

Discussion 1: Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego* (Initial Remarks)

Starting from Husserl's claim that there must be an ego "behind" or logically prior to all acts of consciousness, Sartre attempts to prove that conscious experience, and human psychology in general, can be explained without reference to such a "transcendental ego".¹ [TE 31]

Sartre's analysis of the ego depends on a close examination of the **levels** of consciousness. As Kant pointed out, the most fundamental features of consciousness are both the sense of its belonging to an individual and its continuity over time. Not only do I have the distinct sense that a consciousness of, for example, the pear sitting on the table in front of me is an experience of mine, but also that there's a continuity of experience from moment to moment. My consciousness of the pear is the same consciousness as I continue looking at the pear. There are no abrupt shifts, gaps, or radical breaks in my consciousness of the pear. It is simply there — the object of my conscious experience.

It also seems clear that I am not "doing anything" in seeing the pear. My awareness of the pear is direct and immediate. There seem to be no steps involved — no stages of seeing the pear. I simply look in its direction and see it.

These features are presumably given in nearly all acts of consciousness. (This is, of course, what Kant discusses under the title of "the unity of apperception", that it must be possible for the "I think..." to accompany every one of our mental representations.) And all the separate experiences are tied together or unified in one's mind by the Transcendental Ego (for Kant and for the later Husserl).

Now a question that arises for one interested in subjectivity is, "Who's doing the seeing? What is it that sees and takes possession of the experience of seeing?" The short answer for Sartre is, "Nothing". There is no thing that becomes conscious of the object because consciousness is not, contrary to what Descartes thought, a **substance**. Nor is it "a **thing** that thinks". Rather it is a "pure spontaneity".

At the same time, consciousness is "personal", but **only** in the sense that it is mine.² Thus, it exists **in** the world among things without **being** a thing. It is no-thing and yet it is mine. So what, then, am I?

To understand how the "I" figures into conscious experience, we must keep in mind three fundamental principles of Sartre's theory of consciousness:

1. Consciousness is autonomous, i.e. "other than its object".
2. Consciousness is consciousness-of-an-object.
3. Consciousness is consciousness-of-itself.

But if consciousness is always "other than its object", and is not itself an object, how can it be conscious of itself?

Sartre accepts the claim that every consciousness is "personal" and brings with it the experience of ownership — I see, I hear, I think, etc. This "I" is explained not as another component "in" or "behind" or "prior to" consciousness. To assume that it is would be to fall back into Husserl's positing of the transcendental ego.

It seems to me that the most useful way to think about the "I" is by way of a linguistic analogy. The "I" is the representation in language (the indexical symbol) of

¹ See Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, "First Meditation", §11.

² It's important to keep the "psychological ego" ("me" in Part 1 of the TE) distinct from the ego that unifies experience (the "I" or TE).

consciousness's inherent consciousness of itself. In other words, the "I" of "I see the pear" is a way of indicating in language the "self-conscious" aspect of a consciousness of the pear.

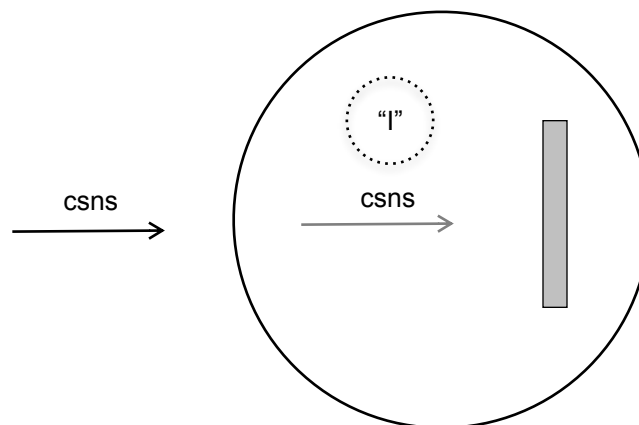
Now another question arises: Is the principle that consciousness is consciousness of itself inconsistent with the methodological constraint of phenomenological "bracketing" accepted by Sartre, viz. that my descriptions must be limited to what I experience directly, of which I have an intuition? All logical or theoretical assumptions must be kept to one side during the phenomenological analysis. So the question comes down to whether the reflexive aspect attributed to consciousness by Sartre — the self-consciousness — is **directly encountered**, as it must be on phenomenological grounds, or **inferred**, which is not permitted in the phenomenological reduction.

