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Lucia Angelino

# SARTRE AND FREUD AS RESOURCES FOR THINKING THE GENESIS OF A WE-PERSPECTIVE

*Abstract:* The philosophical problem I address in the paper is centered around the following questions. What kind of relation to others is relevant for the emergence of a we-perspective? Should one prioritize the concrete face-to-face encounter between *self* and *other* or, rather, focus on the much more complex social configurations involving the figure and the function of a third party (*le tiers*)? Drawing inspiration from Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, I argue that, in order to account for the genesis of a "we-perspective" in large-scale, polycentric, and constantly shifting social configurations, one needs to shift the theoretical focus from the *You* to the *Third*, that is, from the dyadic face-to-face (*immediate*) relations of reciprocity between *I* and *You*, *self* and *other* to ternary relations of "*mediated* reciprocity," involving the figure and the function of a third party who is at the same time an *Other* for the *I* and a representative of the *symbolic order*.

*Keywords:* we-perspective, third party, I-you relationship, group identification, phenomenology of sociality.

## Introduction

The present paper is centered around the following questions. What kind of relation to others is relevant for the emergence of a we-perspective? Should one prioritize the concrete face-to-face encounter between *self* and *other* or, rather, focus on the much more complex social configurations involving the figure and the function of a third party (*le tiers*)?<sup>1</sup>

Up to the present, most—if not all—philosophical answers given to these questions highlight the importance of the relation between *I* and *you*—as a *key* to a proper understanding of the foundations of a "we-perspective."

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<sup>1</sup> This alternative is brilliantly formulated by Descombes (2001, 117–155).

The central argument in this position is that the capacity to adopt a *second-person* perspective—a perspective, in which one relates to the other as a *you*—is crucial for the constitution of a “we is greater than me,” a “we>me” psychological orientation. But, to what extent is such an argument plausible? Does a story built around *I* and *you*, *ego* and *alter ego* suffice to explain the emergence of a we-perspective in complex, polycentric, and constantly shifting social configurations, which go beyond the here and the now, and involve the plural positions of *you* and *they*?

In this contribution, I suggest that it does not. Drawing upon some conceptual resources offered by Jean-Paul Sartre and Sigmund Freud, I argue that, in order to trace a way out of this impasse, one needs to shift the theoretical focus from the “You” to the “Third” (*tiers*). More precisely, I claim that, in order to account for the genesis of a “we-perspective” in complex, plural, and constantly changing social configurations, one needs to shift the focus from dyadic face-to-face (*immediate*) relations of reciprocity between *I* and *You* to ternary relations of “*mediated* reciprocity,” involving a third party who is at the same time an *Other* for the *I* and a representative of the *symbolic order*: not just a third person, but a *figure of transition* between the first-person *singular* and the first-person *plural* perspective.

The decisive point to be retained in this context is that “the third party” is to be understood as a person (for example, an external observer, a witness, or a third in-group *agent*)—rather than as a realm of being (e.g., a shared object or a common project).<sup>2</sup> The Third is “another” whose functions differ from “the first other,” or the *alter ego*, and who is conceived in such a way that this mediation gives rise to plural social configurations, which cannot be fully explained with reference to the dyadic model of *ego* and *alter ego*.

This argument—which I call “the turn to the Third” in social theory, initiated by Georg Simmel (1964) and Sigmund Freud (1959)—is somehow familiar in the social sciences. In contemporary German social philosophy<sup>3</sup>

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2 This conceptual distinction first made by Simmel (1964, part II, chap iii, iv, and v) is currently adopted in social theory, for instance, by Fischer (2013), among others.

3 If one looks at the social sciences, one finds rich and extensive considerations about the figures and functions of the Third. Moreover, there is an ongoing debate in German social philosophy and social theory, which centers on whether social theory

and sociological theory, one finds critical reflections on the Third as a key to understanding the emergence of complex social configurations—such as political and media institutions—, which cannot be explained with reference to dyadic interactions.

