutrients. Its original being is a joyous submersion in the process of satisfying its drives. Against Husserl’s concept of intentionality, which Levinas criticizes for its “intellectualism” (Levinas 1990, 292), and against Heidegger’s conception of the Dasein as care, he takes consciousness to be originally a desire, a desire that takes a double form. Consciousness is a bodily desire that takes the form of a need or a drive: as such, it strives for the satisfaction of its needs by “living from” the world (Levinas 1979, 110); it is, however, even more potently, a desire for transcendence or infinity; in this form, consciousness is a “metaphysical desire” (Levinas 1979, 34). This type of desire does not amount to a need waiting to be satisfied. The desiring consciousness does not strive to be integrated into anything that could be captured in a social category. Rather than striving towards a We, consciousness is the “power of rupture, the refusal of neutral and impersonal principles” (Levinas 1990, 293, cf. Bernasconi 2002). The transcendence that consciousness seeks is vertical; it is an “opening to Highness” (Levinas 1990, 294).

What is the corresponding phenomenological experience of this Other? In Levinas’ conception it is the face, the face of the Other being something that resists the reduction to the immanence of my consciousness, something that thus cannot be captured by any form of intentionality. “A face is present in its refusal to be contained” (Levinas 1979, 194). Instead, the face is what radically precedes the consciousness as to the formation of basic categories of intelligibility and thus it is a “primordial signifier”. Due to its radical precedence and transcendence, Levinas calls the face an “epiphany” (Levinas 1979, 197). This “numinous” (Levinas 1979, 195) experience is an “experience par excellence” (Levinas 1979, 293), and, therefore, Levinas capitalizes the Other which testifies to the intimate relation to what philosophers traditionally consider God (Levinas 1979, 293).

Paradoxically, the Other’s power stems from his or her nakedness, the naked face being a testimony to human vulnerability. Levinas illustrates this point by a scene from Tolstoy’s War and Peace: a crowd about to lynch a soldier with “defenseless eyes” recoils the moment he raises his head (Levinas 1990, 293). We are thus subdued by the power of the other’s vulnerability, and thus the relation to the other is marked not by mutuality but asymmetry. From this asymmetry, “moral consciousness” emerges. Being moral means going beyond one’s limits, be it in hospitality, attentiveness, or love. In its moral form, consciousness is heightened, deepened, amplified. Thus, the desire for transcendence is not meant to reintroduce a “false infinity” of an “empty beyond”, something unknowable that is only negatively characterized with regard to the presence of positive but finite phenomena, and thus entailing a dualism of two separated spheres. Quite to the contrary, what Levinas has in mind is, in fact, a phenomenon “within experience” (Levinas 1979, 23), a phenomenon reached by the capability of a vigilant passivity: facing the
other, we are originally both passive and responsive. The passivity often emphasized in Levinas’ work does not amount either to muteness or to indifference but to a weakness that excludes cowardice. As “weakened” by the attentiveness to transcendence, the consciousness is amplified to perceive phenomena that would otherwise remain hidden from it, and thus it is able to perceive the other in its otherness; it is a transcendence in the presence, not an anticipation of an otherworldly transcendence.

The hierarchical, asymmetrical nature of the moral relation opens up numerous questions, one of which was posed by Derrida (Derrida 2002, 97–192). In Derrida’s view, the Other must not only resemble God, it must be God himself, since among human beings a hierarchical relationship tends to degenerate into violence. Despite problems related to a submission to the Other, Levinas does point to a problem often neglected. The other human being is radically other insofar as his or her individuality can never be shared. Despite his emphasis on the asymmetrical relation, he does not deny that our life depends on universals (in the form of language, social categories, and related institutions, etc.). To be free, a form of a Hegelian institutionalized we is indispensable (Levinas 1979, 241). However, according to Levinas, we live as responsive to the other before we systematize; and it is here that we encounter the asymmetry that reflects the other’s unalienable individuality.

