

Concrete Intersubjectivity: How Persons Interact, and How This Is Crucial to Ethics

Hili Razinsky

Abstract: *Concrete intersubjectivity* is intersubjective interaction, including ongoing relationships, and linguistic communication. This conceptual triangle is a core aspect of sociality, and intrinsic to subjectivity, and to ethics. Yet philosophical and historico-political biases limit its study. On my account, interaction involves an (onto-)logical tension, which participates in an analysable structure. Interaction is a matter of individual subjects (persons), and their interactional engagements (e.g. mental attitudes, intentional behaviour). Condensely, (I) for Mia and Liu to thus-and-thus *interact* is tantamount to Mia having some *interactional engagement* with Liu. (II) Mia is interactionally engaged with Liu means Mia is interactionally engaged-*engaging* as a *whole-person* with Liu as a whole-person interactionally engaged-engaging with herself as a whole-person engaged-engaging with... [ad infinitum]. This analysis is individualistic and relational. Interaction doesn't aggregate engagements of isolated individuals. Neither is it a matter of socio-cultural entities, e.g. groups, additionally to individuals. By invoking a new cross-divisional philosophical conversation, this paper introduces the analysis, and follows with a Kant-based interactive ethical imperative. Depicting interactions as pervasive to morality regarding interactive and non-interactive others, the imperative is normatively and epistemically justified, logically tension-fraught, and guiding in an open variety of indeterminate, multisided, logically-ambivalent cases, as in issues from care ethics, to intergroup politics.

Keywords: ambivalence, interactive ethical imperative, (political, personal, animal) relationship, second-personal interaction, Social Ontology, subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Concrete intersubjectivity – i.e., second-personal interaction, relationships, and communication – is a broad phenomenon encompassing such diverse cases as a life-long mother-child relationship, the mainly professional relationship between a medical doctor and his superior, the brief meeting between a hawk and its prey, or an email exchange that ends unexpectedly. The paper presents my analysis of concrete intersubjectivity or interaction, and follows with a discussion of interaction-centred ethics, but practically ignores the linguistic angle of communication. Interaction on my account is a matter of individual subjects – or, synonymously, persons (psychophysical creatures) – and of their interactional engagements with one another. An *engagement* covers any concrete way that a person lives as a person, thus referring to those psychological attributes that could in principle be conscious, such as mental attitudes and actions. An *interactional*

engagement is a second-personal engagement with a party. Interactional engagements are engagements, but, more than third-personal engagements, they intensively and extensively involve the other person. Interactional engagements imply that persons or subjects are engaged individuals. Yet they also imply, first, that subjectivity cannot conform to an *isolated-individual view* (to name a dominant and very broad spectrum of philosophical accounts); and, second, that (even non-interactional) engagements cannot conform to a third-and-first-personal character.¹

My analysis thus aligns with work that acknowledges that second-personal engagements characterise individual subjects who are thus engaged with others, that they are not third-personal engagements, and that they are central to personhood: central early-20th-century proponents of such a view include Buber, Benveniste in linguistics, and Bakhtin in literary theory. In contemporary thought, too, interaction has sometimes been studied as involving persons second-personally engaging with one another: among such contributions we may count de Jaegher's enactivism, Honneth's and Ricoeur's recognition theories, Darwall's ethics, Eilan's and Rödl's 'second-personal thoughts,' and various works in feminism, esp. in Care Ethics.

2. Interactional Engagement and the 'Second Person'

The notion of interactional engagement is not, however, simply identical with second-personal engagement. First, such engagements need not have the grammatical form of the second person: it is not necessary in such cases that one speaks to the other person(s) as 'you' or by name, nor even make such reference tacitly, supplanted by ellipsis or implicature. Nor, indeed, need one speak or utter anything at all: an interactional engagement can be a gesture of looking away so as not to cause embarrassment, or a dislike that grows month by month. The linguistic term 'second-personal' is, however, a fair synecdoche for any interactional engagement: that is, any such engagement has the character of 'I turn to you.' This, however, does not imply that one wants to address the other person or does address them, and one can thus 'turn' to another against one's will, or do so without caring either way. Also, such addressing is, more often than not, tacit, indirect, and potential.

Second, while interactions transcend linguistic conceptions of the second person, they also transcend non-linguistic ones. We can perhaps capture a notion of a second-personal engagement that exceeds the grammatical meaning by defining or characterising it as follows: *A second-personal engagement* is a bipolar

¹ This term captures the character of engagements in that they are first-personal (Mia is tired as 'I, I am tired'), and interdependently attributable to the engaged person as a third person ("Mia/she is tired..."). Engagements are third-and-first personal in an additional sense in cases where we are third-personally engaged with other persons – e.g., that I (Mia) have heard about him (Liu). But engagements' first-and-third personal character in both its senses must be re-understood in light of interaction.

engagement of a person with others (one or many, specified or not). In a second-personal engagement, the engaged person *addresses* the engaged-with; where 'to address' here implies to aim at, or be directed towards, *reaching* the addressees with the engagement. In so far as it is a success term, addressing would require actually reaching them; and to *reach* with an engagement would be to reach with it as the two-poled entity it is, i.e., as such-and-such a second-personal engagement of oneself with the addressees.

This definition of a second-personal engagement brings us closer than other possible definitions to the notion of an interactional engagement. We can, however, speak of second-personal engagements in broader, although related, senses. In the American conscription poster in which 'Uncle Sam' wants you, for instance, no uncle nor anybody else is (directly) engaged with 'you,' though the poster or the State does second-personally call upon you, or in any event upon certain people. Alternatively, a second-personal use may indicate that a subject is engaged in making it, and yet is not thereby interactionally engaged with others either known or unknown. Thus, some philosophers have recently been opening their posts to email lists with "I trust this finds you well," but as such trust would be absurd in view of the open character of the list, it appears that in delivering their message the authors are not (actually and directly) addressing the potential readers. The above definition of a second-personal engagement is a better candidate for capturing interactionality because in such second-personal engagements there is someone who is engaged, and there is someone who is addressed.

Interactional engagements are the concrete ways in which the parties participate in the interaction. They are second-personal as defined above, yet that definition mutes their mutuality. As discussed below, my analysis reveals that a single interactional engagement is deeply and pervasively mutual in an infinite, multi-sided, entwined, open, *oblique* and indeterminate manner. These terms characterise the specific structure of interactional engagements – which structure inheres to some extent in any second-personal engagement whatsoever. In other words, any second-personal engagement is interactional. One reason behind this is that both parties' concrete engagements within a relationship are never too far from the other person. Complementarily, persons *on interactive terms* (persons who are in a position to interact, for example any two living *humans*) are intrinsically on the verge of interaction, such that any engagement with others can turn interactional or be revealed as one.²

² My account shows that interaction is built into subjectivity such that whenever possible, this, rather than third-personal observation or ascription, is the primary way that subjects take each other as subjects; and that interactional encounters tend to be possible. To illustrate, interaction is possible when one is looking at someone sleeping, in making plans allowing for unknown others to join, in disregarding others, often even when they, for their own part, are not aware of one's existence, and so forth. Many creatures of different species are also on interactive terms, for example humans with domesticated animals, and, given suitable sense organs, particular

These reasons apply to third-personal engagements as well: a third-personal engagement with another person is, in important senses, a secondary notion. Engagements with others with which one can interact belong to their relationship if they anyway have a relationship. Otherwise the engagement would form, or at least evoke, a relationship, such that then too it actually or potentially comprises an interactional engagement. We speak of such engagements as third-personal to ascribe them to some mode or another of denying, defying, or shying away from the interaction with the engaged-with.

