

Jean-Paul Sartre: *The Transcendence of Ego* An Appraisal

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This article attempts to review Sartre's early essay *The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*¹. Philosophically speaking this article discusses Sartre's concern about "the problem of self": Is the self an inner entity beyond conscious experiences as Husserl conceived? If not, what is Sartre's contention about the self? This article comprises of three sections: First session describes the structure of Sartre's essay published as a journal article. The second session illustrates Sartre's attitudes towards Husserl's view regarding the problem of self. The third session elucidates Sartre's alternative contention about the self.

Keywords: the self, the pure ego, transcendence, *in-the-world*, etc.

I

The Structure of *The Transcendence of the Ego*

The Transcendence of the Ego is a Jean-Paul Sartre's one of the earliest philosophical essays published in France as a journal "*Recherches Philosophiques*" article in 1937. It was his first and the earliest philosophical work when he was working as a schoolteacher in provincial France. This essay was said to be an outcome of Sartre's intense study on Husserl's phenomenology. Specifically, this essay elaborates Sartre's understanding Husserl's conception of 'self'. In this essay, Sartre had an opposite and a contrary view to Husserl's conception of self.

Broadly, *The Transcendence of the Ego* comprises of two major parts. The first part describes Husserl's account on 'self'. The second part of

1. The book referred for this review-article is the e-book translated into English by Andrew Brown and published by Routledge, London.

the essay has Sartre's account on self. In the beginning of the essay Sartre targets Husserl about his misconception in conceiving the self as pure entity, which is the object of transcendence, i.e., beyond conscious experience. In second part of the essay Sartre replaces Husserl's notion of self as transcendence by means of self as an activity with-in-the-world.

II

Husserl's Conception of the Self

Husserl's phenomenology was a movement within European philosophy. Husserl contended that philosophy could proceed as a rigorous science. He proposed that phenomenology is a method in succeeding it. The central claim in Husserl's proposal was, philosophers need to have a shift in their perspective, i.e., not just to have a 'natural attitude': means just accepting the givenness of the world around us and of the many objects it contains. He observed that "philosophers being in natural attitude are continuously engaged in acts of positing² the world and its contents. In other words, we explicitly express beliefs to this effect, we regard the world and the objects within it, as existing, or actual." Hence, Husserl believes that a retreat for the philosophers is necessary to reconstruct from the natural attitude. He proposes a phenomenological method to examine our experience of the world.

Husserl, in analyzing the object of consciousness formulates two aspects of the object of consciousness, such as:

- a) The Immanent object of consciousness
- b) The Transcendent object of consciousness

For Husserl, an object of consciousness is an immanent aspect of consciousness if all its parts are contained within a single conscious

² Positional means consciousness is its own object.

experience. For instance, 'sensation' is inherent within consciousness. Whereas a material physical object of consciousness is said to be the transcendent aspect of consciousness. For instance, in the visual perception of any material object, only the front portion is perceived but not the back portion of the material object.

Husserl also differentiates two other factors involved in act of intention such as *noema and noesis*. Among these two factors, the noetic phase is the so-called object of the the pure ego which is the noesis. It is the act of bringing quality to intentionality. Hence Husserl describes the pure ego as a "transcendence in immanence". Thus, this ego is always present in consciousness, yet it is not a graspable, or directly intuitable object, in the way that the empirical is.

To summarize, for Husserl consciousness is always consciousness of something, i.e., it is always intentional towards something. For instance, if someone is thinking, it means that he/she is thinking of something, i.e., he/she is intending towards something. The important aspect which we need to consider here is the "subject of the intentions" e.g., I am thinking of this or that. For Husserl, this consciousness of something is the subject of consciousness or subjectivity is the 'I'. This intended subject of consciousness is mistaken as an empirical ego or the psycho-physical subject with natural attitudes. But this empirical ego with the natural attitudes, for Husserl, needs to be bracketed. Such a 'bracketing' will essentially fulfil the phenomenal approach of subjectivity, i.e., the empirical ego with natural attitude disappears and the bracketing will bring about the pure ego. Hence, Husserl's conception of pure ego is the phenomenological residuum of the method of bracketing. From the above analysis of the object of consciousness, Husserl conceives that the transcended aspect of 'self' as 'I' (pure ego) is an inner entity which is behind conscious experiences.

Sartre's account of the Self

Sartre though accepts Husserl's phenomenology as the method in doing philosophy differs from the Husserlian conception of the transcendental aspect of the 'self' as the pure ego which is beyond conscious experience. Sartre begins his essay with a short note targeting two indifferent views about the 'ego'. "For some philosophers 'ego' is formally an inhabitant of consciousness but whereas for some psychologists, the 'ego' with its desire and act discover its material presence." (Sartre 2004, p.1.) He contends that "'ego' is neither formally nor materially in consciousness rather it is outside, in the world; it is a being-in-the-world, like the Ego of another." (Sartre 2004, p.1.)