22.2. Being with others (sociality)

It is far from evident that the theories of intersubjectivity we have discussed so far can be brought together as making part of one type of approach. If the other is appresented by me as the alter ego (Husserl), he or she cannot be reduced to a gaze which objectifies me (Sartre), and neither of the two accounts (the appresentation, the objectifying gaze) can be easily reconciled with the idea that the primary experience of the other is one of being addressed by the other and of having to respond to his or her claim. Still, as different as these key experiences are, they presuppose a concrete encounter with the individual other (as transcendent or evasive as he or she may be). Against this line of thinking, an objection has been repeatedly raised: it is because we already live in a shared (social) world that our concrete encounters are possible. Consequently, the other is not primarily “Thou”, but any other, anyone. Sociality precedes and makes possible the I–Thou intersubjectivity, not the other way around. This idea was developed in different ways by thinkers such as Heidegger (2010), Merleau-Ponty (2014), and Fink (1987).

a) Heidegger (Mitsein)

Heidegger shares with the authors mentioned above the assumption that a phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity has to appeal to an experience of the other. In the approach represented by Husserl or Stein, the question was: how does my experience of, say, a chair in front of me differ from my experience of someone standing in front of me? Despite obvious differences, according to Heidegger the experience of a chair is in a sense also an experience of the other. We are acquainted with others not only because we perceive other people (their facial expression etc.), but also because we are able to see and use objects in a way other people see and use them. Before others become an object of our experience, they are implicitly present in our daily behavior. When sitting down on a chair or grabbing a cup, others are implicitly present. They are not individual others, whose names and faces I would know, they are anyone. Moreover, in my handling of the objects of daily use, I myself am anyone.

This suggestion developed by Heidegger substantially reframes the debate. The account of intersubjectivity can thus take for its starting point the analysis of everyday objects which are
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accessible or “available” (“zuhanden”) to others as well as to myself. According to Husserl or Stein, others are distinct from myself, i.e. others are “everybody else but me” (as Heidegger rephrases this). As opposed to this, for Heidegger, others are “those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one also is” (Heidegger 2010, §26, 115). The “being-with” (Mitsein) is a constitutive feature of the Dasein itself; “an isolated I without the others” is thus inconceivable (Heidegger 2010, §25, 113).

Despite this emphasis, Heidegger does not ignore explicit interpersonal encounters, in which the other becomes a thematic, explicit “matter of concern” for us (“Fürsorge”, Heidegger 2010, §26, 118). When describing the “positive modes” of this concern, Heidegger mentions two extreme cases. In the first extreme scenario, I can “leap in” for the other, i.e. I can put myself in his or her place and attend to some practical matters instead of the other in the way e.g. an overprotective parent does. By this type of concern, the other can become “dependent and dominated” by myself. Or, I can leave to him or her to care for his or her own existence, which means also that I help the other “to become transparent to himself in his care and free for it” (Heidegger 2010, §26, 119). Beyond these modes of the I–Thou concern, there are other modes of the concern based on a common involvement in the same cause, the “authentic alliance” (“eigentliche Verbundenheit”, Heidegger 2010, §26, 119). In all these modes of interaction, our being with others is not based on the knowledge of the other, but on practical activities, be they a common goal to be attained, the life ambition of an individual, or our typical everyday dealings: others “are what they do” (Heidegger 2010, §27, 122; also Heidegger 2005, 226).

At first, Heidegger presents the claims that we are together with others already in our daily use of objects (we use objects the way anyone does) in a neutral, descriptive language. Yet in the next move, Heidegger adds that on this everyday level of being (with others), we do not grasp our being as or own, and he concludes: the Dasein in this everyday mode of being with others does not exist as itself. “It itself is not; the others have taken its being away from it” (Heidegger 2010, §27, 122). Heidegger believes that this entitles him to call this a “domination by others”. True, when taking public transport or buying a new pair of shoes, we are one just like another. The question is, nevertheless, whether this can be labeled as social conformism. For Heidegger, living with others implies a “constant temptation” (Heidegger 2010, §38, 170) for the individual never to become him or herself, to let “anyone”, “the they” (“das Man”), decide in his or her place. Heidegger capitalizes on his description of the daily use of cultural objects in order to claim that there is a “dictatorship” of the others, of “the they”, who prescribe our ways of conduct: “We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way they see and judge” (Heidegger 2010, §27, 123). The others rob us of the possibility of an authentic existence. The question is, nevertheless, whether everydayness does indeed imply conformity, social dictatorship, and inauthenticity, as Heidegger suggests.

