# If Goffman Had Read Levinas

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**ABSTRACT** The article attempts to explore fundamental assumptions underlying Goffman's theory of interaction. Goffman's work has long been criticized for certain pervasive weaknesses such as the idea of a self as 'inside' and therefore inaccessible, an indifference to any distinction between appearance and reality, and a lack of concern for morality. It is argued that combating these and related problems necessitates uncovering the philosophical roots of Goffman's way of conceptualizing the self. The article identifies these roots in some assumptions that Goffman shares with and may well have adapted from Sartre. Sartre's theory of the self is outlined and clear affinities between these two authors' main assumptions are revealed. The import of this linkage is to point to inevitable obstacles standing in the way of developing the self as a truly social being if one begins with the understanding of what a self is common to both Goffman and Sartre. Next the article puts forward, as an alternative, the ideas of Levinas who has produced an almost point by point rebuttal of Sartre's version of the self. The key point is that, unlike Sartre and Goffman, Levinas locates the self's being or consciousness as taking a positive rather than negative form. This differing starting point has demonstrable repercussions for the way the self can relate to both material things and other people. In particular, such a self can be available to, rather than (as in Sartre and Goffman) hidden from, others and is therefore susceptible to others' influence. Instead of being threatened by the other, there is scope for what Levinas calls non-possessiveness towards and hospitality to others. Finally, the article points out how such a conception of self can be utilized to resolve some specific problems with Goffman's depiction of social interaction such as his amorality, his views on the role of language and his claims to the omnipresence of concealment.

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Erving Goffman's theory of interaction is a remarkable achievement. Many years after the publication of what remains his most influential work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), it is perhaps fair to say that no full fledged alternative to Goffman's version of interaction has yet emerged. For example, for interactional aspects of his theory, Giddens is still happy to appropriate Goffman uncritically, citing how phenomena are 'so brilliantly analyzed by Goffman' (Giddens, 1991: 46; see also 1984: xxiv). This is not to say that many serious criticisms have not been mounted. For example, Gouldner deserves credit for first calling attention to Goffman's overreliance on the world of appearance, a critique reiterated, as Burns has noted, by Macintyre (Burns, 1992: 116, citing Macintyre, 1992: 115–17; Gouldner, 1970: 378–90). Garfinkel (1967: 164–85) has demonstrated that impression management may not be as viable a possibility for mundane behavior as Goffman makes us think. Habermas has pointed to an irrational cynicism about the motives of other people at the heart of Goffman's theory (Habermas, 1991: 90–4). However, of these, only Habermas has really attempted to suggest an alternative interactional theory and, as I try to show below, this 'alternative' has much more in common with the original than Habermas realizes.

Perhaps the reason that clear alternatives to Goffman have not been found is that sociologists have not yet done enough to expose the deep assumptions of Goffman's approach. This article does try to do some of this work. I argue that Goffman is making assumptions about the self that can originally be located in (and probably stem from the influence of) Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1969). Goffman, I will suggest, is relying on and assuming the correctness of Sartre's theory of the self. Therefore, it is important to have ways of questioning Sartre if we are to really have much prospect of rethinking Goffman. Fortunately, the work of Levinas, which is only recently becoming better known, offers a highly relevant critique of Sartre in almost a point by point fashion. I will use this critique to suggest an alternative to Sartre's theory of the self. Then I will attempt to suggest how that alternative might be used to reconsider some aspects of interaction previously analyzed by Goffman. This article, therefore, is in three parts. The first section tries to depict Sartre's theory of the self, also showing how what Goffman says or, more often, assumes has an affinity with Sartre's major ideas. The second section describes the alternative theory of Levinas. The final section tries to suggest some of the ways in which Goffman or any sociologist might begin to theorize interaction differently were Levinas rather than Sartre to be the major influence on how one conceptualizes a self.

But let me clarify what I am claiming. Goffman refers to *Being and Nothingness* three times in his book, proving his familiarity with it. One of these three references is an extended quotation that Goffman fully endorses as mirroring his own perspective. Because of this evidence and also because of the clear-cut similarities I hope to reveal, I do believe that Sartre has been a major direct influence on Goffman. However, my real concern is to demonstrate their shared

assumptions, assumptions that it would be important to depict even if, as is extremely unlikely, the two thinkers came to them independently. My most fundamental claim, therefore, is that we must understand these underlying assumptions because, without doing so, it is impossible to come up with serious alternatives to them.

## Sartre

In this section, I begin an exposition of *Being and Nothingness*, concentrating either on those aspects that have clearly influenced Goffman or on what is essential to position Levinas's contrasting theory. To briefly place the book in its intellectual setting, *Being and Nothingness* is the most significant document of the existentialist phase of this multifaceted author's career. The most obvious direct influence on it is Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962). More generally, it needs to be seen as part of the French effort, begun in the 1930s and in accomplishing which Merleau-Ponty deserves to be accorded as important a role as Sartre, to appropriate the insights of phenomenology in building highly original anti-positivist philosophies. Clearly Husserl is the major source of inspiration here, but in the case of Merleau-Ponty and probably Sartre as well, one must also mention Alexandre Kojève's lectures interpreting Hegel in a way that made him an additional resource for a phenomenological approach.

Sartre begins his work by distinguishing two types of being. The first, which he calls (for reasons that will become clear) being-in-itself, characterizes non-human things (for example, chairs, tomatoes, objects in general). But humans have a different sort of being. The main source of this difference is our potential for self-consciousness. Sartre calls this being-for-itself (Sartre, 1969: 73–9).

But now our first substantive question: what form does our self-consciousness, our being for ourselves, take? Here we already arrive at one of Sartre's most famous and also most paradoxical ideas. We tend to think of the idea of self-consciousness as some kind of self-knowledge, as in knowing one's nature or feelings, but this is not how Sartre understands it. His fundamental idea, which influences all his subsequent understandings of human being – as essentially free, as always needing to choose, as responsible in the sense of being the author of events – is that our self-consciousness takes the form of 'present not-being' (1969: 31) or, even more paradoxically, what we are conscious of as our self is our actual current *nothingness*.

As my first attempt to explain, I will use Sartre's own example of the difference between fear and vertigo (1969: 29–32). Someone is walking on a narrow mountain path. If he feels *fear* he is frightened of something external, that a rock might fall on him or the path become too slippery. But there is also the kind of anxiety that, in this situation, would be *vertigo*. Here, it is not that we worry about possible external threats. Rather, vertigo arises because we suddenly

face the fact that there is a sense in which it is totally within our power as to whether we hold to the path or, instead, suddenly throw ourselves off the edge. Vertigo is, for Sartre, a kind of consciousness of self as this sheer possibility: 'I am always this consciousness of nothing being definite because everything is a possible choice' (1969: 31). Here, therefore, 'a nothingness has slipped into the heart of this relation' (1969: 31). I-my *self* is this constant current consciousness of the possibilities, any of which may be taken; hence the self as always having the form of not being. For Sartre, it is this constant current nothingness that each of us 'is'.