Second-personal engagements, however, are clearly interactional if they take place within the context of an interaction; and successfully maintaining them implies that the parties are, at least indirectly and potentially, already interacting. Why? Because the notion of *reaching*, once interaction is in view, carries with it the full-blown structure of interactional participation. To mention two initial aspects that reaching another involves, one reaches others in their own interactional engagement with oneself and to be reached is already to respond.

Although we might thus take the definition of a second-personal engagement as equivalent to that of an interactional engagement, the notions are worth distinguishing. For an engagement can be typically and clearly second-personal, yet much more subdued in its actual interactionality. Cases diverge, but we may consider an example of a fiercely second-personal but more vaguely interactional engagement in which a singer is giving a concert in a large auditorium on a tour abroad. He is thanking his audience, whom the lights prevent him from seeing, and the local habit does not include cheering. Yet here too, the singer might be thanking some of the audience under a more visibly interactional *encounter* than it initially appears.³

3. Concrete Intersubjectivity and its Study

By 'concrete intersubjectivity,' to repeat, I refer to the triad of (intersubjective) interaction, (linguistic mutual) communication, and (enduring) relationships, understanding these both as concepts and as the phenomena that manifest them. For reasons that stem from the specifics of the account, I am using these three terms (except for nuances) synonymously, in regard to any case of concrete intersubjectivity. Interaction in this sense pertains to *persons* or *subjects*, namely

humans with particular animals they are daily in touch with. Moreover, the range of mutual interactivity can be greatly expanded (See also Sandis 2012, Haraway 2016). 'Interactivity' in my work means the manner in which subjects (on interactive terms thus understood) refer to others as subjects: in line with the analysis, this involves the ability, but also the (ontological) readiness, to interact, as well as the the parties' actual interaction in its particularity, if they actually have a relationship or interact (below I also use 'interactivity' more loosely to describe a phenomenon, concept etc., as bound up with interaction).

³ 'Encounter,' attributed to a person or an engagement, covers in this paper any way that Mia's engagement intertwines with an engagement of Liu through some actual or potential interactional route.

people and other creatures with a first-person perspective, and depicts its participants as standing in mutual contact. This might be an intimate conversation between strangers or a commercial encounter at the pharmacy, or soldiers running after immigrants who are trying to evade them, or, to extend beyond the human framework, a dog growling at a too-friendly child. Again the parties may have a long-standing love relationship, or be working on a project together, or theirs may be an employee–employer relationship with a ceremonial first day followed by an uneasy saga with little direct contact and then an unceremonious final meeting in which the employee is dismissed due to cutbacks.

Concrete intersubjectivity pertains to any domain in which subjects may be found, and my work proposes that its proper study should have reverberations that extend across science, and across philosophical fields, often provoking radical changes. Yet, first and foremost interaction is ontological, ethico-political and linguistic, and I concentrate on a tripartite interconnected investigation. This consists, first, in an (onto-)logical analysis of interaction, or equally of its relations with subjectivity. The second thread considers ethics in the intersubjective sense and as concerned with other persons' good. (I use 'ethics/ethical' and 'morality/moral' synonymously, and these terms may here apply to life and theory, and to normative and meta issues, as well as defy these distinctions.) My work identifies as **laying** at the heart of ethics an interactive imperative that is adapted from some of Kant's versions of the categorical imperative. Logically tension-fraught – similarly to the analysis of interaction – the imperative also serves to guide us in the open diversity of cases that we encounter in the course of life, including regarding political issues and care ethics. Studying concrete intersubjectivity through its linguistic lens, the third thread investigates communication and considers certain implications for other features of language. This paper discusses the ontology and ethics of interaction.

Concrete intersubjectivity is essentially about individual subjects or persons, and yet it does not aggregate them. Namely, Mia being in a relationship with Liu is not a shorthand for saying that certain things are true of Mia and that certain things are true of Liu. Interaction is, however, only about individuals – as they stand in contact – rather than a matter of some other mode of sociality, such as groups, or a 'we.' One way to put this is that the Bratman–Gilbert Social Ontology debate deploys an inapt framework. This major field of inquiry, inaugurated by Searle (1990), is in an important sense a debate as to how to analyse interaction. The axis of this debate, however, is on whether interaction, relationships, modest sociality and so on involve only engaged Bratmanian subjects, or whether they require groups as additional entities. But such a dichotomy of possibilities changes the topic. Isolated subjects and their engagements do not make for an interaction. However, the question is not what interaction includes beyond the parties in their mutual interactional engagements, but what it means that the parties are interactionally engaged with one another. What does it mean that individuals interact in individually engaging with one

another, and that a person is taking part in the interaction in being individually engaged with her party?

An additional entity, for example a Gilbertian collective-we group, could, in principle, comprise the indirect answer. But, in fact, interaction may not be explicated by adding groups to individuals. One reason for this is that the notions of groups, and particular groups, imply interactions and cannot be understood without them (these interactions are not necessarily between group members). This is not to deny that groups are important to concrete intersubjectivity in various ways.

How then are we to understand interaction? What is it for individuals to be in contact? For some decades now, philosophical inquiries into related topics have flourished, yet historical factors have combined with unease about an internal ontological tension to impose limits on the results of this work. The wide variety of ontological, ethical, and linguistic accounts currently available certainly contains important insights, yet they seek to elucidate concrete intersubjectivity through problematic models. The partial reference list below might be helpful in both regards. In what follows, however, I will seek only to present my ontological analysis in a straightforward, albeit super-condensed, manner. Then, for additional elaboration, I pull out a single and limited thread, before concluding with a short discussion of ethics.

4. Interaction: The Condensed Analysis

On my analysis:

(I) for Mia and Liu to thus-and-thus *interact* is tantamount to Mia having some *interactional engagement* as in II.

(I.i) I implies multiple other interactional engagements of Mia with Liu, and of Liu with Mia.

The main work then shifts to II, which states:

(II) Mia is interactionally engaged with Liu means that Mia is interactionally engaged-*engaging* as a *whole person* with Liu as a whole person interactionally engaged-engaging with herself as a whole person engaged-engaging with... [ad infinitum]

(II.i) Mia's specific interactional engagement with Liu as a *whole person* engaged-engaging with Mia in particular anticipates (=def. successfully *invites* Liu and *expects* him) Liu to be/get engaged-engaging as a whole person with Mia as (in the specific case) interactionally engaged as a whole person with himself as... [ad infinitum]

The analysis comprises the lengthy opening up of this condensed four-liner. Despite the use of names, it refers to persons of various genders, national or ethnic groups, and also species. The two-person analysis is relevant to any interaction, but I will not consider this here, nor the relevance of other persons, and of other interactions, to an interaction of Mia and Liu. Terminologically, 'interactional

engagement by Mia/Liu' refers below to their interactional engagement with the party to the interaction being considered.