Rarely, however, one finds reflections on the function of the third within philosophical debates on the “we”—with the consequence that the qualitative change effected by the *intervention* of a *third* party in the relationships between the *I*, the *you*, and the *we*, is still underexplored. That the intervention of a third redefines dyadic relationships between *ego* and *alter ego* and at the same time also plays an important role in the transition from small groups to larger social units (group formations) and “institutions” is an unquestioned point in the social theory debate. That it has an important role to play in the process of group identification and therefore in the transition from a first-person *singular* (“I-perspective”) to a first-person *plural* perspective (a “we-perspective”) is what I argue for here. My paper is, therefore, organized as follows. In the first section, I provide an overview of the dyadic model, which is typically applied to account for the emergence of a “we-perspective,” and highlight the limitations of such a model. In the second section, I outline an alternative framework by drawing inspiration from Sartre’s account of the genesis of groups in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as well as by focusing on Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In a final move, I explore the epistemological and heuristic potential of this alternative framework centered on the Third (*le tiers*) in contemporary research on the “we,” particularly as applied to account for the emergence of a “we-perspective” in groups made up of *many*.

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should turn to the analysis of the role of the third party, in order to conceptualize social phenomena classically viewed from the standpoint of the “Other.” See: Bedorf 2003 and 2006; Fischer 2013; Bedorf, Fischer, and Lindeman 2010; Esslinger *et al.* 2010; Cooper and Malkmus 2013; Berger and Döring 1998. See also: Waldenfels 1997. Despite all this work, however, we do not find any reflections centered on the function of the third in the emergence of a “we-perspective,” neither in social theory nor in the philosophical (and social ontology) debate on the “we.” My main concern in this paper is precisely to move beyond this impasse. Specifically, I intend to explore the role of the third in the genesis of a we-perspective in a “group made up of *many*.”

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## The I, the you, and the we. The importance of reciprocity

Let me start by considering the dyadic model, which is typically applied to account for the emergence of a “we-perspective.” According to a prominent and recent view, supported by both philosophical arguments and empirical evidence, a “we-perspective” typically arises out of a dyadic *I-you* relation involving a “special kind of reciprocity” (Zahavi 2019, 254), one that requires the ability to adopt what has in psychology been termed a “second-person perspective,”<sup>4</sup> in which I relate to another as a *you*—as somebody who is also attending to and addressing me. This strategy is clearly illustrated by Zahavi’s proposal, which today has come to be seen as a classical treatment of this topic in the current debate. According to his proposal, which mainly draws on the writings of German classical phenomenologists, such as Edith Stein (1989 [1917], 1922), Edmund Husserl (1952, 1973), Max Scheler (2008 [1913]), and Alfred Schütz (1967 [1932]), the capacity to adopt a second-person perspective and to establish a *I-you* relation of *reciprocity* is crucial for the emergence of a first-person *plural* perspective. To adopt a second-person perspective means more concretely to be engaged in “a subject–subject (you–me) relation where I am aware of and directed at the other and, at the same time, implicitly aware of myself, as attended to or addressed by the other” (Zahavi 2019, 255). In other words, the emergence of a “we-perspective” requires that “I experience and internalize the other’s perspective on myself, that I take over the apprehension that others have of me” (ibid.). As important as this argument might be, one limitation is that it typically applies to forms of “we” that are bound to the here and the now of a face-to-face interaction between “ad hoc pairs of individuals in the moment” (Tomasello 2014, 5). But there exist other forms of “we” that are not tied to the here and the now of a physical interaction in the same way, and rather imply both temporal as well as spatial distance. Arguably, people can experience themselves as members of a we-community (e.g., a moral, religious, or cultural community), even if they are not *de facto* together with the relevant others. And, indeed, the experience we have been living through

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Schilbach *et al.* 2013; Eilan 2014; Carpenter and Liebal 2011; Darwall 2006.

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during the COVID-19 pandemic attests to the *ethical* possibility of sustaining *meaningful relationships* with others, even in the absence of direct, immediate face-to-face relationships.

What, then, if the “we” connects simultaneously multiple individuals far from each other and unknown to each other? What if the “we” arises out of polycentric and at the same time constantly shifting and conflicting social configurations? How are we to explain the transition from a second-person perspective, in which individuals internalize the perspective of a specific or significant other, to a kind of fully agent-independent, objective point of view?

There is, in short, no question that an account of the “we,” which focuses on the *I-you* relation, is fairly restrictive. It is this lacuna that this paper seeks to overcome by drawing inspiration from Sartre whose analyses of the genesis of the “group in fusion” in the “Theory of Practical Ensembles” are focused on the key role of “the third party.”

In this fascinating and somehow forgotten book of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*,<sup>5</sup> where Sartre seeks to account for the social integration of human multiplicities beyond the holism–individualism dichotomy, he faults sociologists for failing to offer a proper account of the relationship between the individual and the community.