Grasping this idea of self-consciousness as consciousness of not being is probably the first fundamental point for understanding Sartre. But the next point to realize is that, even though Sartre sees recognizing this non-being of the self as the only true recognition of our human form of being, this is not to say he thinks we can or do live in a constant state of facing this. To expand on his ideas, I shall draw on more of his examples. First, he asks us to think of someone waking up to their alarm clock in order to go to work (1969: 37–8). The normal form of consciousness is to think of the alarm clock or, more basically, the fact that we have to go to work as what makes us get up. Here there would seem to be no consciousness of not necessarily being (awake, a worker, and so on) that is, for Sartre, the essence of self-consciousness. Sartre does not deny that we normally believe that what we do is not up to us. But although he concedes that this way of thinking is reassuring and may therefore even be necessary for normal life, he argues that if we were really self-conscious, we would realize that getting up and going to work is never the only possibility. For example, there would always be the possibility of going back to bed or even some more radical refusal such as quitting the job. Seeing these other possibilities should tell us that it is really not the alarm clock or work that makes us rise: 'It is I who confer on the alarm clock its exigency, I and I alone' (1969: 38). What is this 'I', this self? It is again consciousness of not being or current nothingness, for example not necessarily being the person who will get up even a second from now, not necessarily being a worker, and so on.

Thus far we have our selves, at least in so far as we are conscious of them, as always taking the form of consciousness of not being, although the last example already hints at the fact that constantly living with such awareness may be impossible or, at the very least, impractical. But now we need to consider in more detail how a person's consciousness of self might surface with regard to their real life activities. Here, Sartre's famous idea of bad faith best depicts the dynamics. I begin with Sartre's analysis of a waiter. (This is the example from which Goffman [1959: 75–6] quotes at length.) Sartre writes:

> It is precisely this person who I have to be (if I am the waiter in question) and who I am not. It is not that I do not wish to be this person or that I want this person to be different. But rather there is no common measure

between his being and mine. It is a 'representation' for others and for myself, which means I can only be in representation. But if I represent myself as him I am not he; I am separated from him as the object from the subject, separated *by nothing*; but this nothing isolates me from him. I can not be he, I can only play at being him. (1969: 60; emphasis in original)

He means that the waiter's *self* can never be represented by his activities as a waiter, not because there is some other activity that is more him than being a waiter, but because no one's self *is* their activities in the world. This is because their self (as possibility) always *is* not a thing and activities in the world, by definition, are just things. This does not therefore mean, to return to the quote, that he really is not the waiter because he really is something else. Rather, he is not the waiter in that he is not anything.

At this point, we might be inclined to look for some other thing, perhaps something more substantial than an occupation, that could 'really' be us. Sartre's analysis of sincerity suggests that it will not be possible to find any such thing. He begins by admitting that it is possible to not just play at a thing in quite the way his waiter does. He analyzes someone who cannot face his homosexuality (1969: 63–5). Imagine that this person finally manages to declare his homosexuality frankly. As Sartre concedes, there is a sense in which this person is not just playing at homosexuality the way the waiter is playing at being a waiter. It does seem right to say he is being sincere. But, even here, Sartre strongly resists the conclusion that this person, no matter how sincere, has managed to be what he is. He reasons that one cannot 'be' a homosexual because this is just another example (like being a waiter) of a thing. A person can never 'be' a homosexual because the self only exists as a not, as possibility, as other than every activity, even the activity of being honest.

A few general observations (some about Sartre, others about Goffman) are possible even at this early point. First, now we can appreciate why Sartre depicts the being of objects as being-in-itself. He is trying to differentiate their sort of being from humans' sort of being. Things just are what they are, whereas persons are not (meaning their selves are not) what they, in a sense, are (for example, waiters, homosexuals, and so on). Second, we can already note clear-cut resemblances that almost certainly suggest the influence of Sartre on Goffman. Sartre's root idea of persons inevitably not being their selves no matter what they do is remarkably similar to Goffman's basic idea of persons constantly creating an impression of self that has no correspondence to any underlying reality, an aspect of Goffman often noted – though not, as far as I know, connected to Sartre (see, for example, Burns, 1992: 106; Hollis, 1977: 88; Travers, 1994: 130, 132: 'The strange lacuna is the one just where we hope to learn who plays the roles'). Third, in so far as Goffman's perspective is rooted in Sartre, it already furnishes us with a sense of how much of a radical rethink will be required. It will not be sufficient to argue, as does Habermas (1991: 93–4), that what is needed is simply more

sincerity on the part of a fundamentally Goffmanesque actor. As we have said, for Sartre sincerity is just another thing-like representation that still is not the self. Indeed, a passage not noted by Habermas proves that this is what Goffman believes as well: he defines the sincere person not as better representing himself, but simply as more taken in by his own act than a cynic (Goffman, 1959: 18–19). Fourth – and this point is important for the eventual contrast with Levinas – because Sartre thinks that this process of never being able to be in the world what one is is inevitable for humans, he also believes that the human condition is inevitably frustrating, unhappy and alienating: 'The being of human reality is suffering . . . precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state' (Sartre, 1969: 90). It seems problematic to be grounded, as we argue Goffman is, in a doctrine that would seem to make human contentment not just difficult to obtain, but actually impossible.

Returning to our discussion, thus far we have Sartre's world as consisting of two sorts of being: the being-in-itself of things and the not being whatever it is on the level of activity of the self. But there is also a third sort of being for Sartre. Other people are clearly not our self, nor does he want to say that we can relate to them as if they were mere things. How then can he formulate the being of other people? His answer is that other people exist for us or have the being of 'the look': 'At each instant the Other is looking at me' (1969: 257). To be conscious of others, for Sartre, is to be conscious of being looked at. What are these looks of the other doing? They are labeling the self, fixing definitions of the self, appraising the self. In this experience of the look, we get 'the feeling of being finally what I am but elsewhere, over there for the other. . . . Through the other's look I live myself as fixed in the midst of the world' (1969: 268). The basic role for the other in Sartre, therefore, is as the prime agent for the whole process of the self solidifying into various external manifestations that can never really capture the self as it is. For example, he analyzes various designations such as evil, jealous, sympathetic and sad as being in a sense potentially real, but only real as the judgements of others, never equivalent to what, as a self, any 'I' would think about itself, not because one would disagree with them, but because the self can never be fixed in such a way: 'When the Other describes my character, I do not "recognize" myself' (1969: 274).

