

The Pure Ego and Sartre's Transcendence of the Ego

James T. Hong
The University of Minnesota

The title of this essay may be somewhat confusing. Sartre's Transcendence of the Ego is not only the title of one of his books, it is also a very terse description of the theory put forth in that book. The pure ego, as described by Husserl, is deemed by Sartre: the transcendental ego. So when Sartre speaks of the transcendental ego, he is actually referring to the pure ego: the designation I will use. Sartre's own theory describes a "transcendent ego."

In this essay I intend to briefly describe: 1) Husserl's conception of the pure ego, 2) Sartre's criticism of this theory, 3) his own theory of the ego, and 4) a criticism of this theory. Hopefully I may give a simplified and clearer picture of Husserlian and (pre-Critique of Dialectical Reason) Sartrean Phenomenology.

The Pure or Transcendental Ego

Edmund Husserl's conception of the pure ego varies with each of his major works. Here I will concentrate on the Ideas.

To begin with, for Husserl and for Sartre, consciousness is always consciousness of something, this is intentionality in a nutshell. When one is thinking (or for that matter, acting, desiring, etc.), one is always thinking of something. I.e. something is intended. What is important here is the subject of the intentions. I am thinking of this, I am intending that. This I is exemplifying of the pure ego. When there is consciousness of anything, there is the subject of that consciousness, this subjectivity is the I.

So far this I may be deemed an empirical ego. That is, a "believing," psycho-physical subject within the natural, "existing" world may be the originator of intentions. But if the Husserlian epoché, or the placing aside of existential meanings and status' of the spatio-temporal world—"Brack-eting"—is effected, what becomes of the ego? For one, the empirical ego, or worldly I, disappears. I, as the smeller of perfumes, or I, as the watcher of films, vanish. Only two correlates remain, the intentions of the essence

(Eidos) of objects, and the pure ego as reference point or origin of these intentions. In this sense, the pure ego is a phenomenological residuum of the epoché (Husserl: §57, p. 173 and §80, p. 233).

In another vein, my experience at $t_1, t_2, t_3, \dots, t_n$ must all be my experiences. These experiences which succeed each other in time must all refer back to me and to each other as temporally succeeding experiences. This "stream of experiences" is an unitary totality. The reference point of this unitary stream of experiences is the pure ego.

But these are not the only functions of the pure ego. In the act of intention, two factors are differentiated: the hylé and the noetic phase, or noesis. The hylé, or material, are the "blank" objects or matter of sensory experiences. Once intention has pinpointed a certain object or essence, the hylé is given "meaning," in the broadest sense of the term. That is, when one intends a transcendent object or essence, the hylé which reside in consciousness are animated with significance or meaning by the noetic phase. This noetic phase is the act of bringing or giving hylé the quality of intentionality (Husserl: §85, p. 249). The pure ego is that which effects this noetic phase. It "glances" toward a "potential field of perception" to individuate objects or variations of sensory data. In this way, objects are not seen as objects in themselves—but, in a loose sense, "potter's clay instead of the pot" (Sartre: trans. intro. p. 20). But this should not be confused with Berkeleyan idealism. For in this conception, "the percipi does not contain the esse as a real [or existential] constituent" (Husserl: §98, p. 287).

Now we see that the pure ego has a twofold function, that of providing a reference point to consciousness: "the pure ego as it lives, wakeful, in the passing thought is the center of reference" (Husserl: §84, p. 243); and that of being the origin of consciousness and intentionality, that of being the true I. Thus Husserl describes the pure ego as a "transcendence in immanence" (Husserl: §57, p. 173). For the Ego is always present to consciousness, yet it is not a graspable, or directly intuitable object, in the way that the empirical is.

Sartre's Critique of the Pure Ego

Sartre wishes to keep phenomenology truly phenomenological. He feels that if the pure ego is indeed accepted, the study of objects per se will

no longer be useful. Phenomenology would then be forced to investigate the constituting function of the pure ego. But let us look into his argument in greater detail.

For Sartre, consciousness cannot be unified or created by the pure ego. Consciousness, like the Spinozian substance, may only be differentiated and limited by consciousness. The I that exemplifies consciousness as being mine, is the **expression** of the unity of consciousness, not the condition (Sartre: pp. 39-40). Consciousness unifies itself. By referring to itself or to retentions of past consciousnesses, consciousness unifies itself in time. And in intentions, consciousness is not only of the object, but also of itself as "pure inwardness." That is, consciousness does not constitute itself as a transcendent object; it is aware of itself in a relation of pure intimacy, so to speak. With this characterization, there is no need of a unifying I. Consciousness is primordial.

But Sartre does not stop with the view of consciousness in general. In unreflective or non-reflective consciousness, there is no I hovering behind the scenes. When one sees a tree or hears music, there is consciousness of the tree, or consciousness of the music. These are the necessary correlates for Sartre, the intending consciousness and the object intended. So in unreflective consciousness, there is no I (Sartre: p. 47).