In his own words, it is “a common error of many sociologists to treat the group as a binary relation (individual–community)” —in which the individual is either absorbed (and therefore dissolved) in the group or stands in front of it, as a separate entity—, “whereas, in reality, it is a ternary relation” (Sartre 1976 [1960], 421), so that each individual, *as a third party*, is connected, in the unity of a single *praxis* and, therefore, of a single perception, with all the group

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5 It is worth recalling that Sartre’s *Critique* has largely been ignored both in social ontology and in the burgeoning field of the phenomenology of sociality. Almost everyone who has written about Sartre’s ideas about the “we” mistakenly considers the presentation in *Being and Nothingness* to be definitive. That work, which appeared in 1943, does contain an analysis of “Being-With (*Mitsein*) and the ‘We’” in the chapter entitled “Concrete Relations with Others.” But shortly after the publication of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre began to modify many of its fundamental points. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind what he himself said near the end of his life: “What is particularly bad in *L’Être et le Néant* [*Being and Nothingness*] is the specifically social chapter, on the ‘we,’ compared to the chapters on the ‘you’ and ‘others’ [...] that part of *L’Être et le Néant* failed [...]” (Sartre 1981, 13.)

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members, and with each of them individually. The crucial point to be retained is that each member in the group is a third in relation to every other member: each individual might become a “regulatory” third *within* the group and might act as a mediator through whom all the others are unified. Moreover, Sartre’s major claim is that, “whatever relations of simple reciprocity” there are within the group, “these relations, though transfigured by their being-in-a-group, are not constitutive” of “a group behavior and of group thoughts” (Sartre 1976 [1960], 374). What is needed is a relation of “mediated reciprocity,” involving the figure and the function of a third party.

In order to grasp this claim, I suggest looking closer at Sartre’s treatment of the Third in the apocalyptic genesis of the “group in fusion.” I shall do this in a necessarily schematic way by reading Sartre’s work through the following question: How does individual thinking (and acting) become collective?

### **Beyond pure reciprocity: the Third**

Sartre provides an answer to the question thanks to what he terms the third party in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. As I read Sartre, there are two ways of understanding the third party within the context of the ephemeral group in fusion. There is what I call a *weak* way: the one that consists of conceiving “the third party” as a third in-group agent whose function is to foster mutual understanding and relation among group members. But, beyond this, there is a *strong* way: the one that consists of conceiving “the third party” as a representative of the group or as a temporary leader whose function is to convey the perspective of the group, as a whole, to all the others, as well as to direct and unite them for a while. By “the third party” (*le tiers*), Sartre means,<sup>6</sup> more precisely, a third *in-group* agent who acts, as if he/she were the whole group

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6 As I will argue here, the Third in Sartre’s *Critique* ultimately appears not only as a third in-group agent—as has been abundantly proposed in secondary literature on Sartre’s *Critique*, which includes important contributions by Catalano (1986, 2010), Santoni (2003), Rizk (2014, 2011), and Flynn (1997)—, but also as a temporary leader or as a provisional representative of the group’s aims and values. The essential point to be retained is that the third party, as a temporary leader, is neither an outside leader nor a particular chosen leader. On the contrary, everyone in the group can become a third in relation to the others and therefore unite and direct the group for a while.

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acting within her/him.<sup>7</sup> They find themselves in the situation where, by acting on behalf of the group, to which they belong (e.g., as a temporary leader),<sup>8</sup> they induce all the other members to act immediately in the name of the same group<sup>9</sup> and, thereby, engender the social convergence of human multiplicities. That is why, “from a structural point of view, the third party” can be defined as “the human mediation through which the multiplicity of epicenters and ends (identical and separate) organizes itself *directly*, as determined by a synthetic objective” (Sartre 1976 [1960], 367).

As “creator of objectives and organizer of means” (ibid., 381), the third party “stands in a tense and contradictory relation of transcendence–immanence” (ibid., 381), since they are *inside* the group, yet also *outside* of it as its “unifier.” In this respect, they might be considered as a director or as a leader whose function is to unify a gathered multiplicity of individuals by posing in their reciprocal actions a relationship to a synthetic objective, which goes beyond each individual. As long as the fusion of the group continues, however, this power passes immediately to another individual in the group who, acting freely on behalf of the same group, assumes in turn this function in an endless process of grouping. In other words, each member in the group might become a third and might act as a regulatory third through whom all are unified in an endless process of grouping. In this respect, as Catalano clearly pointed out in his *Commentary*, “the law of the group-in-fusion is what Sartre terms an ‘alternation of statutes’: each [individual], as potential regulatory third, can

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7 Sartre clearly expresses this concept: “His praxis is his own in himself, as the free development [...] of the action of the entire group which is in the process of formation.” (Sartre 1976 [1960], 371.)