Surely, one cannot help but notice the affinities between this doctrine and how Goffman analyzes the other. There is the same basic assumption that what the other is fundamentally doing is observing 'me' and also the idea that these observations are unlikely to discern anything we might call a real self (for this theme in Goffman see, for example, O'Neill, 1972: 15–17; Williams, 1988: 68). There is no capture of the real self by others either in Goffman or in Sartre because, again, the self really only exists as negation: 'Consciousness . . . by being nothing may escape the other who threatens to ensnare it' (Sartre, 1969: 284). In

other words, what the other sees of me via his looks is inevitably not me because if I accepted it as me I would be denying my self, which only exists or *is* in the form of not being whatever it appears to be (i.e. not being whatever thing-like form it appears to have, now largely in the eyes of others). Sartre further derives from this, in another image that sounds quite like Goffman's world view, that self–other relations are always inevitably a struggle, for example a struggle (as Goffman especially goes on to emphasize) to control definitions of the self.

There is still a major missing element in our understanding of Sartre that is necessary for gaining a sense of his ideas, even though this aspect is not so directly picked up by Goffman. It is crucial to Sartre's schema that there be a method by which people potentially continue to *be* selves which, as we recall, would to him mean having the constant potential to *not* be whatever they currently 'are'. We always have the possibility of *doing* something. He thinks of this human capacity to act as our constant ability to modify and therefore in a sense negate whatever is: 'An act is a projection of the for itself toward what is not' (1969: 435). The undeniable human fact that we can act in the sense of doing is, for Sartre, what gives the power to resist whatever current solidified understanding makes us apparently be one thing rather than another. We are not whatever we currently are (including what other people think we are) because, via the power to act, there always remains, for every human, for every one who has a *self*, 'the permanent possibility of effecting a rupture with its own past' (1969: 436).

Understanding action in this way also allows Sartre to make another of his fundamental points; namely that, ultimately, to have a self means to be *free*. This freedom is our never having to be or never really being whatever we currently 'are'. We are not this current thing – whatever it is – because we can always act. And he also derives from this another of his famous ideas: our mode of being (our self) can be said to be not thing-like in that one is or can be 'constantly choosing oneself' (1969: 440). These ideas of the self as freedom and choice can be further clarified using another of his examples. What he wants to show is how what he thinks of as the self's freedom and need/ability to choose remain even though he must concede the potential influence of circumstances. A person on a hike with friends, after several hours, finally finds the fatigue too much and gives up (1969: 453–7). How we can say whether this person has chosen or freely given up? Sartre argues that, while clearly the fatigue (a circumstance) has influenced the decision, we cannot say it *made* him/her do one thing rather than another. It is 'I' (the self) who must give into the fatigue. 'I' do not choose the fatigue, of course, but I still choose in that I choose how to respond. That choice, which I am free to make, defines the (current) me.

We could also suggest, following O'Neill, that noticing this strand in Sartre might have helped rescue Goffman from the empty version of the self that we find in him. O'Neill argues that most interpretations of *Being and Nothingness* tend to see Sartre's self as empty because they do not pay sufficient attention to

the part of his theory where he discusses the need to act in 'situations'. Thus, as O'Neill reads Sartre:

> The power of nihilation or freedom whereby consciousness becomes aware of what is lacking in its condition is not an act of pure reflection or simple withdrawal. The fundamental project which I am is progressively revealed through an ensemble of real existents which simultaneously separate me from my ends and are structured secondarily as means or obstacles to my purposes. (O'Neill, 1972: 88–9)

Unfortunately, this is not the aspect of Sartre that most influences Goffman.

Two further important ideas also follow from Sartre's theory of the self and its activities. The self, qua free and choosing, is defined ethically by the idea of responsibility. Returning to the example, Sartre would say that our hiker needs to face the fact that he/she is responsible for having stopped hiking. This is because he/she has chosen to do this, not admittedly in the sense that there were no reasons whatsoever that made it difficult for him/her to go on, but because, whatever these reasons (i.e. the fatigue), it remains the case that the hiker *chose* to submit to them. Presumably, unless he/she actually collapsed, there is a sense in which the hiker stopped freely. How and why we are responsible is further elaborated as residing in the fact that we should be conscious of 'being the incontestable author of an event' (Sartre, 1969: 553). I am responsible for stopping because, in being conscious that in the last analysis I chose to submit to the fatigue, this implies that the incontestable author of my stopping is *me*. This sense of what one authors, what one is responsible for (i.e. all one's actions), is another version of what Sartre means by one's self.

The other important implication of all this for Sartre is that we must face the fact that ultimately nothing we ever do can really be justified. Justification implies, Sartre argues, some reason or grounds for what we do, but the necessary absence of grounds is the other side of the coin that what we do is always down to our self. The dramatic (and well known) way he puts this is that human life is always and inevitably absurd (1969: 479). He means that our freedom, choice, responsibility, and so on condemn us to never being able to defend or justify any of our actions since, to him, any such justification would simply be a denial of responsibility (selfhood, choice). We can never defend or justify what we do but, as an alternative, we can and should identify with our acts in another way; by accepting that we have authored and so are personally responsible for them.

## Levinas

Levinas basically belongs with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre as another French-speaking attempt to develop an original philosophy inspired by phenomenology. However, his work is only recently becoming well known in the English-speaking

world, partly for the banal reason that it was translated later, but also because elements of his approach (such as his critique of Hegel's totalizing aspirations and his reservations as to what he considers the excessively human-centered version of being offered by Heidegger) mean that his work has had to await perceived affinities with him detected by major postmodernists such as Derrida and Nancy to be brought to the attention of a wider academic audience.

For the purposes of this article, what makes him especially relevant is, first, that (as I shall claim) he offers a realistic alternative version of the self and, second, as I suggested in the introduction, it is an alternative that is fairly obviously expressly designed to rebut Sartre. I focus on Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, first published in 1961, although not translated into English until 1969.

Levinas agrees with Sartre that the place to start is to articulate the kind of existence or being that the self has. He also agrees that this form of existence is fundamentally not the same as the form of existence of a thing. But he begins with a different – even an opposite – depiction of the being of this self. Levinas is troubled by Sartre's idea that the self reaches awareness only via negativity, only through a sense that it is *not* this, *not* that, *not* anything. As Sartre also believes, there is a kind of inner life, a withdrawal, in which the self first dawns. According to Levinas, however, this experience is not an experience of not being. This first experience of separation, of inner life, is not negative at all, but positive. Levinas identifies this first experience of self as *enjoyment* (1969: 109–30).