Let's take a simple example. Sartre claims that if I'm completely absorbed in an activity, say watching a movie, my consciousness is claimed by the events and scenes taking place on the screen. I'm caught up in the action, unaware of my surroundings. But if I'm disturbed by another person talking, or if my chair is bumped by the person behind me, my absorption in the film is broken and my attention is drawn to my surroundings. This "return to reality" is not generally traumatic — I'm not shocked to find that I'm sitting in a movie theater with other people. I don't ask, "My God, where am I? How did I get here? What's going on?" I know exactly what's going on. I know I'm in a movie theater where I'm in the process of watching a movie.

But then the question is — why am I **not** shocked? What is it that allows for the continuity of experience from one type of conscious experience to another? Sartre's answer depends on the resolution of two levels of consciousness, the **unreflective** and the **reflective**. Whenever I am conscious of my own thoughts, perceptions, or feelings, it is always by means of either an "immediate intuition" of the conscious event or "an intuition based on memory". [TE 43]

In the / *Think* there is an / who thinks. We attain here the / in its purity.... The fact that can serve for a start is, then, this one: each time we apprehend our thought, whether by an immediate intuition or by an intuition based on memory, we apprehend an / which is the / of the apprehended thought, and which is given, in addition, as transcending this thought and all other possible thoughts. If, for example, I want to remember a certain landscape perceived yesterday from the train, it is possible for me to bring back the memory of that landscape as such. But I can also recollect that / was seeing that landscape. This is what Husserl calls...the possibility of *reflecting in memory*. [TE 43]

Each time this happens, an "I" appears accompanying the consciousness. I recognize it as a consciousness of mine. This representation of the I occurs at the **reflective** level, where consciousness is directed toward itself and "takes itself as an object", as Sartre puts it.



However, it's helpful to acknowledge that **what** one is conscious of at the reflective level is still a consciousness of an object, for example, the scene in the movie. In other words, my **reflective** consciousness is a consciousness of an **unreflective** consciousness of what appears on the screen. The object of my reflective consciousness is also paired with an imaginary "I" — imaginary in that it has no real being as an object of conscious intuition. It is not **there** for consciousness — not "directly given". But it does have the effect of permitting me to think, "It was I who was previously absorbed by the movie and who is now conscious of the people around me".

Does this rescue Sartre from erroneously positing (unreflective) consciousness as an object (of reflective consciousness) while claiming at the same time that consciousness is always "other than its object"? Perhaps, if we recognize that the object of reflective consciousness is not consciousness as such, since there is no such thing as "pure consciousness" apart from an object. It is not a pure consciousness but (to speak paradoxically for the moment) an "objective consciousness" — an unreflective consciousness-of-an-object, that is grasped by a reflective consciousness which takes the previously unreflected consciousness-of-an-object as its object.

If we accept this as a solution, we can then conclude that the "I think" (the cogito) arises at the reflective level. But here's the contentious point. Sartre claims it must in some sense be immanent or belong to the unreflective, as well. This assumption is necessary to account for the fact that when I shift from the unreflective to the reflective level, there's a continuity of experience. I'm not shocked. I don't have to forge a new identity for myself. Rather, I experience the prior **unreflected** and the present **reflected** consciousness unproblematically as mine. One's identity is not placed in doubt by such events.

Perhaps we need to ask about the nature of this reflective consciousness. Is it directed toward a **memory** of watching certain events on the screen? If so, then it would seem to be an **unreflective** consciousness of a mental object — the memory. But this is not what Sartre is proposing as a typical act of reflective consciousness. The mental object is typically a **past unreflective consciousness of an object**. Thus, there are two components — a reflective consciousness of an act of consciousness, where the reflective consciousness is itself unreflected. But then isn't reflective consciousness still in some sense consciousness of a **memory**, i.e. consciousness of [the retention of?] a past act of unreflective consciousness. But is that the same as consciousness of an object in memory? [TE, 46-47.]

The key point for Sartre is that if I'm able to examine the intentional object of that past act, i.e. nothing but the "non-positional" side of the original consciousness, I find that my memory must have in it the "I" (an element which is not a salient feature of the original consciousness). Therefore, Sartre concludes, it must have been there all along. But in drawing this conclusion, does he go beyond phenomenology by positing logically that which is not directly given to consciousness. If so, this would be the very same mistake that he accuses Husserl of making. [TE, 45.]

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