I and II succinctly present a tension-fraught explication: together they detail the comprehensible yet inconsistent ontological structure of concrete intersubjectivity. The tension lies in the manner that interaction is related to subjectivity, such that it is a tension within interaction, and equally within subjectivity or personhood. Let me stress that the analysis does not contrast a sense or a way that individuals are separate, with their being together. Rather the contrary, as individual – or solitary – as persons might be, persons are intrinsically in interaction, and may well be more individual the closer or deeper the interaction is. However, interaction (concrete intersubjectivity, a relationship) involves subjects in a way that is, triply, not quite consistent. Concrete intersubjectivity requires individuals whose engagements logically precede the interaction, yet interaction constitutes and makes possible such engagements and subjects, and again, it undermines them.

Conversely, taking subjectivity as the explicatum, the notion of an interactional engagement, which stands at the heart of the analysis, is tension-fraught.

Interactional engagements are a person's engagements. I understand an individual person in terms of indeterminate mental holism, a view developed by Donald Davidson. On my adaptation, 'engagements' cover all concrete aspects of a person qua a person, such as mental attitudes and instances of intentional behaviour. A person is always engaged in various indeterminate, tension-fraught, and temporally open ways, and an engagement of her consists – and is constitutively rational – in its interlinkages and interlinkability with other ways she is engaged, or might thus be, become, or be found. In contrast to Davidson, on my analysis persons are often ambivalent. In ambivalence one's opposed attitudes are interlinked as opposed, and are together interlinked with other engagements of the person. Davidson also understands communication, and thus concrete intersubjectivity, in ways that I find eliminative, but indeterminate mental holism in itself does not eliminate communication or interaction.

Rather the contrary: the analysis of interaction between subjects who are conceived through indeterminate mental holism supports the mental holism of persons. Yet it is somewhat more complicated than this.

First, standing alone, mental holism disregards the interactionality of persons. Yet engagements are constitutively interactional or interaction-bound. At issue here is the interactional engagement, and an interactional engagement is an engagement. It is also, as the analysis shows, substantially and irreductively interactional. Namely, in being thus-and-thus interactionally engaged with Liu, Mia is with him in his interactionally engaging with herself as... In other words, 'an interactional engagement' is not a mere mode of (non-interactive or thus conceived) engagement.

Moreover, for reasons to be mentioned below, any engagement, and thus every person in view of any engagement of her, is interaction-bound. In analysing interaction in terms of interactionally engaged subjects, I implicitly also conversely analyse subjects and engagements in terms of the subjects' interactivity (see footnote 1) and interactions. While the analysis deploys a pregiven (and independently supported) account of mentally-holistic personhood, it also both demonstrates that interaction requires that persons are such indeterminately and holistically engaged beings, as well as understands indeterminate mental holism anew as interactive.⁴

Indeterminate mental holism thus being inadequate, as long as its interactivity is disregarded, how does the interactional analysis reconstruct indeterminate mental holism? A detailed answer goes beyond the scope of this paper, since it would call for a lengthy analysis, explicitly of interaction by subjectivity, and implicitly of subjectivity by interaction. But to sketch some lines of this analysis and reconstruction, this importantly involves that the support the structure of interaction lends to mental holism must be made more complicated still. Secondly, then, the notion of a person, this notion of a mentally holistic interactive interacting being, as we all must consist in, is not quite consistent. *Personhood* (as well as interaction) is, however, coherent in the sense that the conflicting aspects jointly and concretely make sense together. Interactive mental holism is also, as my analysis hopefully shows, true: i.e., it provides a true depiction of humans and other sentient beings, and is inherent to them qua persons or subjects.

Thus, in a (two-person) interaction, a person (Mia) is interactionally engaged with another (Liu) in a manner that involves indefinitely multiple encounters between them in their engagements with one another. Any single interactional engagement of Mia with Liu is, as the reader may perhaps spot in the condensed four-liner, bound up with an indefinite array-series of interactional nodes between the parties in their interactional engagements. Other aspects of the analysis might hardly be visible from the condensed presentation alone. However, opening it up reveals that they ground the condensed analysans and its implications, and lend the analysans its character or meaning, which I call *oblique mutuality*. Behind the 'whole person' coding, Mia's and Liu's multiple concrete engagements and engageabilities pop up, *not* in two bulks, but in an open, multiple and tension-fraught array or multi-directional-tree of encounters. Hyper-amplifying the indeterminate yet thick array of interactional nodes of mutual engagements, this also reveals the indirect or potential interactionality of any engagement.

Due to this hyper-tree character, any of Mia's interactional engagements is bound in a tension-fraught manner with Liu in his own interactional engagements

⁴ Davidson's physicalism is also not assumed. Razinsky (2017) provides reasons, other than interaction, to maintain indeterminate mental holism. It also grounds the possibility of true and comprehensible inconsistency, especially in Ch. 8.

with her in her engagements with him and so forth; and this holds for actual engagements that can be clearly attributed to Mia or to Liu, as for the engageabilities they each might have or acquire in this or that direction; again this holds for specific engagements of them, as well as for larger threads of their respective engaging. The tension in question is not a matter of discord between multi-sided relationality and an individual entity: an interactional engagement is indeed both of these, but, generally speaking, multi-relationality is perfectly consistent with being an individual entity, as is the case for both persons and their engagements.

For example, singing a song is relational: it constitutively relates the person with the air (and/or with particular sound-waves, the song, the institution of music, the idea of music, etc.). But, contra the dichotomy relationalism/individualism, their relationality also shows us how to understand the individuality of the singing and the singer, and at the same time an entity's constitutive relationality does not deflate its individuality. Singing to one's beloved is similarly also an individual in relating the singer to the beloved (or as a relatum in a relation between the singing to the sung-to, or in a triple relation with the sung-to and the singer); and in so far as we de-emphasise the interactional structure, and consider only the special relatum here being considered, i.e., another person (or similarly another person's engagement), this should raise no difficulties.

But here comes the difference. Relations to non-personal objects do not problematise the consistency of personhood and engagements. (That's to allow for a simple comparison. In fact the relationality-individuality of subjects and engagements in regard to social, cultural, or even all relata is disharmonious, since relations of persons and engagements are pervaded with interactionality.) However, *relationship-relationality*, as I call the relationality pertaining to concrete intersubjectivity, connects the (individual) parties in their (individual) engagements in a way that threatens subjectivity and engagements, and threatens them precisely in the sense that concrete intersubjectivity logically prerequisites them. This is because, in being thus-and-thus interactionally engaged with Liu, Mia is concretely involved with him as thus involved with herself and so forth, in a manner that loosens their engagements, or renders them too free. The positive (namely specific, with content) yet hyper-multiple and indeterminate array of interactional nodes connects the parties' engagements too abundantly, 'freeing' them so as to destroy, as if from the start, engagements and persons.