In enjoyment (for example, in sinking one's teeth into some bread) there is always both a human self and a thing. And yet it would not be right to describe the self's experience of the thing as just the (Sartrean) sense that it is not that thing. In enjoyment I do not feel at all negative about my self; I feel positive, filled, satiated, happy. Nor do I feel distant or alienated or separate from the thing I am enjoying. Instead I feel in contact with it, related to it. That our relation to things that are not us can be one of enjoyment therefore suggests a version of the self's being that is quite different from negativity. First, while it is true that the self is not these things, it is not a negation of them because it is related to them via need. Second, and even more important, the fact that nourishment, etc. can be enjoyable suggests that we have the opposite of a negative sense of self, since we relate to what we are not but can enjoy. The self in enjoyment, which for Levinas is the self experiencing its existence, experiences itself as certainly incomplete, as in this sense *not* various things. However, crucially, instead of this being an experience of its own nothingness and other things' radical inability to be it, it is an experience of its own *positivity* as it realizes it can satisfy, fulfill, content itself with some of the things that it is not.

This experience of enjoyment, happiness, fulfillment is, therefore, rather than any consciousness of a lack of substance, how Levinas understands the original consciousness of the self. How different this beginning is from Sartre's is a key to my entire argument, but has perhaps been sufficiently emphasized by now. Also implied is a different view of material things, all that is not the self. Now

that there can be enjoyment or happiness, it should be clear that these things need not be conceptualized as diametrically opposed to the self, only resisting and threatening, as in Sartre's idea that things threaten to solidify and trap selfhood. Instead, in enjoyment and happiness, I can see things as supporting me, as contenting me. There is a dependence on them and in that sense incompleteness, but it seems wrong to see it as a negative dependence if I can get enjoyment out of it, as in enjoying my need for food (a form of dependence) as I sink my teeth into the bread.

Now, at this point, a problem with things does enter Levinas's account although, crucially, unlike Sartre's problems with things, the self will invent ways of resolving this problem, thereby avoiding a Sartrean-style inevitable frustration with the external world. The problem is that, although we can be happy, this happiness seems to be radically contingent in that it is dependent on the fact that the things we require for enjoyment are actually there. Levinas refers to this as the inherent 'instability of happiness' or 'the concern for the morrow' (1969: 144). So into the self's world, which is originally one of enjoyment, there enters disquiet or insecurity. This takes the form of a recognition that, although we can be happy or content even in a world where what is not us co-exists with us because we can enjoy, enjoyment or happiness may not last because no one can guarantee that the things we are dependent on for the self's fulfillment will still be there tomorrow.

How can we overcome what now seems to amount to an inordinate dependence on chance or luck, the good fortune that what we depend on will always be available to us when we need it? It is as a solution to this problem that Levinas understands various other mundane aspects of being human besides our ability to (enjoyably) consume. He notes that we also accumulate possessions and, because the possibility of possessions implies somewhere to store them, we therefore have homes (1969: 156–8). Here, Levinas is asking us to appreciate the significantly different relation to the elements (objects that are not us) that we can have if, besides being able to enjoy things, we also actually possess things by keeping them in our homes. We now have the ability to locate them when we need them. So we have found a possible solution to the problem of the morrow. If I possess something in my home, while I may not have immediate enjoyment of it, I only 'adjourn and delay' immediate enjoyment, and thereby solve the problem of uncertainty (1969: 156). Thus, as long as the bread is in my house, I possess it, and so, while it is true that I am in no constant state of enjoyment with regard to it, I can still be happy, content, secure because of my reasonable certainty that it will be there for me to enjoy when I awake in the morning.

At this point, how might we assess Levinas's account? The idea of the self as what has possessions and what has a home – in other words, what *dwells* somewhere – appears to solve the problem of the insecurity of the life of sheer enjoyment. It also seems a more realistic and sustained description of plausible human life than does the idea of immediate enjoyment alone, although the latter

remains compelling as an account of the dawning recognition of the self. And, in terms of the contrast with Sartre, that a self can be at home, that it can dwell somewhere and also that it can in general possess are still consistent with the self as integrated with things and having a positive, substantial sense of what it is. There is no consciousness of self as a consciousness of one's own nothingness or lack of substance.

But is all there is to the human self this capacity for enjoyment and possessiveness? Are these the only forms that human self-consciousness takes? These are the questions that Levinas confronts in the remainder of his account. Despite the differences between them, Levinas has so far followed Sartre in his choice of what types of being need to be depicted: selfhood and non-human things. Now they also agree that there is a third and necessarily distinct form of being, namely the existence of other people. But where their descriptions at first seem most similar (and here it is a case of Sartre's version exercising obvious influence on Levinas's version) is in how they characterize the being of these other people. We recall that, for Sartre, our consciousness of other people was a consciousness of that which is not us, not our self, but also distinct from non-human things. The essential difference was that other people, unlike mere objects, had the power to, or took the form of, looking at us. The stare, the look, is the essence of other persons' being for Sartre.

It is impossible not to conclude that Sartre's version of our consciousness of other people has influenced Levinas when the latter himself says that to become conscious of others is to become conscious of *the face* and, in a further clear affinity with Sartre, that the essence of the face is in the eyes (1969: 187–220). But without in any way denying these similarities, it is perhaps more important to emphasize their differences. Behind the idea that the person is the look is the sense of people as staring at us, attempting to pierce us, trying to grasp an inside, fixing, solidifying, labeling us. These are all themes we developed in our description of Sartre. Levinas's idea of the face still concentrates on the eyes, but now it is no longer that the eyes are seen as staring at us and certainly not that they are trying to get inside in some attempt to locate a self whose reality escapes because of its fundamental negativity. Levinas speaks of these same human eyes, but what he believes the human self sees in them when they face him/her is not that they are staring, but a kind of nakedness: 'the depths of defenseless eyes', an openness, a kind of 'mute appeal', something exposed to us (1969: 199).