Heidegger’s account of being with others has several important advantages. The claim that others are a constitutive feature of our own being (which is “being-with”; Mitsein), and the claim that we encounter others when pursuing our daily, practical concerns, enable him to refuse the initial problem of the Husserlian approach. If we ask how to provide the “bridge from one’s own subject, initially given by itself, to the other subject, which is initially quite inaccessible” (Heidegger 2010, §26, 121), we are on a wrong track.

As compelling as Heidegger’s account may be, it offers little space for the description of concrete forms of interpersonal encounters. Philosophers such as Sartre or Buber believe this to be not a mere omission, but a fundamental mistake. For both of them, the concept of “being-with” (Mitsein) cannot account for real encounters, precisely because it is still an a priori structure of my own being. As such, “it does not constitute the slightest proof of the Other’s existence, nor the slightest bridge between me and the Other … The ‘being-with,’ conceived as a structure of
my being, isolates me as surely as the arguments for solipsism” (Sartre 1978, 249). Or, according to Buber: “the man of ‘selfbeing’ … is not the man who really lives with man … the man who now knows a real life only in communication with himself” (Buber 2002, 199).

**b) Merleau-Ponty: the common world “undivided between my perception and his”**

According to Merleau-Ponty, the problem of intersubjectivity should not be conceived of as a problem of my knowledge of another self. The hidden assumption of such an approach is that self-knowledge is immediate, or that it is at least easier to acquire than knowledge of others. Nevertheless, such a self-knowledge is precisely something that is not available for a being that is embodied and that only gradually discovers its own bodily capacities and social commitments (already at work in each perception and movement). Such a being is “given to himself as something to be understood” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 362, see also lxxiii), and consequently, it discovers or finds itself in a way that is not substantially different from the way it finds others: “We find the other the same way we find our body” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 138).

What does this imply for the description of the way we encounter other (embodied) beings? What is that which I encounter? According to Merleau-Ponty, the key phenomenon is the bodily movement that has an expressive meaning, which is a behavior or a comportment (I see “a living body performing an action”; Merleau-Ponty 2014, 369; 1964, 170). Merleau-Ponty draws on examples of early transitivism: a child asks his mother “to console him for the pains she is suffering” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 174). But an adult expressive movement can also be analyzed along similar lines: a man who fell asleep in the sun wakes up and picks up his hat to protect himself from the sun. This gesture, oriented towards the world (the sun and its heat), is immediately understood by myself as referring to the same sun: “the world exists not only for me but for everyone in it who makes gestures toward it. There is a universality of feeling” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 137). Merleau-Ponty often appeals to this type of experience in which the difference of individual perspectives does not stand in the foreground: “this world can remain undivided between my perception and his”, “the other’s body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 369f.).

The key experience of the other in Merleau-Ponty is a perceptual one. Nevertheless, it is not, strictly speaking, a perception of the other, but a perception with the other, a “co-perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 170). This is what gets lost once we overemphasize the face-to-face encounter. For Merleau-Ponty, “the other is never present face to face”. He or she is moreover “near me, by my side”, or “behind me”. The “otherness” of the other consists in the shared, yet slightly different view of the same world (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 134). The underlying phenomenon of intersubjectivity is thus commonality; sharing of the world and of the same corporeity.

Against this approach to intersubjectivity, objections of at least two kinds were raised. First of all, Merleau-Ponty seems to solve the problem of the other by dissolving both the self and the other in an undifferentiated generality. Second, Merleau-Ponty misses the transcendence of the other when comparing it to the transcendence (alterity) within myself.