But reflective consciousness poses another picture. When one reflects on a past consciousness, both the past object of intention and an I, intending, appear. Yet this is reflection within a reflective memory. When one reflects, or attempts to place himself or herself in a past consciousness, that is, within a non-reflective memory, no I appears. For example, I may reflect on a past experience of listening to Rachmaninov, and intuit the music, which was the object intended; but I may also intuit myself as intending or listening to the music. But if I play the cassette of the Piano Concerto #2 and reflect on a past experience of listening, all that is intuited is the concerto, there is and was no I.

But if the pure ego were granted, what do we make of the reflecting consciousness of reflective memory? There would be three I's: the I of the pure ego, the I of the reflecting consciousness, and the I of the reflected consciousness (Sartre: p. 52). Which would be the correct I, or how would these I's be consolidated into one complete, unified I? For Sartre, this problem is insoluble.

And furthermore, if the pure ego were granted, consciousness would be weighed down; "[the pure ego] would slide into consciousness like an opaque blade. The transcendental I is the death of consciousness" (Sartre: p. 40). Consciousness would no longer be the absolute, the pure ego would. Intentionality would then be tainted. Consciousness could no longer be of an object, but only to it or representative of it. The pure ego would be to the "concrete and psycho-physical **me** what a point is to three dimensions: it would be an infinitely contracted **me**" (Sartre: p. 41).

Sartre concludes his critique with four points: 1) the I is a transcendent existent, like an object; 2) this I is not intuited in the same manner as an object, it is, in a sense, almost "inferred-intuited" from reflecting consciousness; 3) this I only appears on the occasion of the reflective act; and 4) this I falls like the empirical ego when the phenomenological epoché and reduction are effected (Sartre: pp. 52-53).

Sartre's Theory of the Ego

Sartre's own theory of the ego follows the consequences of his conclusion above. Consciousness constitutes the ego, and grasps this creation as if it were in the world—though not like a normal, transcendent object of the world. In other words, the ego is not **in** consciousness at all, it is transcendent, as stated above.

The world provides the ground for the creation and subsistence of the ego. Objects in the world, when intended by consciousness, are seen as valuable, harmful, practical, etc. In turn, the self reacts to these constituted meanings, for they are not in the world, we give the world its meaningful gloss. The reactions may be of hatred, love, want, desire, etc. But these are emotive "states:" infinite states of one's being, which cannot be asserted with certitude. For example, during spontaneous experiences, such as repugnance, hatred is not **causing** this feeling of disgust. This spontaneous experience somehow "emanates" from hatred. And the latter thus appears through this "emanation" (Sartre: p. 68). But these emotive states, when totalized, exemplify the ego. Together with actions, the totality of states refer and constitute the ego. "The ego is to psychical objects [and actions] what the World is to things" (Sartre: p. 75).

This ego is not an x-pole like an Husserlian noematic nucleus. It is spontaneously "created" with each state and action that is constituted or actuated. That is, states do not build the ego, and the ego does not create states and actions. They come together, coterminously.

In sum, Sartre's theory of the ego follows this strict temporal outline:

consciousnesses are first [and thus primordial];
through these are constituted states; and then,
through the latter, the ego is constituted (Sartre: p.
81).

Critique of Sartre's Theory of the Ego

One problem that occurs with Sartre's conception of the ego is the unification of consciousness. Each spontaneous consciousness is—with regard for intentionality—only of the object. How does one consciousness connect or unify itself with others? Sartre claims that this effected "by a play of 'transversal' intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses" (Sartre: p. 39). Where are these "retentions?" How can a spontaneous consciousness of an object retain past consciousnesses? Sartre must then be referring to the memory. So consciousness would not only be of an object, it would also need to be connected to the memory of the individual. Sartre's solution can only be his assertion that non-reflective consciousness not only has consciousness of an object, but also non-positional consciousness of itself. But this characterization makes the intentional aspect of consciousness, a train going toward one place, while also retaining its origin. Yet for Sartre, there is no origin before consciousness. So consciousness is a train travelling toward someplace while also knowing it is travelling? And again, how does one train connect itself with the whole line of fellow trains?

In order to preserve the strength of intentionality's claim, consciousness must only be totally of its object. Each spontaneous consciousness, individually, is only of its particular object.

In another perspective, if Sartre means awareness instead of bare intentions, it does seem correct to claim that reflective awareness is aware

of something which is not itself, while also being aware of itself. This is what Descartes exhibits by the Cogito, the I think. But Sartre criticizes this point. The I of the I think is presumptuous. It would be more precise to say, "there is thinking."

But then what would hold thinking into a conceivable concept? That is, if the I were not part of the I think, what would be the object of the thinking? It would be caught in a circle within itself; subject would totally equal object. The thinking-I of the Cogito is the object or intention of the thought. And this is tenable, for the Cogito of Descartes is one of reflection.