Furthermore, the onto(logical) tension has a third side to it: in hyper-amplifying the indeterminacy of a mental holism, this positive hyper-indeterminate nodal array also, inversely, substantiates that which it undermines. In a word, personhood requires that engagements are indeterminate. More specifically, the positive character of engagements has to be indeterminate, and engagements have to be indeterminate in a positive manner, i.e. in concrete ways and directions. And personhood requires this positive indeterminacy in terms of

the manner in which one lives – one's engagements and engageability – rather than as a theoretical truth. Yet this indeterminate character of one's engagements and interlinkages cannot be drawn solely from first-personal life (as third-personally backed). While in a sense it can be drawn from first-personal life – indeed, we live this way, namely our engagements are indeterminate qua the manner in which we ourselves are engaged – this is because our first-personal lives, third-personally backed, are not lived alone, since we are always, down to the most solitary engagement, crucially in interaction with others. However, let us pretend for a minute that the notion of isolated first-and-third-personally engaged persons makes enough sense to speak of it or to imagine that it captures the structure of our lives. In which case, how would the indeterminate character of an engagement show up? If third-and-first-personal life was (onto-logically) isolated, rather than lived with others in concrete intersubjectivity, a person's indeterminacy would only be a theory, both to her as to others. The indeterminate positivity of interactions is an enabling-and-constitutive condition on a mentally holistic person and her engagements, even though interaction shatters persons and their engagements, and even though interaction logically prerequires them.

5. Aspects of Interaction

The *interactivity* of a person with another, or of persons with each other, here means an ontological readiness to interact that is shaped by their actual interacting, if any (see footnote 1). The analysis presented here shows that interactivity underlies any encounter of not wholly disparate subjects that may be comprehensible to them. This implies that more-or-less non-interactional encounters are tacitly, indirectly, or potentially interactional, and ostensibly one-sided or isolated encounters may become or may be found to be part of a multifaceted, dense, and/or wide-open interaction. In analysing interaction in the above non-eliminative mode, we are aware that persons on interactive terms, e.g., two humans, are interacting, or are on the verge of interaction, given any (suitable) encounter or occasion. They would, for example, be in contact, or on the verge of it, if one is third-personally directed towards the other, or in cases in which they are inattentive, or are physically or socially distant. Let the designing of an economic policy provide an example. Such a policy has impacts on various people, and, however the story goes, this is not in all respects external to the planners' engagement. In designing the policy, it is as if the experts say to these people 'here is what we have arranged for you,' potentially inviting them to respond, as some of them may one day do.

In the analysis being presented, we also focus on the deeply pervasive way that each of the interacting parties is involved with the others in their involvement with oneself. Indeed, Mia's engagement with Liu is not to be independently thought of, nor is it enough to interweave it with a limited number of ways Liu is engaged with her, and she with him. Rather, her interactional engagement brings

with it indefinitely multiple nodes, which bind it with indefinitely many other ways the parties are and may be interactionally and otherwise engaged.

This helps us, for example, see how mutual commitments should be conceived, and especially how they may constitute the crux of ethics. Some approaches, such as contractual views (Scanlon 1998, or Darwall 2006; 2011), understand ethics in terms of mutual commitments. I disagree that ethics is contractual in Scanlon's understanding and in other ways, and I also have reservations about the idea of mutual ethical commitments. (We may accept that any person has ethical commitments to every other person, but an ethical commitment of one to another need not imply corresponding commitments in the opposite direction, especially in non-interactive cases and in cases where the parties are very dissimilar in their subjectivities or interactive participation. Furthermore, while interactive situations imply mutuality of commitments, this is foreign to their ethical character.) However, to anticipate, ethics is, on my account, bound up with something like commitments to others. Relatedly, as regards subjects in position to interact, once they do or might encounter one another in ways that they can relevantly comprehend, ethics is also interactional through and through. Reservations apart, the notion of mutual commitments respects the strong relations of ethics to interaction; yet it respects them only because mutual commitments are interactional engagements, and they are interactional engagements only because, and in so far as, they do not form a solitary set, but are constituted together with an open array of other interactional engagements of the parties, some ethical, others unethical or non-ethical, or in-between, or all together.⁵

Our analysis of interaction deals with people in contact. It directly approaches persons, and approaches them directly in being in contact with one another, and the elaboration that emerges makes clear that to concentrate on collectives would be to lose the concrete intersubjectivity under study. (Moreover, replacing intersubjectivity by collectivity would also be to lose the collective notions and phenomena, since there are always aspects of concrete intersubjectivity to be considered.) To exemplify this with an instance from ethics, ethics being about how subjects should be and should behave with others, there is something inapt in describing genocidal killing as a 'crime against humanity.' To do this ignores the ethically interactional character of the act. The politicians, generals, soldiers, and other collaborators (and the system they enable) first and foremost inflict harm on their direct and indirect victims. Genocides, including of other animals, are harmful to all humans, and the harm may involve our relations

⁵ Neither can interpersonal contracts be understood in terms of some abstract set of mutual obligations. In addition to other constitutive elements like social or legal background, such obligations must be understood through the rest of the parties' interactions. Non-intersubjective contracts, for example between individuals and companies, are also, indirectly, invested with interactionality and arrays of genuine and of metaphoric interactions.

to humankind as a group (or, as below, to a value of humanity), but not to the same extent or in the same manners.

If interaction is a matter of subjects being with each other in concrete ways, this may rule out its analysis in terms of collectivity, but other investigations might take a different route. Concrete intersubjectivity is often conceived in terms of individual subjects, yet in such a way that their interaction is reduced to or underpinned by some sense in which subjects are *generally together*. This notion can encompass multiple metaphysical structures, e.g., 'being with others,' sharing a world, and sharing a language. Similarly, it can take up multiple forms and senses of cultural partnership, sharing, and joint basis (qua subjects), including languages, the environment, institutions such as work or family, and values that potentially interacting subjects hold in common, or take as relevant. All the above deserve scholarly attention. They are all very important in social, ethical, and interactive respects; but they are not tantamount to interaction. Thus, perhaps a crime against humanity is not against the group comprising all humans, but rather against a value of humanity: yet this too displaces the main crime of genociders, which is interactive.

The analysis of interaction also points to a structure of indeterminate complementation governing a party's interactional engagement. Let me present this aspect in some more detail.

6. Parties are Indeterminately Complementing One Another, Rather than Being Similar

In explicating interaction in terms of indeterminate complementation, our analysis stands in contrast to interaction being viewed through a structural metaphor of 'copy' or 'sameness.' The appeal to such a metaphor, although common to various studies of interaction, reflects the broader philosophical trend towards denying concrete intersubjectivity. Broader biases leave room only for isolated individuals and their engagements, and/or for the impersonal entities in or through which they meet, and thus eliminate interaction, i.e., persons being engaged with others in their interactional engagements with themselves. Even where isolated individualism is challenged, its traces usually remain as tacit assumptions, such that studies of interaction and communication tend to assimilate concrete inter-subjectivity to the subjects' being in some respects similar or the same, or their pursuing such similarity. In interacting, they would share certain things, or imitate each other, which repetition may be conceived as constitutive of the interaction or as its glue.