According to the first objection, the I–thou intersubjectivity was abandoned in favor of a commonality (sociality). As Renaud Barbaras claims: “Merleau-Ponty is right against Husserl and Sartre in emphasizing the experience of harmony … yet he seems to go too far in this direction, since he dissolves the harmony in generality, in which no one encounters anyone, since no one is able to recognize himself” (Barbaras 1999, 43). Interestingly enough, Merleau-Ponty himself articulates this worry. By the emphasis on the sharing of an experience, “we
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introduce the impersonal into the center of subjectivity, and we erase the individuality of perspectives”; as a result, both the alter Ego and the Ego disappear. He replies by showing that e.g. an experience of anger or grief of the other lends itself to a double interpretation: (1.) we can share the experience of anger or grief, since they are “variations of being in the world” that can “settle upon” the behavior of the other as well as upon my own behavior; (2.) and yet they are individual experiences no one else can have: “The other’s grief or anger never has precisely the same sense for him and for me. For him, these are lived situations; for me, they are appresented” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 372). Both interpretations are true. The first emphasizes the generality of the body that enables us to share emotions; the second introduces what Merleau-Ponty calls the “generality of my inalienable subjectivity”: each of us is an “indeclinable ‘I’” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 375). The second emphasis—that my emotion cannot be shared by anyone—does not nevertheless mean that it cannot be understood by another: if I suffer because a friend of mine has suffered a personal loss, we relate to each other, yet our experience is not identical. It is on this level that the experience of “appresentation” has its proper place, as well as the concept of solipsism, and even the Sartrean idea of intersubjectivity as struggle. For Merleau–Ponty, none of this refutes the primordial acquaintance with others. Moreover, plurality of perspectives, solipsism, struggle do not exclude others, they presuppose others: solipsism is a “lived solipsism” (“a solipsism shared-by-many” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 376); the Sartrean struggle and objectifying gaze is a refusal to communicate and as such, it “is still a mode of communication” (Merleau-Ponty 2014, 378). The fact that we have experiences that cannot be shared by others does not make the existence of others a theoretical problem. As Taylor Carman puts this, “Others are not a problem, but they are trouble” (Carman 2008, 150).

The second objection was aptly formulated by Zahavi: “Merleau-Ponty lays such enormous stress on the presence of alterity that one occasionally gets the impression that there is no decisive difference between my relationship to myself, my relationship to the world and my relationship to the other” (Zahavi 2001, 155). It is true that in Merleau–Ponty, different forms of alterity or transcendence are dealt with in a parallel way: the transcendence of my body, of the world, of my past, of my birth and death (Merleau–Ponty 2014, 381). From Levinas’ point of view, there is an important difference between the alterity within myself, e.g. the alterity of my own body (“proper alterity”), and the “radical alterity” of the Other (Tengelyi 2004, 92–98). Merleau-Ponty, indeed, does not seem to admit such a distinction. If certain phenomena “transcend me”, they “nevertheless, only exist, to the extent that I take them up and live them” (Merleau–Ponty 2014, 381). For Merleau–Ponty, the transcendence of the other is not radically different from the transcendence of my own death: I am open to both, they color my experience and the world I live in, and yet they transcend me. Merleau–Ponty would definitely agree that the structure of experience of these different forms of transcendence is in each case specific (birth, death, past, world, others, body), but he would not see a reason to introduce the concept of a radical transcendence restricted to but one of them.

22.3. Beyond the distinction of intersubjectivity and sociality: the group

The distinction between intersubjectivity (Husserl, Sartre, Levinas) and sociality (Heidegger, Merleau–Ponty) used as a basic scheme to structure the discussion should not conceal the importance of another modality of being with others—that of the plural subject or group. This modality fails to be satisfactorily comprehended either by the label of intersubjectivity, most often involving a dyadic structure, or by a social, usually anonymous, realm. Formulating a phenomenological concept of the group, plural subjects, and collective intentionality, thinkers in the tradition of phenomenology join in a renewed interest in what can be generally
captured as “We”, a concept developed recently primarily by social scientists, political thinkers, or, in philosophy, by thinkers mainly of an analytic background (e.g. Searle 1995, Gilbert 2000, Tuomela 2016), and thus it is especially here, in the context of collective intentionality, that phenomenologists seek an intensive dialogue with analytic philosophers reflecting on the social realm (see Chelstrom 2013).

Phenomenologically oriented thinkers, such as Carr, De Warren, or Szanto, who formulate the concept of the “We” on a phenomenological foundation, move beyond classical phenomenology without failing to emphasize that an understanding of phenomenology as largely ignoring the social realm is misleading or downright wrong (Moran and Szanto 2016). Rather than abandoning the classical phenomenological tradition, they cast new light on the respective theories, finding here new motives to elaborate.

David Carr’s procedure is illustrative of this endeavor. In his treatment of the plural subject, he draws on Husserl, but orients himself primarily towards Husserl’s treatise of being with others as developed in later texts. The fact that Husserl has come to seek new ways of capturing being-with-others in confronting the “European crisis” is fundamental. The conception of plural subject is often linked to a confrontation with historical events, shared trauma, or social transformation, and, most importantly, it is related to the experience not merely of subjective time, but of the phenomenological experience of history. “Through the we-relation historical reality enters directly into our lived experience and becomes part of our identity” (Carr 2014, 55).