Sartre's denial of 'I' as the formal or material object of consciousness

Sartre's essay begins with an analysis of I and Me. In other words, he critically evaluates the formal aspect of consciousness, i.e., 'I' inhabits all our states of consciousness and performs the supreme synthesis of our experience. But for Sartre, there are other moments of consciousness without an 'I'.

In analyzing the theory of the formal presence of 'I', Sartre criticizes the possibility of Husserl's conception of transcendental 'I'. He observes since the formal aspect of I consciousness serves as a supreme synthesis of all our experience then Husserl's conception of transcendental I' which is beyond conscious experience is not possible. Phenomenologically, consciousness is that which intends towards the objects and constitutes our empirical consciousness. In other words, transcendental consciousness is an inseparable companion to the intended object of conscious. Here transcendent aspect of 'I' consciousness may not be unconscious. Hence Sartre claims that the relation between 'I' and consciousness is an existential problem.

Husserl grants a special status to the transcendental consciousness, whereas Sartre denies it. The 'I' grasped in reflective consciousness by Husserl has no real concrete moment. For Sartre, "'I' does not appear in reflection as the reflected consciousness: it gives itself through reflected consciousness. To be sure, it is grasped by intuition and is the object of evidential certainty." (Sartre 2004, p.8.) Hence Sartre denies Husserl's account of transcendental "I" as existentially inconsistent. Transcendental "I" featuring in experiences are not in unreflective consciousness but only in reflective consciousness which happens to have existential status than being in the pure transcendental object of consciousness. "Transcendental 'I' is the death of consciousness." (Sartre 2004, p.7.) Hence for Sartre 'I' is never purely formal.

Sartre also makes a purely psychological examination of 'inner-worldly' consciousness and leads to a conclusion that, "the 'I' must not be sought in unreflected states of consciousness nor behind them. The 'me' appears only with the reflective act, as the *noematic* correlative of a reflective intention." He observes 'I' and 'me' are one. But in and through the infinite series of our reflected consciousness it merely has these two faces. For him, the distinction between these two faces, 'I' and 'me' is only at the functional level. Thus, from the above analysis, it is clear that Sartre accuses Husserl of an unnecessary duplication of selves.

III

Sartre on the constitution of the Ego

For Sartre, consciousness may only be differentiated and limited by consciousness but cannot be unified or created by the pure ego. For Sartre, the 'I' that Husserl exemplifies out of consciousness as being mine is the expression of the unity of consciousness but not its condition. For Sartre ego is not directly the unity of reflected consciousness as Husserl conceived but the unity immanent, i.e., "ego is the constitution of unity of *states, actions and qualities*." (Sartre

2004, p.12.) “The state appears to be reflective consciousness. It gives itself to that consciousness and becomes the object of a concrete intuition.” (Sartre 2004, p.12.) e.g., hatred is a *state*. “Thus the relation between hatred and the instantaneous consciousness of disgust is constructed in such a way as to cope simultaneously with the demands of hatred (the demand to be first, to be the origin), and the sure and certain data of reflection (spontaneity); the consciousness of disgust appears to reflection as a spontaneous emanation of hatred. We encounter here for the first time this notion of emanation, which is so important whenever inert psychical states have to be linked with the spontaneities of consciousness. Repulsion appears, as it were, to produce itself at the prompting of hatred and at the expense of hatred. Hatred appears through it as that from which it emanates.” (Sartre 2004, p.15.) The constitution of *action* requires time. For Sartre, “*Qualities* are intermediary between the Ego on the one hand and states and actions on the other.” (Sartre 2004, p.16.) Therefore, for Sartre, the Ego is the transcendent unity of *state* and *actions*.

For Sartre, the above-narrated unity or the link is possible only due to emanation. “Emanation merely links together consciousnesses to psychical passivity. The relation of quality to state (or to action) is a relation of actualization.” (Sartre 2004, p.16.) Sartre encounters Husserl’s two functional aspects of pure ego such as *noema* and *noesis*. He adds, “The essential difference between quality and state is evident. The state is the noematic unity of spontaneities, the quality is the unity of objective passivity.” (Sartre 2004, p.16.) For him, “the Ego, after all, being an object, is passive. So, what we have here is a pseudo-spontaneity.” (Sartre 2004, p.19.) “The spontaneity of the Ego exceeds itself because the Ego’s hatred, although unable to exist by itself alone, possesses in spite of everything a certain independence vis-à-vis the Ego.” (Sartre 2004, p.19.) He observes the link between the Ego and its states thus remains an unintelligible spontaneity “It is a virtual locus of unity, and consciousness constitutes it as going in completely the

reverse direction from that followed by real production; what is really first is consciousnesses, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego.” (Sartre 2004, p.20.) Hence, for Sartre “...consciousnesses are given as emanating from states, and states as produced by the Ego”(Sartre 2004, p.20.)