One way or another, we must reject the understanding of interaction through similarity. It cannot hold for two reasons that apply to explications as diverse as contagion (enactivism); feeling-as, feeling-with, or understanding another (empathy studies, Darwall); hearing and interpreting as a duplication of the speaker's utterance (communication pragmatics); and shared, joint, or mutually identical values, intentionality, obligations, or emotions (Social

Ontology's explications of interaction as irreducible to isolated individuals' engagements include such entities in their conceptions of groups. Be they shared, collectively accepted, or more or less maintained by any member, they actually figure also as a complementary feature to groups in the explication of interaction/interactional modes, e.g., Tuomela 2007,⁶ Gilbert 2000).

As fruitful as the metaphor may be, both philosophically and also scientifically, sameness and copy cannot supplant interaction. On the one hand, none of the above is core to interaction; on the other, in cases where 'copy'-phenomena, structures, or aspects play a part in our social-interactional life, they are bound up with interactional engagements or are themselves modes of such engagements. Namely, the copy is shared or repeated in a manner that deploys ordinary indeterminate complementation. Many objections might be raised to both of these points, and I will not tackle them here. In particular, though, one must wonder whether interactional engagements might not, even if they are not dispensed with, be grounded by doublings. Perhaps specific candidates for conceiving concrete intersubjectivity in terms of identity or imitation would support the interactional engagement, e.g., as some sort of micro- or macro-engagements. While it is possible that some similarities do support the parties' interactional engagements as components, governing principles, or whatever, we should be able to show they do not support the interaction in a manner that legitimates the interactional analysis as a matter of sameness or its pursuit.

My aim here, however, is to contrast the sameness/ copy metaphor with the indeterminate complementation aspect of interactional engagements. Indeterminate complementing is intrinsic to interaction, namely, any instance in which Mia is interactionally engaged with Liu as a whole person engaged-engaging with herself, and so forth, indeterminately complements that first-mentioned interactional engagement of Liu. For example, as suggested above, interactional engagements that duplicate engagements by the party can be shown to demonstrate indeterminate complementation. For instance, suppose that Liu asks Mia to convey a message to her dad, and that she understands the message, and her understanding, in a sense, imitates the message, and imitates Liu's delivery of the message. Suppose further that, in understanding him, Mia is interactionally engaged with Liu.⁷ With these assumptions we can see her

⁶ Tuomela, however, speaks of logically prior interpersonal communication. He also appears to conceive of it (and, ontologically, of groups) in an isolated individualistic way.

⁷ Alternatively, such understanding can be an aspect of their interaction and engagements, rather than an engagement. This would require other interactional engagements of Mia to indeterminately complement Liu's engagement.

This example targets post-Gricean philosophers of communication and linguists who model communication on a speaker's utterance being imitated by a hearer's understanding. However, in such approaches, the duplication pair is by and large identified with Liu saying something to Mia, conveying to her a message for herself, which message Mia understands. I proposed the above example to make a more convincing case for the duplication model, as well as to allow for a brief illustration, since the example is at least straightforward, while saying something, and

understanding as a case of a copying engagement, yet the assumptions imply more than mere copy or duplication. They also describe Mia's understanding of the message as engaging her with Liu in being engaged with her in asking her to deliver it. However the example is fleshed out, it would also become clear that Mia's understanding complements Liu's engagement in a manner that is bound up with many other engagements of both. Those include interactional responses of Liu, say his respect for her sensitive understanding, as he learns from her breathless father that Mia managed to reach him in time.

However, to understand the feature of indeterminate complementation, we need not expound on examples suggesting duplication, since indeterminate complementation is often also strikingly visible. For the real flaw in similarity-based analyses of interaction is that in genuine interactions there may be no similarity at all between the counterparties' engagements. Why should their engagements be similar if they are not interactional in duplicating those of their party, but rather in responding to his engagement with oneself, and in the evocation of a response from him? In other words, if they are interactional in indeterminately complementing the party's engagement? Mia is frequently, and maybe typically, interactionally engaged with Liu in responding to a very different way that Liu is interactionally engaged with her. Perhaps Mia answers Liu's question, or she may be thanking him for a cup of tea.

These half-sentence examples stress the element of complementation. In answering Liu, Mia does not repeat Liu's question but complements it. Liu brings Mia tea, and Mia complements the interactional node in thanking him. Crucially, a response does not have to respect expectations bound up with the particular concepts, and the complementing is not supposed to conform to a pattern. Mia may, for instance, address a question by bypassing it, the topic being too heavy for the hour. She may address Liu's proffered cup of tea by daring to ask him for a much-needed loan.

The open range of the complementation is one angle of its indeterminate character. Another is that Mia's responsive engagement is in no sense completing or exhaustive. This structure does not form a closed pair (nor any larger limited construct). Rather, it is indeterminately bound up with a complex open array of the parties' interactional and non-interactional engagements. For a start, as Mia is thus-and-thus engaged with Liu (daring to ask for the loan in response to the tea), Liu is interactionally engaged with Mia as in that manner engaged with him, e.g., he becomes uncomfortable, and this is just as much constitutive of Mia's engagement.

Morally, how ought Liu respond when Mia asks him for a loan to open a little business? Well, we need to know much more of the parties, interaction, and context, and indeed we may be more clueless after learning. At stake here, to begin

its being understood, tend in real-life examples to fail both in terms of copying, and qua engagements.

with, are Mia, Liu, and their relationship. In Liu's indeterminately complementary interactional engagement with Mia's appeal, and in other ways that may be found relevant in which they engage with the world, each other, or the issue, Liu, Mia, and their relationship also set up the moral good in question. Sometimes, and to some extent, there is one clear thing to do. Often, however, we are in a position to take action, advise, or judge, but in a manner that is ambivalent, multi-sided, and uncertain. This is the rule rather than the exception for sound ethical guiding.

7. Ethics with Interaction: Recalibration

The study of interaction in a non-eliminative manner can direct our attention to the constitutive relations of ethics with interaction. Having set out in the previous sections some aspects of the ontological analysis, I now also wish to note the recalibration they call for in ethics.

Interactivity involves that persons in a position to interact will, given a chance, be interacting or on the verge of interaction. If this is so, then supposing that ethics requires attention to interaction, such requirement might be relevant very broadly, i.e., whenever interaction may be in view. Interaction is, however, pervasive, and this suggests that, whenever it is in view, it is, by and large, relevant to ethics.

For ethics requires attention to interaction. Consider, first, a judgement of a consequentialist or deontological character. The modern Western framework being formed around the Mill-Kant axis has, from our point of view, important merits. It takes ethics and morality as primarily about persons, and how to behave with them, adopting a good-willing concern with their good, needs, and will. It is also about persons as those who are ethically concerned with others, since, across the tradition, solitary individuals are the implicit or explicit makers or maintainers of objective judgements.