These defenseless eyes, the human face they epitomize and the version of becoming conscious of other people that they amount to all make sense as what we could call the inevitable challenge that the presence of other people constitutes for the self as Levinas has depicted it. Perhaps we can say that, although Sartre's actor is certainly threatened by the presence of other people (the threat of solidification), other people do not call upon him/her to change or do very much because, in the last analysis, other people are just another aspect of what is not him/her. On the other hand, if we imagine (with Levinas) a self who, instead of

coming to awareness as not other things, has initially recognized itself by its ability to enjoy, first by consuming and then by possessing, everything that it is not, we can also imagine other people as something decisively different, a real challenge or crisis – the crisis being how to relate to something that one cannot possess.

Let us look at Levinas's account of this key phenomenological moment in a little more detail. The actor has been leading an enjoyable, happy and possessive life but, as yet, he/she has no real consciousness of other people. What happens to this self who is thus far content, but is also, we have to say, complacent? We know that what happens concretely is that he/she sees a face. To see or become conscious of a face is to become conscious of the one sort of being that 'paralyzes possession. "I" cannot lay hold of this other without suppressing him' (1969: 171). We can use this brief passage to obtain a more precise sense of what Levinas is actually saying. He does not mean that a human literally cannot lay hold of, and in that sense possess, another human. One *could* do so but, as he says, not without suppressing him. Murder is actually Levinas's key example of this process (see 1969: 197–201). As he analyzes this situation, if we murder, we do succeed in a kind of possession, a laying hold, of another human. We do so, however, only at the price of suppressing his/her mute appeal seen in their defenseless eyes. If we murder another, we destroy their face.

Levinas clearly has a sense, unlike Sartre, of how the consciousness of other people can take the self onto a new, higher, less complacent form of self-consciousness. Obviously, for example, he expects the self, in the presence of the other, to at least achieve realization of the biblical injunction 'Thou shalt not kill'. But, more than this, Levinas points out that we can only murder other humans and also that it is most clearly murder rather than the more brutal, less fully human, activity of extermination if we see the other's face with its defenseless eyes (1969: 198). Since we should recognize that the impulse to murder is the impulse to deny the mute appeal of that which we cannot be possessive in the face of, then the consciousness of other people can rouse us to a new version of what a really conscious self would be. If we are really conscious, clearly we are conscious of other people, of faces. But if we cannot possess these faces, as dawns on our consciousness with the fact that any attempt to lay hold of them (by murder, whether literally or metaphorically) cannot help but ignore the mute appeal of their defenseless eyes, the ethically valid way to respond to others is to develop *non-possessiveness* with regard to them.

What is it to enact this non-possessiveness given that, at this point in his account, our selves are leading enjoyable lives consuming and possessing in our homes? In clear contrast with Sartre's idea of the self-consciousness of others as a lifelong struggle with them, Levinas posits that the self who is really conscious of what other people are (i.e. that which we cannot possess) must be and would be *hospitable* to them (1969: 172). Hospitality, therefore, is the form of life of the non-possessive person. Consistent with his depiction of the self as that which dwells at home among its possessions, he details this by imagining the other as

he/she who presents him/herself at the door. Dramatizing their otherness, their clear difference from self, and the mute appeal that is theirs, and obviously drawing on the Old Testament tradition that influenced him, he often speaks of the other's arrival as the arrival of the stranger, the widow or the orphan (for example, see 1969: 213). How would a self, conscious both of what he/she could/should be and also conscious of what the other person is, respond? He writes: 'I welcome the other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him' (1969: 171). And this welcome, this hospitality, goes on to take the concrete form, as hospitality does, of sharing one's possessions with the other: 'no face can be approached with empty hands' (1969: 172). Here we see clearly how the presence of other people in Levinas's account leads to new forms of self-consciousness. A self who deals adequately with others could no longer just complacently and egocentrically consume its possessions; it would also be conscious of how to be welcoming, hospitable, open, giving.

But why call this version of self a form of consciousness rather than, say, an ethics? One reason is that the whole experience arises *out of* consciousness – of what we possess and what we cannot possess. Another reason, however, is that there is a definition of the truly conscious person that fits with a Levinas-style description of the hospitable self. Besides thinking of consciousness as a Sartrean constant awareness of some inner blank page, we also think of the truly conscious person as the *attentive* person (1969: 78). Attentiveness is self-consciousness in the sense of an awareness of what is happening in the larger world and in particular with regard to the needs of other humans. Furthermore, attentiveness takes the form of an awareness of what action actual situations call for. So, to take a mundane example, it can be said that someone has a fully conscious self (now in the sense of an attentive self) if they show awareness that someone needs their seat on the bus and offers it to them.

There is also a further surprising derivation from this line of argument that is another clear riposte to Sartre. Like Sartre, Levinas wants to say that part of being a fully conscious self is to be aware of one's responsibilities. But what are we responsible for? We recall that responsibility, according to Sartre, is taking responsibility for what one personally does. No doubt this might be a conventional version of what we are responsible for, but Levinas is able to challenge it in a way that may seem paradoxical at first, but is also quite consistent with his emerging theory of the truly conscious person as hospitable, attentive, and so on. If my full consciousness of what I am (my self, my powers, what I could and should do, could not or should not do) only arises when I am faced with those defenseless eyes, it therefore follows that I am and feel responsible not just for me (what I personally author), but for all the others who face me. Levinas means that when others face me, say when a stranger appears at my door, because what is called for is a welcome, hospitality, attentiveness to their needs, it has to be said that I feel responsibility not just for me, but for the other as well. The arrival of the other produces 'this urgency of the response [and] engenders me for

responsibility' (1969: 178). Really Levinas is saying that this *is* responsibility, not in Sartre's sense of an awareness of what one has authored, but in the sense of thinking about what one can do for others; responsibility as responsiveness or attentiveness to the other who 'appeals to me with its destitution and nudity, its hunger, without my being able to be deaf to that appeal' (1969: 199–200). The idea of not being able to be deaf, not being able to ignore, is of course a good definition (even if it is not Sartre's) of what it is to feel responsible.

Also at stake are profound points concerning whether human life is absurd or not and also whether the essence of being human is freedom (see 1969: 82–90, 302–4). We recall that, for Sartre, the *reason* it all had to be absurd was that he thought the recognition of selfhood – in other words, self-consciousness – depended on it. But if we see, with Levinas, how a consciousness of self can arise not in our personal choices, but in our sense of the various responsibilities that are ours, then a way of justifying or defending our action (i.e. by what or whose appeal it is responsive to) can easily co-exist with the sense that it is *our* action. And, of course, where there can be a justification or a defense, then what we do is certainly not necessarily absurd.