8 In the group-in-fusion, this is obvious, because every person is a potential sovereign who can lead the group for a while. However, identifying the third party with a leader is both an error and an exaggeration, since it represents a function, and not a concrete figure, but, most importantly, it represents a function that can be played by various actors in the group. However, this analogy contains a grain of truth in the sense that the third party embodies the leading idea, in which the group’s members can have a share and which welds them together.

9 Since the example that Sartre has in mind is the French Revolution, we might think of the case of revolutionary groups. Typically, in a revolutionary group, an agitator/organizer will emerge. They are neither a leader *stricto sensu* nor the one who commands or is in charge. But they do act as a director, a medium, and a channel for popular opinion.



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become equally an actual regulatory third, *without becoming a transcendent other to the group*” (Catalano 1986, 175).

In this alternation of statutes, “which appear as the very law of the fused group” (Sartre 1976 [1960], 381), there emerges a movement of “mediated reciprocity” between two “third parties” who come together in the generating movement of the group. Each one does not act in the name of the other in front of them; they act in the name of the group. At this juncture, there emerges the first “we-subject” (*nous*), which is “practical but not substantial” (ibid., 394), and plural rather than singular, because it emerges in the ubiquity of this movement of mediated reciprocity between several selves. The result is that something like a “we-perspective” emerges in a movement of mediated reciprocity, where each individual is simultaneously an *I* and a *third* in relation to every other. According to Sartre, there is “nothing magical” in this result. It merely requires the interiorization of a third-party perspective, which entails a *radical alteration* of the first-person *singular* perspective, so that everyone in the group comes to think, act, and feel “in a completely new way: not as an individual, nor as an Other, but as an individual incarnation of the common person” (ibid., 357). The crucial point in this argument is that the shift to the third-person position is decisive, in order to give rise to a group-minded perspective—not “me,” but “we” as a group—and, at the same time, to scale up to group’s identity.

Moreover, each individual who plays the role of “the third party” brings about a relation of a new, distinctive kind amongst the group members. This new relation, which is born out of fundamental reciprocity, is no longer the simple, immediate, direct, and lived relation between *I* and *you*, but a “relation of each to each, with and through all” (ibid., 467). The most important feature of this relationship lies in the fundamental characteristic of mediation, which is neither an object nor an objective, but the group’s common *praxis* “laying down its own laws” (ibid., 467) in each “third party.”

Without going into the finer details of Sartre’s very deep analyses, it is important for us to focus on the following three points.

First, it is important to notice that “the third party” has a crucial role to play in the process of group identification, insofar as the internalization of a third-party perspective—its synthetic point of view—is the basis, upon which the

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first “we” emerges that cannot be attributed neither to a single individual nor to a collective consciousness, since, as we have seen, it emerges in the ubiquity of a relation or a movement of mediated reciprocity between several selves.

Second, it is important to notice that the Third functions “as a *via media*”—the middle way—(Flynn 1981, 358) between the individual and the group, and, as such, enables the move from a subjective self-regarding perspective (first-person *singular*) to a more objective and socially inclusive view (a “we-perspective”), in which each individual thinks from the particular standpoint of all those involved, or affected, together with him/her. In the same vein, it is important to notice that the figure of the Third enables the shift from a simply experienced we-perspective to a we-perspective reflexively assumed.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that the third party embodies not just a third person, but all those (group members) who are not immediately present and, at the same time, also the norms, values, and aims, in which they have a share and which bind them together, therefore communicating an identity of interest and purpose to all the others. That is why the Third enables each self to come into contact with the group’s norms,<sup>10</sup> and to act as well as to think in accordance with the normative standards of the group. In this respect, the third party can be seen as a figure of transition, a sort of link, holding together the individual and the collective levels of human thinking.