Sartre also differentiates between two modes of consciousness such as: unreflective or non-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness. “Ego is an object that appears only to reflection, and which thereby is radically cut off from the world. It does not live on the same level. Just as the Ego is an irrational synthesis of activity and passivity, it is also an irrational synthesis of inwardness and transcendence. It is, in one sense, more ‘inward’ to consciousness than the states. It is in the most exact sense the inwardness of reflected consciousness, as contemplated by reflective consciousness.” (Sartre 2004, p.21.) “Ego is at one and the same time an ideal unity of states, the majority of which are absent, and a concrete totality giving itself entirely to intuition. This means simply that the Ego is a noematic, and not a noetic, unity.” (Sartre 2004, p.22.) For him since there is no direct unity of consciousnesses, the ‘I’ is not necessary.

Essentially difference between the *state* and *quality* is: “the state is the noematic unity of spontaneities, the *quality* is the unity of objective passivity.” (Sartre 2004, p.16.) Quality is the intermediary between the transcendental unity of ego on one side and the states and actions are at another side. “So long as the ‘I’ remains a structure of consciousness, it will always remain possible to contrast the consciousness with its I on the one hand and all other existents on the other. And finally, it is after all ‘me’ who produces the world.” (Sartre 2004, p.29.)

From the above analysis, Sartre encounters Husserl’s transcendental ego needs to be bracketed. In his words, “But if the ‘I’ becomes transcendent, it participates in all the world’s vicissitudes. It is not an absolute, it did not create the universe, it falls like other existences

under the epochē,” (Sartre 2004, p.29.) Hence, for Sartre “the world did not create the ‘me’, the ‘me’ did not create the world, they are two objects for the absolute, impersonal consciousness, and it is through that consciousness that they are linked back together. This absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the ‘I’, is no longer in any way a subject, nor is it a collection of representations; it is quite simply a precondition and an absolute source of existence. And the relation of interdependence that it establishes between the ‘me’ and the world is enough for the ‘me’ to appear ‘in danger’ before the world, for the ‘me’ (indirectly and via the intermediary of the states) to draw all its content from the World.” (Sartre 2004, p.29.)

Sartre argues, if the pure ego of Husserl is admitted as the vision of transcendental, then Sartre the transcendent ‘I’ is the death of consciousness. If it is admitted as Husserl’s vision of transcendence then psycho-physically me will have three dimensions. In other words, if pure ego were granted then 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), and which would be the correct I, or how would these I’s be consolidated into one complete, unified. Sartre contends, this problem is insoluble with Husserl’s transcendence aspect of pure ego and would be an infinitely contracted me. Thus, for Sartre, pure ego is not merely a noetic effect, rather ego is spontaneously constituted with *state* and *actions*.

Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Transcendence of the Ego* is a critical attack on Husserl’s transcendental aspect of ego. In this philosophical work, he questions “being aware of one’s own self”. Specifically, Sartre encounters the transcendental turn of Husserl’s conception of self, i.e., “the transcendental self as pure ego.” This pure ego described by Husserl was denied by Sartre. In this essay, unlike Husserl’s principle of intentionality Sartre provides a model of consciousness; a

consciousness which is intentional always, i.e., consciousness is always necessarily consciousness of something. Sartre conceives consciousness as a pure activity and denies 'ego' which lies within, behind or beneath. Sartre claims to justify, there is no ego with consciousness as its source or necessary condition. Sartre distinguishes two modes of consciousness, i.e., pre-reflecting and reflecting consciousness. Hence, this shift from Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness to Sartre's phenomenology of consciousness is the hard-core discussion in his work "*The Transcendence of Ego.*"

The usage of the notion of 'transcendence' differs between Husserl and Sartre. Husserl's usage of the notion transcendence means 'go beyond', i.e., self as the pure ego is beyond conscious experience; whereas for Sartre, usage of the notion transcendence has the objective aspect of consciousness, i.e., he means transcendence of ego not as something beyond conscious experience but as an activity spontaneously constituted with-in-the-world. Secondly, Husserl phenomenologically arrives at two selves; whereas, Sartre denies these formal and material aspects of phenomenological selves and criticizes it with possibilities of three other "*I*"s, such as the '*I*' of the pure ego, the '*I*' of the reflecting consciousness, and the '*I*' of the reflected consciousness.

To summarize Sartre's critique against Husserl's conception of ego in his "*The Transcendence of Ego*" the following are the major remarks: 1) the '*I*' is not a pure existent beyond conscious experience; 2) the '*I*' is witnessed as object viz., reflecting consciousness; 3) the '*I*' appears not as pure unity of consciousness but appears as reflective act; and 4) spontaneous constitution of '*I*' as an empirical ego is the effect of phenomenological *epoche* (bracketing).

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End Notes

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