We may again approach the problem of consciousness unification. Would it be more correct to claim that consciousness is of the object, yet also non-positionally of its origin: the ego? This would fall into the same trap as Sartre. In non-reflective consciousness, it is granted that there is no awareness of an I. But this does not mean that there is no I. And in fact, in non-reflective consciousness there is no consciousness of itself either. When Sartre claims, it is "not 'I have consciousness of this chair,' but 'There is consciousness of this chair'" (Sartre: p. 53), he is still making the mistake that he is trying to correct. To claim that "there is consciousness of..." is just as presumptuous as claiming the I of the consciousness—if Sartre is correct on that matter. He is still caught in the web of mistaking reflective consciousness for non-reflective consciousness. Sartre would instead have to claim, "Chair." That is all. When I see the page of my book in non-reflective consciousness, it is just "page" or "word." Thus, no consciousness appears in the non-reflective consciousness. And if one argues further, there is no consciousness at all?

If we take Sartre's claim that the I only appears on the reflective level and not on the unreflective level of consciousness, we see that this assertion is only a cognitive distinction. Somehow, in non-reflective consciousness, the I just doesn't appear to our awareness. At the non-reflective level, it does seem that, whatever we in fact are, we are wholly part of the world. We "lose ourselves" in and to the world; but only cognitively, not literally. And if we assume that there is consciousness of something at the non-reflective level, what stops us from asserting an I?

This I is the only possible entity that could unify many multifarious consciousnesses. For these spontaneities need a reference point, an anchor. Objects provide an anchor of some sort, but only as destinations.

Now, on another note, does the I actually weigh down consciousness? In a sense, yes. For it does provide an anchor or reference origin. But if there is no I, spontaneous consciousness would be chaotic spurts into the world that cling onto objects like mosquitoes onto skin.

And to the question of three I's, these may only be different expressions of the true I. The I of reflected, past consciousness is an abstraction or past I. For one, it definitely is **not** me. It is only a me, a correlate of my past consciousness. And here, we may see the I as it was, or more precisely, what we think it was. I have no contact with this past I, it is just a picture of myself, a portrait. The I which is reflecting on a past consciousness is the true I. The I which reflects on myself now, is also the true I. Hence, the third I, the I of the transcendental ego, is not needed here, it is identical to the I of reflecting consciousness.

Here I am not claiming to define or describe the I in all of its facets. This I is in one sense, a felt I, the I of introspection, and in another perspective, an irreducible element. On this second perspective of the Ego, I agree with Husserl, though not without reservation, when he claims

the experiencing Ego is still nothing that might be taken **for itself** and made into an object of inquiry on its **own** account. Apart from its "ways of being related" or "ways of behaving," it is completely empty of essential components, it has not content that could be unravelled, it is in and for itself indescribable: pure Ego and nothing further (Husserl: §80, p. 233).

The lucidity of consciousness and intentionality may still be upheld if the pure ego, or at least some sort of transcendental I, is asserted. In fact, lucidity only makes sense when it is referred to the I. In contradistinction, Sartre would claim that lucidity is referred only to consciousness.

In this way, Sartre tries to make two I's. The unity of consciousness is an I, and the transcendent ego is another. We as humans become unified streams of experiences supporting a created object, which is a false image of ourselves. And these unified streams of consciousnesses cannot be an I. And I must be some sort of true unity. Spontaneous consciousnesses are just that: spontaneities, what would Sartre unify them into? A huge totalized

consciousness? In Sartre's theory my experiences wouldn't be mine, in fact, I wouldn't exist, there would just be experiences.

Sartre has repudiated the pure ego so he may assert the freedom of the individual. But the pure ego does not in any way hamper freedom. On the contrary, freedom presupposes it. For what is free? The self as subject is free to choose, not consciousness.

And this relation, of self to consciousness, is then Sartre's problem, or our problem in interpreting Sartre. Henri Ey has summed up this problem in Consciousness. Either Sartre equates the self to consciousness (which he seems to do within Transcendence of the Ego), or he divides the self from consciousness so radically, that an insoluble fissure is created (Ey: p. 204). Ey describes consciousness and the self as coterminous and complementary, the self becomes transcendent and somewhat transcendental precisely through its becoming. Without going into the details of Ey's argument, we may just see that the self, while alive, is a becoming with a reference point. And this reference point, or pure ego, is not a mass that encumbers our actions, our thoughts, or our freedom. Consciousness is a state—not Sartrean—or sign of the self's life and ability for *Erlebnisse* (experiences). It is the media through and in which conscious life takes place. It provides the middle ground between transcendent objects and our selves. And through our interactions and our *Erlebnisse*, consciousness and its correlates, memory and a self-view of the self, become. This preserves the dictum of freedom, "existence precedes essence." First **We** exist, as selves, with particular reference points, then we make ourselves. There is no "essence" to the pure ego, it does not define what we are, or more precisely, what we will be. It is an Archimedean point on which we will build. And how do we build onto this point? Via our abilities for *Erlebnisse*, via our consciousness.

But, alas, this is only an abstract and theoretical outline. The problem is to clearly and adequately describe the self's, the ego's, relation to consciousness.

Works Cited

- Ey, Henri, Consciousness: A Phenomenological Study of Being Conscious and Becoming Conscious. Translated by John H. Flodstrom. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Husserl, Edmund, Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology. Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Humanities Press INC., 1969.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness. Translated by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.