The character of ethical judgements is usually understood as impersonal or impartial. I hold to this since ethical concerns involve any person with any other person, and, ethically speaking, one would, for example, appreciate the good of one's beloved as a person's good, rather than as the beloved's. It is not a moral judgement on Liu's part (or regarding him) that it would be wonderful to bring a flower to Mia, Liu's love, who likes the flower's smell, unless this, other things being equal, suggests that Liu judges it would be wonderful to bring Nagi, whom he also expects to meet, a certain cookie Nagi adores, the bakery being just as much on Liu's road. Taking ethics as impersonal does not mean, however, that the particular persons do not matter. For instance, since a love relationship may make a person especially needy for the party's attentions, or benefited by them, or vulnerable to his engaging, it might be 'impersonally' right that the party care or do more for the beloved's good, perhaps in particular to bring them a flower.⁸

⁸ While ethicists have proposed that there are regions of special obligations, such as in a love relationship, I stress here that the special engagement with a beloved might be a matter of ethics

This leads to the non-neglectable character of the specific interaction in ethical matters. It might appear, however, that the differentiability in question is only a matter of maxims, subconditions, or rules of application, or of special obligations in certain sorts of relationships, or of concepts. For instance, morality, other things being equal, would conform to a maxim that partners ought to make small gestures of love; or the fact that somebody expects something of us would comprise a subcondition on the moral value of our granting them it; or love relationships oblige us in ways that transcend obligations to others in general; or in those situations where the concept of need fulfilment is relevant it inflects the concept of the ethically good so that they coalesce. One way or another, the idea would be that the ethical imperative is indifferent to the interaction, but there is always a question of how the imperative reads in a particular case. There is indeed always such a question, and the canonical range of solutions (in targeting the differentiating details of moral cases, though barely considering interactions among those details) cite some categorization, like rules or concepts, for applying the ethical law to a case, and evoke a notion of priority to decide matters when more than one category appears relevant. For example, if Mia, a person in trouble, pleads for Liu's help, the imperative would have to be read in regard to apt (agreeing or disagreeing) value concepts, say a value of help in such-and-such a trouble, a value of responding to a personal plea in such-and-such circumstances, and also the value of fulfilling new commitments to Mia that such help may elicit (but that Liu may well fail to hold to). Subsumed under this approach, the interactions around a case, and especially interactions between the moral subject and those this person is concerned about, would contribute some of the details-of-significance in choosing, identifying, and using the rules or concepts for the case.

I focus on concepts, but the following remark bears on the other proposals too. The bottom line is that concepts, maxims, and such special obligations for special kinds of relationship that have ethical character in the any-person to any-person sense here understood, all play an important role in applying the ethical imperative. In playing this role, however, they are, like the imperative, interpenetrated by the particular interaction.

A 'concept,' in my use, captures a thread of our life-with-language (as in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*). A concept is tied up with words, yet is broader and narrower than the thread of a word. It is multiple, open, indeterminate, and tension-fraught, but has a coherence of a notion.⁹ This characterisation is perhaps sufficient to see that everything about and within an interaction is partially anchored in many concepts, and morally-bound aspects are not excluded.

or morality in the sense here considered of the positive concern of persons with others and their good.

⁹ See Razinsky (2015), although the two-sided constitutive relations of concepts with interactions are not discussed there.

Sometimes the ethics-related conceptuality that pertains to a case falls under a name, i.e., a visible, typical, or self-suggesting wording. For instance, a situation may make the moral demand on Mia to “stop Liu’s suffering.” Ethics studies are, however, often biased by taking the named concept as the general case, or by assuming that those names that would matter in deciding the nature of the circumstances and what is then good or ought to be done are pregiven before the application of the imperative.

All the same, cases abound in which morally-bound words present a moral issue or could properly do so, and they lend further support to the thought that concepts moor moral differences for different relationships. As concepts are threads of our life-with-language, it is to be expected that ethical considerations in cases predicated with names, are, *inter alia*, anchored in the related concepts. Thus, concepts like that of suffering, or of stopping suffering, would be central to moral cases we would describe as Mia’s having to stop Liu’s suffering, and they would often play a crucial role in pinning down the moral differences.

The concept of incapability to interact comprises another important example of playing a crucial moral role. It does so quite differently from the morally-related concepts that usually come up as ‘purely’ or partially moral, but deserves our attention because it is indispensable to the sense in which ethics is interaction-bound. This concept is morally bound and is enacted in moral life in implying that more attention and care may be due in regard to persons who are incapable of or hindered from suitable contact.

The unusual yet impersonal ethics in regard to the beloved, the lover, and the loving-beloved is also partially anchored in various morally-bound concepts. Thus, the lover and/or beloved may suffer especially from the partner’s misconduct or carelessness, may suffer from attitudes that are problematic only in regard to love partners, and may need, benefit from, or ask other things from the other party to this special relationship than they do from others.

While such rule(s) of thumb pertain to the concepts in question, the particular interaction is no less constitutive. In accordance with the interaction, a concept might or might not apply, and might be inflected in one way or another. The applied concept and the inflection may or may not have a role in a moral engagement or demand, and, in case they do, the interaction shapes the moral demand and the way that the concept is relevant to it. In other words, ethics requires particularism about interaction. This includes that an ethical judgement, attitude, or conduct (by the ethical agent or others) refers to the parties – the ethically-engaged-with, as well as the ethical agent – in their particularity, but it goes much further than particularism about persons.

Why is interaction important for sound ethical engagement, and why does it matter in its particularity? Consider again ethics in a love relationship. Will Mia act immorally if, in a fight with Liu, she mentions something she knows he is uncomfortable about? Well, such conduct is often morally wrong, but it can also be fine (or wrong but not morally so), or the morally right thing to do, or again

ambivalently right yet wrong, and this would usually depend on the parties and their interaction.

At this level, however, the particularistic point is not made. Maybe the moral judgement reflects the interaction only in the sense that it falls under some description in which the relevant concepts make it morally wrong to mention Liu's Achilles' heel, or permit its mention, or be it as it may. The details can provide a better judgement, but this means that we might be able to adequately evaluate various assertible aspects of the interaction, rather than that they point to some unsayable moral perception or *de re* judgement. Is it not the case, then, that such evaluative descriptions articulate a pattern or rule subsuming the particular case? My answer is that, even if they form normative rules or patterns, a particular case always allows for additional details, interpretations, and connections which may undermine the patterns. Interactions, in particular, provide the ethical situation with a flood of potentially significant additions and changes. But this appears to prepare for a second objection to particularism. Namely that the particular interaction decides the game only by being the arena for an exhaustive evaluation of 'all' relevant features, i.e., a full description, whereas any approximation may draw a misleading picture. Yet attention to interaction in the study of ethics shows the objection is ill-founded. On the one hand, moral life and philosophy do not require such totalities. On the other, these totalities are not furnished by a particular interaction of Mia with Liu, nor does an engagement of Mia or Liu, or anything morally relevant in their lives or interaction, furnish them. (Also, nothing changes about this with regard to larger units of plural interactions and participants.) In particular, an interactional engagement – including a moral engagement (im/moral behaviour, ethical attention, etc.), and including an engagement that invites such a morally-bound response from the party – is often conflicted and unclear, even radically open, as is the interaction it is part of. Furthermore, apt ethical judgements rarely consist in complicated evaluations of abundant material. They are not limited to actual or to known cases, and can be very general (such as the judgement that killing is bad), or far from specific (as in approving, other things being equal, the discriminate killing of soldiers under anti-colonial struggles).