Along with this sense of not an absurd but a justifiable self, a self who can defend its actions and not just accept (personal) responsibility for them, there is also a sense that identifying the self with the idea of freedom, as does Sartre, is too arbitrary. Unlike Sartre's idea that we can do whatever we want so long as we are willing to take responsibility for it, there is the idea that a valid human self is not totally free because it cannot help but be conscious of responsibilities, the face of the other that cannot be ignored: 'my arbitrary freedom reads its shame in the eyes that look at me' (1969: 252). It should be evident that, in this case, although Levinas does borrow Sartre's idea of the look, the look is hardly trying to trap me into a label I can never recognize. Rather, the look calls up some response in me that *is* me and that it would be highly irresponsible of me to ignore.

# Goffman

It seems clear that Levinas's work does offer a major alternative image of selfhood, but can this alternative be put to work from the perspective of a sociologist interested in interaction? How might Levinas's essentially philosophical considerations be applied to self–other relations in everyday life? What sort of work might have ensued if Goffman had read Levinas?

Here I shall be restricting my comments to Goffman as represented in his first work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The justification for this limitation is that, although Goffman was of course a highly prolific writer and author of many stimulating works besides his first one, it is doubtful that works such as *Asylums* (1961), *Behaviour in Public Places* (1963a) and *Stigma* (1963b) offer any fundamental revision of his major assumptions, including (most relevant to this article) his conception of self. The one possible exception would be his late

major work *Frame Analysis* (1974) but, as I will briefly try to suggest towards the end of the article, even there we still get the same basic insubstantial version of the self.

To begin at the most basic level, how would the self be reconceived if we took guidance from Levinas? As Goffman thinks of it (as with Sartre), either there is no real, substantial existing self, just endless equally unreal external images or, in what is probably a slight vulgarization of the Sartrean original, the self does perhaps exist, but as something 'inside', rarely visible: 'many crucial facts lie concealed within' (Goffman, 1959: 2). The only way in which this inner reality gets exposed is by accident, by a lapse of what can normally be suppressed by actors struggling to maintain favorable impressions.

But if we move from the idea that the self is either nothing or basically inside to the idea that the self appears in how each of us treat others, how we respond (or not) to their appeal, then selves take on a reality; they become substantial. According to this idea of selves, they would clearly surface, be available, be exhibited – namely in our activity in the world. This is not to say, however, that who a person is or, in other words, what someone's self is like would be crystal clear from what they do. There would still be interpretive problems but, crucially, they would be *different* interpretive problems. In particular, the interpretive issue would not be the fundamentally unresolvable one of what is going on 'inside'. Questions of selfhood would be more like (and there could be interpretive disagreements here) what kind of person (self) is one if one does X in a given situation or refrains from doing Y in another situation, and so on. Blum and McHugh's efforts to show how motives can be appropriated for sociology, in that they make 'publicly accessible types of persons', would seem to converge with the approach one can here derive from Levinas (Blum and McHugh, 1974: 38; see also the critique of Goffman by Jenkins for making 'too absolute a distinction between "inside" and "outside" ' [Jenkins, 1996: 30]).

In rethinking the idea of the self, we also need to rethink the idea of the other. For Goffman (and here the influence or at least affinity with Sartre is obvious), others are 'observers', always looking at us, seeking to pierce an exterior, and never quite managing to do so except indirectly because, of course, the self, being nothing, is only (if at all) 'indirectly' available (for examples, see Goffman, 1959: 2–3). Levinas can free us from the essentially artificial idea that the other's role is always to be observing us. It becomes misleading to think of the other as just an observer because, first, the other's main activity is simply not to be staring at one. If we become what we are by how we respond to the appeal of others, then the other is more a (potential) influence on what we are than a sort of spy attempting to catch us out.

Note that this perspective does not involve denying a point about human behavior that Goffman has rightly emphasized. It is certainly true that our behavior can vary depending on who we are with. But Goffman, given his root image of the self as either not there at all or inside, can only interpret this as

demonstrating the unreality of the exterior, how it shows that what we do is all 'front' or 'performance' (1959: 22–30). To see variations in self as in some sense stimulated by the presence of others in this way is to seriously overlook all the ways in which the presence of an other can bring out aspects of a self that are really there, not just a front, but would not arise were it not for contact with the other. For example, it is surely the case that one's sympathy can be aroused by facing a truly sorry case. But it seems quite wrong to interpret the fact that sympathy is not always equally present as Goffman would, namely as demonstrating that sympathy must be a front to hide a hard-hearted interior. Instead, the sympathy seems real, an authentic part of one's self, albeit a part of one's self that is not always available even to oneself because it depends on the circumstances of others to arouse it. Or, to take the much more superficial sort of example that Goffman seems to favor, say one takes extra care in cleaning the house because people one respects will be visiting. Because of his prejudice that the self can never be available in what one does for others, Goffman could only interpret this act as mere performance, hiding some hidden (dirty) self. However, if we suspend this prejudice, it seems far more plausible to accept that this represents some authentic consciousness of the way one wants one's house to be (i.e. clean), although perhaps it takes the presence of other people to remind someone of their own deep-rooted commitments (self) in this respect, commitments that for practical reasons it may be difficult to sustain all of the time. Thus, Goffman almost seems to imply that we would not be able to wait until the people leave so that we can mess it up again! It is very hard to believe that this is how people who have just made an extra effort in this respect would normally react.

Besides these fundamental matters, other key issues can also be rethought. These include the status of speech and the role of morality in interaction. Concerning speech, Goffman writes:

> The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives* and the expression that he *gives off*. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and others are known to attach to these symbols. . . . The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. (1959: 2; emphases in original)

Consistent with his overall perspective, he suggests that it is the information we give off rather than any information we give that is to be taken seriously. He thereby dismisses the whole realm of verbal, intentional speech as just another example of a veneer, a way in which the self protects itself from the attempted

incursions of the other. For example, this perspective is clear in his analysis of how a crofter's wife watches a tourist try some native dish. She would

> listen with a polite smile to his polite claims of liking what he was eating; at the same time she would take note of the rapidity with which the visitor lifted his fork or spoon to his mouth, and the gusto expressed in chewing the food, using these signs as a check on the stated feelings of the eater. (1959: 7)