### **The function of the third party in the process of group identification**

In this last section, I focus my attention on the role played by the third party in the process of group identification and, therefore, in the transition (shift) from a first-person *singular* (“I-perspective”) to a first-person *plural* perspective (“we-perspective”). As we have seen, the Third appears to play an important role in this process. But the crucial question that still requires an explanation is how this process can be described psychologically. In order to answer this question, I suggest using the schema of identification developed by Freud in his work *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. I will do this in a necessarily schematic way by focusing on the few pages, where Freud

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<sup>10</sup> A similar argument borrowed from developmental psychology is made by Bedorf (2006, 262).

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sketches out a graphic representation of identification.<sup>11</sup> In this fascinating book, in which Freud seeks to overcome the limitations of both Le Bon's and Tarde's crowd psychology,<sup>12</sup> he interprets the process of group identification as meaning that the "individual gives up his ego ideal" and narcissistic self-love, "and substitutes for it the group ideal" (Freud 1959, 78–79). In other words, the process of group identification, as described by Freud, implies that "a number of individuals have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego" (ibid., 61).

That is why, in the words of Étienne Balibar, the relations among group members must be described by following:

[...] the schema of a *double mimesis*, functioning at once *horizontally* (as identifications between subjects with one another, identifications with one's fellow men [...]) and *vertically* (although, paradoxically, the graph designed by Freud inscribes this verticality on a horizontal axis), as identification with a "model" (*Vorbild*) that is also imaginary, whose power of attraction and suggestion induces, through a return effect, the *Spaltung* of the subject into an *Ich* and an *Idealich*, which are both *him* and *different from him*, or better still, as Lacan will say in his commentary (in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) it is "in you more than you," and thus is at once the same as you and different from you. (Balibar 2016, 50.)

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11 At the end of the chapter entitled "Being in Love and Hypnosis," Freud designs the graphic representation of the process of group identification that he previously defined as follows: "A primary group [...] is a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego." (Freud 1959, chap. VIII.)

12 Le Bon (1895), Tarde (1890), and Freud (1959) can be considered as the founding fathers of crowd psychology, which they jointly established, while attempting to solve the mystery or the riddle of group formation/constitution. Another important figure in this debate is McDougall (1920). A historical and systematic reconstruction of their contributions can be found in Moscovici (1985). Many other books contain accounts of the relationships between Freud, Le Bon, and Tarde. See, in particular: Giner (1976) and Adorno (1972, VIII, 35).

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I shall argue that the graph of identification, as sketched out by Freud, presents a particular interest from the point of view of our philosophical inquiry for at least two reasons.

First, it shows that a “we-perspective” in a “group made up of *many*” arises from relations of “mediated reciprocity,” “functioning at once *horizontally* (as identifications between subjects with one another) and *vertically*,” as identification with a third party or a model, who is, however, immanent, and not transcendent to the group.

Second, it proves that the shift from a first-person *singular* (“I-perspective”) to a first-person *plural* perspective (“we-perspective”) requires a far more radical alteration of one’s sense of the self than the one achieved/effected by adopting a “second-person perspective,” an *alteration* of one’s sense of the self that implies the capacity to adopt a “third party-perspective,” by which each individual gives up his/her own “ego ideal” and puts in its place the “group ideal.”

## Conclusion

To summarize and conclude, the thrust of this contribution was to demonstrate that the *I–you* relation, involving a special kind of *reciprocity* between *self* and *other*, accounts well enough for the emergence of a “we-perspective” in dyadic forms of “we” that are bound to the here and the now of face-to-face interactions. But it cannot explain how a “we-perspective” (first-person *plural* perspective) emerges in far more complex, polyadic, and constantly shifting social configurations, which go beyond the here and the now, and involve the plural positions of *you* and *they*. Arguably, if a “we-perspective” is to develop amongst a plurality of group members, it is *not sufficient* that each individual takes and internalizes the perspective of a specific or significant other towards themselves; they must also, at the same time, internalize the collective perspective of the group as a whole. As should hopefully by now be quite clear, the third party plays a key role in this process, since they are at the same time an *Other* for the *I* and a representative of the *whole system of perspectives* shared by the group members. In conclusion, my argument can be formulated as follows: in addition to the capacity to adopt a second-

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person perspective—which entails identifications between subjects with one another—, the emergence of a “*we-perspective*” in polycentric and constantly shifting social configurations requires the shift to the third-person position, through which a kind of “group’s agent-neutral point of view” emerges and is communicated to all the others.

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