Moral appreciation has to take in interactions in their particularity because an interactional engagement is constituted together with a much larger interaction – the past, present, and future ways that the parties are or may be engaged, with the fates this may inflict on the morally considered issue and persons as well as on others. However Mia is morally engaged, Liu is there, again and again, to interactionally reset it. Furthermore, whatever it is about Liu that forms the primary focus of a moral appreciation, it is bound up with engagements of his; under interaction, and all the more so under a directly related interactional engagement (as any ethics-bound engagement of Mia would be), it is bound up with the interactional engagements of both parties.

Below I suggest that ethics must take interaction into account: ethical judgements have to attend to interactional possibilities. Even more fundamentally, ethics must take interaction into account by understanding typical ethical engagements, second-order moral judgements included,¹⁰ as (actually or potentially) interactional. Accordingly, considerations as to whether ethical engagements are sound must attend to the interactions in question. They must focus on the interaction of Mia and Liu but often also on various other interactions as being interwoven. This includes the interactions which any considering agents (Mia, Liu, 'third parties,' observers, public servants, university ethicists, and so on) might thus take part in. To a large extent, the interactionality of ethics is pivotal to investigations in Ethics of Care (e.g., Held 2014, Kittay 1999); other important contributions have been made in Intersectional Ethics (including Lorde 2007, Lugones 2003, and Haraway 2016).

The ontological analysis of interaction proposes that we have to think of interaction when we ask ethical questions because interaction pervades ethical issues. By the same token, we can note that interaction considerably widens the unclarity about good and bad, and it does so in regard to particular cases. Sure you should do something to relieve a person in pain in front of you, but this is less sure if he is trying not to let you notice that he is suffering.

8. An Interactive Imperative at the Heart of Ethics: A Brief Presentation

The ontological analysis of interaction elucidates the structure of morality in specific ways. In the ethico-political part of my study, drawing from Kant's versions of the categorical imperative, I propose an interactive imperative as follows: One ought to engage with others, focussing on their good, as a subject with subjects.

As with the ontological structure of concrete intersubjectivity, this condensed articulation of the imperative has to be opened up; and once we are aware that interaction may well be relevant, and inspect the imperative together with the ontological study, this imperative is found to be strongly interactive. To begin with, engaging with Liu as a subject with a subject, implies Mia's reaching him or being ready to reach him with her engagement, and this implies she is engaged with him as being interactively engaged with herself and so forth. Importantly, this includes, first, that Mia is ready for Liu's 'turning' to her (for help, with accusations, with a thought, to share their joy, etc.). Second, in reaching as an engaged mentally-holistic subject, thus evoking Liu's engagement, Mia is also turning, or on the verge of turning, to Liu. For her ethical engagement with Liu is

¹⁰ E.g., a judgement, by Mia or others, that she ought not pay Liu so little money for his work, or that it is definitely good that she is impatient with Liu's health complaints, or that she is right to give her time to Liu now that he is unwell; or, again, a judgement that she would act – or judge or otherwise be engaged with Liu – well in some encounter with him, or that it would be the right thing (or fair enough, or unforgivable) for Mia to interactionally engage with Liu in some such way.

interlinked with other engagements of her (not to mention the many intertwined ways such engagements and interlinkages pertain to their interaction, and as such bear on her engagement).

The interactivity of the imperative also implies a substantial positive concern with the other person. This is because of the focus on their good, but it is also because their personhood is acknowledged, as being in contact involves, and as the disavowal of contact disavows. However Mia stands in regard to Liu, her positive ethical concerns would go together with all sorts of hostile and other interactional engagements that she would maintain towards him. All the same, these ethical carings are, like all engagements, operative, regardless of what one does with them. Those committing genocide are also thus engaged with their victims (despite themselves), positively focussing on their good, as subjects with subjects, and this, in different ways, shows in their conduct.

The imperative is also normatively justified in the sense that subjects, (onto)logically, cannot but accept, in a concrete and ambivalent way, the requirement to engage good-willingly as a subject with a subject with one another. The ground for such accepting consists in the ontology of concrete intersubjectivity. This also in a sense acquires the imperative epistemic justification. Asking whether it is true that any person is morally demanded in the sense that the imperative articulates, this question can be divided into a question of whether the imperative necessarily raises demands in any person's life, and of whether such demanding or moral value is in some apt sense objective.^{11,12,13} In

¹¹ The notion of objectivity should, as I see it, always be understood in terms of subjects, socialities and culturalities. This is not to say that that objectivity is pragmatic. Rather it applies to cognitive concerns, epistemic pursuits, and issues of truth and reality. Objectivity is multi-inflected and reflectible, and investigating something can go with investigating what objectivity should mean there. Objectivity is a moving pivot.

¹² I thus here make a tripartite distinction.

A normative justification shows the affirmation of the ethical value, imperative, demand or engagement. In our case, by analysing the imperative, we normatively justify it, and the justification shows the ethical 'imperative' is really ethically imperative or that one really ought to be engaged with others as subjects with subjects focussing on their good. In terms of a second-order affirmation, the imperative is normatively justified in that the onto-logical structure of concrete intersubjectivity affirms that we ought to be demanded by imperative as we are, aptly apply it, and accordingly act; or that it is 'really' good to thus engage with one another etc. The second part to the epistemic question is about the truth of the normative assertion or prescription. Is it true that one ought to engage as a subject with others as subjects focussing on their good? According to our interests and to the answer, this epistemic sub-question may be almost identical to the normative question. The first epistemic part as to whether the imperative moral demanding is indeed how persons must and do live is also only separable from the second part for some purposes, and in an undermined way.

¹³ I use 'demanding' to allow for the complex dynamic way the imperative plays out in our lives. In contrast to the open texture of forging moral demands as part of engaging with others, any particular demand that, from her point of view, or from an external or objective one, engages a person, can be ethically wrong. In which case it would also be invalid (in regard to the second

that the ontological relations of personhood and concrete intersubjectivity imply such demanding, we are furnished with some kind of a positive answer to the first question. Since these same relations involve us as analysing subjects, such that we or the analysis cannot but take the imperative as true, we are also furnished with a positive answer to the second.¹⁴

Importantly, the imperative does not limit ethical obligations to those who ask someone for something, or who interact with her, or are on interactive terms with her. The imperative ties humans with animals whose sense organs and size rule out any communication with humans, often poses stricter obligations regarding those too needy to interact, and in any case may not be equated with acquiescing or giving that which one is asked for.