Notice the idea here that speaking can always be construed as making a claim about something. The underlying notion of self is again of something that is not really there and is certainly not public, and so at best can only be reported on or represented. Similarly, there is the idea that what we are doing when we speak is (perhaps inaccurately) 'stating our feelings'. Our feelings-our-selves are not directly available, but can perhaps be represented, made available by a 'statement'. It is probably true that some people limit themselves to using conscious speech in this fashion, but a Levinas-inspired approach could cite the whole idea of anyone who *speaks expressively*. An expressive speaker is, we sense, surely not just 'stating their feelings' or 'claiming to be liking something'. Instead of the self being elsewhere and simply reported on, their self seems somehow out there, visible, not indirectly but directly available in how they speak, the kinds of things they say. To develop this a little, to be expressive is not exactly the same as being sincere. The idea of sincerity is that there is still an imagined barrier between self and world as between what is inside – available only to ego – and outside – visible to all – although one desires to report on or represent this inner world. For the expressive person, it is more that there is no barrier in the first place; their self is already in the public domain. And if we ask the further question of how a self can be so available, we need to draw on Levinas rather than Sartre for a plausible answer. An expressive person is one whose self is not some internally existing thing, carefully monitored in an attempt to protect it from the gaze of the world. Rather, this sort of person's self is more something that takes shape *by* its vulnerability, its sensitivity to what is other than itself. This sort of self is open, exposed, sensitive, reacting rather than just reporting. This level of expressiveness would certainly require speech, it could never just be a matter of signs that one unconsciously gives off. But, at the same time (as should be evident), the forms of speech that would occur would not adequately be seen as simply a report – even an honest report – about the self. Would not people who could be expressive in this way constitute a welcome relief to a field constrained, under Goffman's influence, to treat people (according to Gouldner's memorable imagery) as 'tricky, harassed little devils' (Gouldner, 1970: 380)?

Concerning morality, it has been recognized (at least since Gouldner) that Goffman's actor is fundamentally amoral (Gouldner, 1970: 388–90). A representative quote from Goffman on this issue is:

> In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they or their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, *qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized. . . . As performers we are merchants of morality. (1959: 251; emphasis in original)

Goffman is saying that, in interaction, we are largely judged (or, as he would say, observed) in terms of whether we perform morally or not. For example, workers in virtually any job are judged by, among other things, whether they are 'doing their best', which is surely a moral matter. But he is also saying that all that really matters to the self is the *amoral* matter of creating the impression, irrespective of the truth, that we are adhering to moral standards such as doing our best. Besides being amoral (or perhaps it is part of the same syndrome), notice that this actor is fundamentally untruthful not just in the sense of being insincere (we say that expectation is based on a doubtful image of the self), but in the more fundamental sense of being indifferent as to whether his behavior is really moral in any sense (i.e. indifferent as to whether he or she is really kind, courageous, generous, and so on). All that matters is whether one's behaviour *appears* to be moral in these various ways. Goffman's actor can be seen to be untruthful in the sense of not being interested in being treated *justly* (i.e. he has no interested in being assessed from a perspective of how moral [or not] his behavior may be, which is presumably what assessments attempting to do justice are all about).

What is the source of this amorality, this lack of interest in justice and truth? What makes Goffman's actor only a 'merchant of morality'? I suspect that we are seeing another consequence of the same basic underlying perspective on what a self is. Moral standards are, by and large, standards as to how to treat others. If the self is not available in such acts, if the self is *not* what it does and refrains from doing to others, it makes sense that it would have no real interest in attaining moral standards, although it would still, as Goffman realizes, be interested in creating the impression of adhering to these standards simply because they form the terms of evaluation. On the other hand, if an actor knows that what he/she *is*, the kind of self that really belongs to one, is largely a matter of how one treats others, it seems much more logical to have a commitment to actually realizing these standards rather than merely pretending.

Thus far I have been depicting and also providing alternatives to quite general aspects of Goffman's theory. Despite the fact that Goffman, as is well known, is not the most systematic or scientific of sociologists, there are also, in his work, statements approaching hypotheses (i.e. specific predictions as to how people actually behave). For example, there are predictions about the extent of

concealment, our attitudes towards accidents, the existence of impostors and the tendency towards what he calls 'mystification' in social life. I am not going to argue that *no one* ever does the various things Goffman thinks he observes, but I will suggest that, as no one with much self-respect (in Levinas's sense of self) would be likely, for reasons I will explain, to act in these ways very often, the behaviors he depicts are likely to be far less common than he implies.

Goffman gives a whole list of things we 'typically conceal'. In particular, we 'will tend to show . . . only the end product' (1959: 44) and we also tend to conceal our mistakes, to create 'an impression of infallibility' (1959: 43). The first of these points would seem to be a poor example of concealment. It seems a reflection of the underlying prejudice that the real reality (the self) never appears, to treat the unfinished product or aspects of the process of production as what is really real and, hence, to consider it a case of concealment rather than a case of working out what one really wants to do if, say, one bins early drafts. On the other hand, hiding one's mistakes to create the illusion of infallibility really is concealment. However, the question is whether any actor who respects themself would really be inclined to do this often or, for that matter, at all. Clearly, if the impression is all that matters it would be unreasonable to willingly create a bad one, hence a tendency to conceal as many mistakes as possible. But, if what matters is not just the impression, if what matters is what one really achieves (especially for others), then it becomes possible that an actor would not particularly want to conceal their mistakes. He/she would probably want to reveal these, partly to avoid claiming undue credit for themself (i.e. out of an interest in justice), but also to avoid the danger of creating the *wrong impression* (i.e. that one had performed a task when really one had not). It is interesting in this regard that, as Hannah Arendt has noted, we are often dependent on the forgiveness of others for interaction to continue (Arendt, 1958: 236–43). Why is forgiveness both rather prevalent and also often necessary if the typical response to most of our mistakes is simply to hide them?

Moving now to the issue that Goffman describes as the 'maintenance of expressive control' (1959: 51–8), he asserts the critical importance to interaction of gestures or events that are totally accidental or inadvertent. Here, he means the things the actor finds her/himself unable to control (i.e. loss of muscular control as in belching, emotions such as nervousness or some contingency in the environment such as a squeaky door). But how important are matters like these? Goffman knows they are, in a sense, trivial, but he suggests that they are critical for interaction, the reason being that they can quickly destroy a performance, usually by revealing that something *is* just a performance: they are the 'single note off key [that] can disrupt the tone of an entire performance' (1959: 52).

A couple of events have occurred in the public arena (i.e. on television) that afford a good test of Goffman's prediction. There was Mrs Thatcher fainting in the midst of one of her typically strong speeches and also George Bush Sr vomiting during a state banquet. Goffman is no doubt right to an extent in that

we do find these events somewhat disturbing or at least titillating – witness the number of times the tapes were repeated. However, do we really find these events more revealing of the real selves of the actors in question than all the actions they can control, as Goffman would predict? I would argue that in fact these events do not really work this way. We do not decide that really Mrs Thatcher is not the Iron Lady at all, but quite flexible because she fainted. Goffman assumes that we will react this way because he also assumes that we are suspicious of everything she actually does as not revealing of her true nature. But once we see that a self is not internal because it is available in how we treat others, we also see that the true test of whether Mrs Thatcher has a flexible self is surely in what she does and does not do (i.e. whether she abolishes the poll tax or not). Her flexibility is not on show in the act of fainting because this is something, unlike her actions and omissions concerning the poll tax, over which she (her self) really does have no control. (For an earlier treatment of selfhood that resists the idea that the self is most on show when we are out of control, see Turner, 1976.)