Throughout his treatment of the constitution of the plural subject, Carr refrains from claiming that a group ontologically precedes the individual. In a phenomenological manner, he applies to the plural subject a classical concept of intentionality. “Like the we, the I exists as the unity of a multiplicity of intentional experiences and actions, a unity not postulated in advance but constituted in and through that multiplicity” (Carr 1986, 532). The group thus forms from the inside, not from the outside (Carr 2014, 50), or the We, having a shared experiential basis, arises from multiple individuals—from the joint intention of individuals involved in forming a collective endeavor.

This procedure lends itself to a comparison with Heidegger’s “authentic alliance” or Sartre’s group-in-fusion. In his book *Experience and History*, Carr in fact uses Sartre’s concept positively, emphasizing that it can be read as a phenomenon, and not as a reified super-subject (as a “large-scale I”; Carr 1986). In this sense, Nicolas de Warren follows a related path, in his analyses of the We drawing explicitly on Sartre’s concept of a group-in-fusion. De Warren has shown that the constitution of the group is not exhausted by revolutions but can be applied to phenomena such as the aftermath of September 11 or the movement Occupy Wall Street (de Warren 2016, 313–326). Most importantly, we find in de Warren’s treatment of Sartre’s groups-in-fusion a re-introduction of the “Third” into contemporary discussions, and a nuanced phenomenological typology of groups ranging from the group-in-fusion to fraternity groups with a tendency towards violence. With this, rituals forming the essence of these shared praxis come into view.

In his account of “collective actions”, Hans Bernhard Schmid focuses on more mundane activities than storming the Bastille; for instance, taking a walk together, and everyday cooperation. He takes a different perspective from Carr or de Warren in explicitly refusing subjective individualism, i.e. the position that only individuals have intentions. Such an assumption fails to account for normativity and collective action. Schmid tries to formulate a position that neither ascribes intention to individuals nor to collective subjects. “Collective intentions are not intentions of the kind anybody ‘has’—not single individuals, and not some super-agent. For collective intentionality is not subjective. It is relational” (Schmid 2011, 44). People act in relation to each other as they orient their agency on commitments made in the past. For Schmid, committing to
a project shared with others means that we limit our self-governing, i.e. we act not primarily in view of what we wish as individuals but act as members of a group.

Notably, Schmid has used his theory to re-interpret the traditional view of the Milgram experiment, uncovering its cooperative structures (Schmid 2011, 215) that, by being ignored, caused the experiment to be incorrectly assessed. His evaluation focused on those who, according to the traditional interpretation, failed the test, i.e. who were willing to comply with an authority figure and to administer potentially fatal electroshocks to another person. According to Schmid’s evaluation, they did not fail because of a lack of moral integrity. Rather, they were obedient because they understood themselves as part of a project they shared with the scientist, and they incorrectly evaluated, i.e. overstressed, the collective structure of the experiment. The Milgram experiment was deliberately parasitic upon cooperative structures indispensable to leading a good life that inevitably include a collective dimension. Rather than refusing any collectivity as alienating (as the traditional interpretation has it), Schmid understands collective structures, in this case being part of a scientific project purportedly analyzing memory, as key to understanding basic human praxis of both those evaluated as succeeding as well as those that turn out to be failures.

Schmid’s enlightening analysis of the Milgram experiments provokes several questions. Above all, it seems that considering collective intentions as separate from individuals might lead to problems even if we do not attribute intentions to a super-object but merely to a shared praxis transcending individual intentions. Chelstrom has argued that separating collective intentions from intrinsic individual intentions endangers the concept of collectivity itself: “Denying subjective individualism makes collectivity something bereft of a kind of relation to individuals—thereby eliminating a feature that appears to be essential to collectivity” (Chelstrom 2014, 125).

The emphasis on groups and plural subjects has introduced topics so far neglected in phenomenological research. The experience of history, of trauma, of violence, and of social transformation, as well as of thoroughly mundane cooperative activities, has appeared at the center of discussions. Other questions, long studied by philosophers, e.g. the phenomenon of obedience, of promise making, of conformity, and of self-centeredness have been discussed from new angles. Significantly, this leads to a broadening of the scope of possible phenomenological research and opens it to an interdisciplinary horizon.

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