At the same time, the imperative is interactive through and through. That's because its content – good-willing engaging as a subject with a subject – includes the logic of its realization: the imperative is not realized by the truth of its abstract content. Indeed, to approach others in a way that suggests (something that would stand for) abstract good-engaging, or engaging as a subject in general, or engaging with others as such subjects, is to refuse the imperative. Suppose that the imperative as read abstractly yet implies that in being relevant to a person ('Mia') as regards another ('Liu'), it must somehow pertain to some or another interaction between them. For instance, it implies that Mia's ethical engagement would be part of an interaction with Liu; or maybe of an imminent one; or maybe her moral engagement with Liu must belong to an interaction with such-and-such features, also general or abstract, e.g. that it is not hostile, or that Mia is attentive to Liu, or that Liu looks on Mia kindly, or that he is open but distant. Thus read, the ethical imperative would be inaptly interactive, leaving non-interactive moral engagements out of the picture. But also, being engaged with another, abstractly interacting, can in any case only fly in the face of the imperative.¹⁵ That's because in interacting (or being ready for interaction) in a way that appears or aims at being abstract rather than concrete, purely ethical, universal, wholly impersonal, etc., one is not engaged with another (in actual or potential interaction if such there is) as focussing on their good. Rather, the ethical imperative acquires its sense in becoming concrete, that is in interaction.¹⁶ It, or we, cannot help but form

epistemic question as to the truth of an ethical proposition), and, according to the case, it may also be taken by mistake as engaging her.

¹⁴ In some suitable manner, we have to take the imperative as true precisely in analysing it. This stronger premise also holds, because in regard to subjectivity and concrete intersubjectivity, ethics included, a sufficiently successful analysis brings into the open the concretely intersubjective lives of individuals, and the imperative is inherent to our concretely intersubjective lives. But note that, while we have to take the imperative as true, we, importantly, can well also see it as invalid, not necessarily valid, etc.

¹⁵ The same holds for taking abstractly others aspects of the imperative, e.g. being engaged as a subject.

¹⁶ I.e. in actual and potential interaction. But in this paper I also ignore that the imperative on Mia applies to an interaction and applies in some way within an interaction only wherein Liu-

some array of concrete interactive and moral possibilities. This interactive array is central to ethical conduct in a particular case, including when actual communication is scanty or non-existing.

In presenting the ontological analysis, I have ignored the diverse concrete ways in which it characterises interactions, including how an interaction can take a radically different shape in accordance with otherwise small differences, as well as diverse dynamic and comparative relations among interactions. This 'phenomenology' both lends content to the analysis and justifies it. The same goes for the ethical investigation, which is also an opportunity to get deeper into some issues. Thus, ethicists of care construe the concept of care as almost identical both to interaction and to good interactional engaging. This is, as I see it, far too close, but care is central to interaction and to ethical engagement. Nothing about this is simple, however. I elsewhere examine the manifold significance of the imperative for various cases. Similarly, the imperative elucidates the ethical possibilities of political relationships that involve oppression and reification, and here, too, proposals offered to a good-willing subject as to how to politically interact may be more interesting than one might expect.

Specific situations, interactive options, practices, problems, etc. are important in regard to the ethical imperative in another way too. By this I mean that the imperative is quite abstract, and thus raises the ordinary batch of questions about particular cases: How is it to be applied? How should it be understood? How ought it be applied? How is it to guide a person with her interactional engagement and engaging?

These questions may appear especially disturbing given each of the following: the ethical imperative is, on the one hand, analytically true, namely the interactivity of subjects anyway implies treating, as subjects, one another as subjects. On the other hand, the imperative is analytically false, anyway if 'ought' implies 'can.'¹⁷ Persons cannot, and thus ought not, be engaged with each other as it requires.

It is an aspect of the ontological tension above presented that the ethical requirement contradicts itself whenever it arises. To repeat, interaction is understood through the interacting subjects, but it is a disharmonious understanding of a disharmonious relation, and similarly each party's subjectivity is bound up in a conflictual manner with the interaction and with the party's subjectivity. In line with this, in each case that a person is interactionally engaged with another, some aspects would enforce her subjectivity, or dull it, or dull the interaction, etc., in enforcing or dulling the other aspects; but also, the implication by one aspect on another would depict the first aspect reversely. Thus, if Mia's

with-the-moral-issues is relevantly around her. But at the same time, in taking or finding, aptly or inaptly, the imperative relevant, or missing it (e.g. not noticing 'Liu' when she should have), Mia is already applying the imperative, and, in doing so, unless interaction is entirely excluded, she is interacting or on the verge of it.

¹⁷ Otherwise, it is vacuous.

engagement supports her subjectivity by undermining the interaction with Liu, then, in being undermined, the interaction would undermine her subjectivity, and so on. One way or another, with Liu to engage with, Mia would always, at once, be more of a subject and less of one, more and less interacting with him, more and less interacting as a subject, more and less interacting with him as a subject, and more and less positively interacting with him. Each such aspect, in applying to a particular case, is only one note within an endless non-repetitive loop. For instance, in respect to something in her contact with Liu, Mia might be in some way more of a subject, and this could imply a more substantial interaction, in a manner that, let us further suppose, spoils her treating Liu as a subject; yet, in his maltreated subjectivity, he may be more of a subject in their interaction, with, say, indirect effects on the interaction and on Mia's subjectivity within it, and so on and so forth.

However a person is involved with others, her positive engaging with them as a subject with subjects is undermined. The structural aspects in question are quite general, while their character and the loops they form depend on the case. To exemplify the kind of more-is-less aspects the imperative invites (always as 'notes' in a non-repetitive loop): ought one focus on the other person and her needs, leaving one's own aside, outside the interaction, away from one's party? Well, without ever accepting Kant's purism, the answer is in certain senses yes, and often significantly so. It is usually pretty immoral to avoid a neighbour's need for a little conversation because one has better things to do, or, again, to discourage a lonely neighbour from talking with one by practically telling him how busy one's life is. Again, a medical doctor should ignore her discomfort with the arrogance of a severely ill patient. Or should she? And should Mia be taciturn with her neighbour regarding her daily pressures? Leaving certain of her engagements, so to speak, aside, Mia might well not quite come as a subject to Liu, and this can easily lead to not treating him as a subject.

Does it follow that the imperative can never be applied, regardless of how loving, kind-hearted, useful, and so forth one is? Does it follow from the logical truth of the imperative that it is not at all an imperative? Both contraries could suggest it does not matter how one engages with others. But, in fact, sometimes people engage quite marvellously with others. Even in insoluble 'dirty hands' cases, the imperative can fruitfully guide us, and it guides us through, rather than despite, its logical truth and logical falsity. Whatever the case, the imperative's guidance would be indeterminate, multiple, conflicting, and open, as are interactions; but it is far from being vacuous.¹⁸

¹⁸ This paper has gained from many interactions over presentations and drafts. Ben Young's close reading of an earlier version has been especially helpful.

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