A third claim concerns the concept of impostors. Goffman writes: 'We will want to ask, "What are the ways in which a given impression can be discredited?" and this is not quite the same as asking: "What are the ways in which the given impression is false" ' (1959: 66). What he is expressing here is his distrust of the analytical utility of the question of whether someone is an impostor. He offers many grounds for his distrust ranging from defending those common sense considers to be impostors (pointing out that all these normally lack are not the skills, but the conventional job credentials) to suggesting that really everyone is an impostor because 'the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it' (1959: 65).

Would a Levinas-based approach restore analytic force to the idea that there are impostors? Presumably we would need to be able to say that there actually is a sense in which some people basically are what they appear or claim to be and others are not. Again, I think the source of the problem lies with Goffman's Sartrean roots. The idea of the impostor loses all meaning if no one can ever *appear to be* what they are, if being and appearance are, by definition, never in correspondence because the self cannot appear, but only be represented in what appears. Once the self *can* appear (as it can if the self is a matter of how one treats others), then surely the idea of an impostor acquires a valid meaning. It becomes anyone who grossly misrepresents their accomplishments, typically by posing as doing things that they are not really doing. Kindness, for example, can be detected as a pose if there are publicly available standards for kindness (i.e. if kindness is not imagined as an inner state, but as a matter of how we actually treat others). (Here, what can be derived from Levinas again converges with how Blum and McHugh [1974: 26] argue for the 'social availability' of motives.) As before, this is not to say that there may not be difficult interpretive problems in deciding if someone really is kind. For example, it would be a good idea to examine their treatment of people not just when the people were up, but especially when they

were down. However, there is a big difference between conceding that it may require work to detect an impostor because appearances can be deceiving and assuming, as does Goffman, that it is not even worth the effort.

There is also the issue of how to theorize the nature of the social bond, whatever binds people in relationships. Goffman clearly states that what is most important for adequate relationships is 'the maintenance of social distance' (1959: 67). At this point in the article, it is not surprising to see Goffman depicting relationships as characterized by distance since distance is clearly inevitable if no one's self is ever actually on show. How, though, can he say that distance actually binds persons together? For example, how could it ever inspire persons even to be *interested* in one another? What he suggests is that 'restrictions placed upon contact, the maintenance of social distance, provide a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience' (1959: 67). So distance can lead to a tie between persons, the tie we call awe. There is some truth in this, but still it seems highly problematic to argue, as Goffman implies, that awe is a firm or even the only basis of relationships. To take just one example, the form of social bonding we call friendship may well involve elements of reserve and even distance, but it can hardly be based on mutual awe. Friends have and require considerable demonstrable mutual knowledge. Think, for example, of some intimates who are so lacking in a sense of mystery about their friends' selves that they are often able to predict what they would say next. We suspect, therefore, that Goffman is only forced to limit social bonding to awe not because there are no other ways for persons to be in close relationships with one another, but because he can locate no other form of bonding conceivable on the basis of his root idea of a hidden unavailable self.

As stated, all of these points are based on an examination of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. It is worth considering whether the same Goffman I have been criticizing is still on show in his ambitious late work *Frame Analysis* (1974). This is certainly the book in which Goffman has appropriated the most from phenomenology – not Sartre's version, but the one associated with Alfred Schutz. Besides returning, albeit very briefly, to Sartre, he does quote Merleau-Ponty once at length in this work. But our question must be whether he has fundamentally revised his conception of the self.

In his new terminology, instead of a performance, he writes of an activity being 'framed' in a particular way. He also acknowledges the existence of an environment outside any imaginable frame by the term 'anchoring'. If all actions are framed in some way or another and if frames have anchors, what does this imply about the status of the self who is presumably in some sense the doer of the action? Goffman admits that:

> It is hardly possible to talk about the anchorings of doings in the world without seeming to support the notion that a person's acts are in part an expression and outcome of his perduring self, and that this self will be

present behind the particular roles he plays at any particular moment. (1974: 293)

However, while stating that his new theory must *seem* to support this idea of a 'perduring' and real self, he then proceeds to resist this interpretation. He suggests that while we (common-sensically) may well perceive something other than or behind (i.e. anchoring) the doings, there is simply no reason to treat this anchor as particularly real or particularly the self:

> Something will glitter or smolder or otherwise make itself apparent beyond the covering that is officially worn. [But] . . . this discrepancy between person and role, this interstice through which a self peers, this human effect, need no more depend upon the world beyond the current situation than does the role itself. Whatever a participant 'really is', is not really the issue. His fellow participants are not likely to discover this if indeed it is discoverable. (1974: 298)

Whatever the changes in the later work, it does not seem that his concept of the self has really changed.

## Conclusion

It does seem clear that both Goffman and Sartre define the self in certain specific and highly questionable ways. It is also apparent that in the work of Levinas there exists an alternative viable way to conceptualize what a human self could be. Furthermore, this alternative perspective must be a promising avenue for sociologists to pursue because of the extent to which Levinas's whole approach puts so much weight on how it is only interaction with others (i.e. our dealings with the social world) that can make us fully human. I have tried to suggest tentatively in the final section some of the practical implications for rethinking interaction that might follow from adopting such a perspective, but the self-imposed constraints of this article have caused me to focus on how what Goffman originally conceived might be rethought by a Levinas-inspired approach. It is surely also the case that new problems, new areas of concern, even new forms of interaction, would be more amenable to study if we were to start from the open, welcoming, vulnerable self that Levinas leaves us with.

Finally, a note of caution. I have tried to suggest that Levinas's assumptions could help us develop a sounder and more sociological version of self. But this should certainly not be taken to imply that his work offers the only resolution to the sorts of problems the article has considered. The potential of ethnomethodology to contribute towards a more adequate version of the self has not been exhausted, nor would I want to imply that classic sources such as Mead and Simmel do not still have much to teach us concerning the interests flagged here.

But it is true that these classic and contemporary sources are by now quite familiar to most of us. Levinas's contribution is, I hope I have shown, equally worthy of our attention.

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