

## Discussion 2: Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, Part I

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Let's begin with a general overview of Part I before going through the details of the text.<sup>1</sup> We'll start with the question of **idealism**: Do objects have their own natures independent of consciousness? Or is "objective experience" subjectively constituted by the mind?

In attempting to answer this question, **Kant** distinguishes between

- empirical, and
- non-empirical (*a priori*) **concepts** and **principles** of the mind.

The empirical and *a priori* components of the mind make possible and give rise to ("**constitute**") our objects of experience. This view ("transcendental idealism") is in sharp contrast to **common sense realism**, which maintains that perceptual objects are separate from and **independent** of the mind. Kant characterizes his contribution as a "Copernican turn", which puts the subject at the **center** of the phenomenal world of experience.

**Phenomenology** is a twentieth century movement which attempts to investigate the essential features of our mental experience and to clear up the confusions generated by the confrontation of transcendental idealism and realism. A major emphasis in phenomenology is on the **intentionality of consciousness**, which plays a central role in the attempt to answer the following question: What is the nature of mental experience? Phenomenologists such as Husserl, informed by the work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), adopt the view that mental acts (imagining, calculating, perceiving, desiring, etc.) are

1. non-spatial, and
2. directed toward an object, e.g. the image of a loved one, a sum of two numbers, a ripe juicy pear, etc.

In other words, in a mental act (**noesis**), consciousness is directed toward the intended object (**noema**) of our mental activity.

For Sartre and others (e.g. the **early** Husserl), the objects of consciousness stand apart from and "transcend" consciousness itself.

The phenomenological method of analysis is not limited to the **activity** of the mind, however. It includes the objects of consciousness as well as the principles governing them. The phenomenologist takes seriously the objects of consciousness without regard initially for their ontological status (i.e. whether or not they exist). Why is this method of phenomenological analysis important for Husserl? Because it examines those aspects of mental experience that **precede** and are typically **presupposed** by science.

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### Sartre's Argument in TE, Part I

Sartre begins his argument with the following statement: "It must be conceded to Kant that 'the I Think *must be able* to accompany all our representations'." [32]

As mentioned above, Kant's basic question has to do with the *a priori* conditions for the **possibility** of experience. In particular, Kant asks **how** objects of consciousness are **constituted**, brought about, **made possible**.

An *a priori* condition **necessary** for the possibility of **empirical** consciousness is referred to by Kant as "transcendental consciousness". But, as Sartre is quick to point out, this stops short of making claims about the **reality** of the transcendental consciousness—the transcendental "I" or ego. In other words, necessary **conditions for the possibility** of an

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<sup>1</sup> This summary follows closely Sartre's text and draws in elements from Paul Spade's discussion in "Notes on Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*"[NSTE], an appendix to his lecture notes on Sartre's *B&N*.

object or event are not the same as the **existence** of an object or event. This amounts to a distinction between **validity** and **fact**. [33]<sup>2</sup>

Now Sartre extends Kant's analysis and questioning in the following way: Given that the "I think" must be **able** to accompany any consciousness ("representation", for Kant), do we find **in fact** that it does? For example, does the "I" **precede** and **make possible** our thoughts or does it **"follow from"** them? [34] Given that the "I think" must be **able** to accompany any thought or mental representation, do we **find**, phenomenologically, that the "I" **produces** the representation as a **unity**, or is it that the unity **already exists** in such a way so that the "I" is **able** to accompany it? In other words, Sartre asks, does the unity depend on the "I", or does the "I" depend on the unity?<sup>3</sup>

Sartre's answer is that *the unity is determined by the object of consciousness*. [38] The acts of consciousness do not need to be spun together on the subject end by a transcendental ego. They are already unified or held together at the object end. The "I" is both **superfluous** and **transcendent** (outside consciousness). Consciousness is unified and individualized without the help of a TE. (39f)

At this point, the argument is that the TE is **not necessary** to explain consciousness and human experience. He goes on to argue that the TE is not only unnecessary, it is **impossible**. [NSTE 33]

Sartre then states a fundamental principle: **Consciousness is consciousness of itself**. Thus, it is "absolute". He also adds some crucial distinctions at this point — **positional** vs **non-positional**, and **reflective** vs **non-reflective**, consciousness. [40f]

- **positional consciousness**: consciousness of an object **posited** or placed before consciousness.
- **non-positional consciousness**: consciousness of consciousness **not posited** as an object.

For Sartre, every act of consciousness involves both a **positional** consciousness of an **object** (intentionality) and a **non-positional** consciousness of **itself** (what he refers to as "inwardness").

The transcendental I is the death of consciousness. Indeed, the existence of consciousness is an absolute because consciousness is consciousness of itself.... And consciousness is aware of itself *in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object*. All is therefore clear and lucid in consciousness: the object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence.

We should add that this consciousness of consciousness — except in the case of reflective consciousness which we shall dwell on later — is not *positional*, which is to say that consciousness is not for itself its own object. Its object is by nature outside of it, and that is why consciousness *posits* and *grasps* the object in the same act. Con-

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<sup>2</sup> Note, as Spade points out in his "Notes on Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*" [NSTE], this does not mean validity in the **logical** sense. Rather, it's equivalent to "**legitimacy**". [NSTE 31] Note also that Sartre describes Kant's transcendental ego, of which we are unaware, "as an unconscious". [33] It is supposed to be **in** consciousness and active, but we have no consciousness **of** it, according to Kant. Sartre thinks the very idea of the unconscious, which he likens to "an unconscious consciousness", is contradictory. [NSTE 31f]

<sup>3</sup> Note that **unity** and **individuality** are not the same. **Unity** refers to the acts of consciousness being held together into one point of view or narrative. What one sees from that point of view may be incoherent and crazy, but there is at least a unified point of view **of** the incoherent object or series of events. **Individuality** refers to the fact that the unified and continuous consciousness is **distinct and separate** from other minds in which consciousness occurs. Sartre also believes that acts of consciousness are held together **over time** much as fibers are strung together in space by a spinning wheel—"overlapping and intertwining". This is referred to as "unity within duration...perpetual syntheses of past consciousnesses and present consciousness". [NSTE 32f; 38f]

consciousness knows itself only as absolute inwardness. We shall call such a consciousness: consciousness in the first degree, or *unreflected* consciousness. [40f]

Consider the example of being absorbed in watching a movie. I am both (positionally) **conscious of the movie and what's taking place in it**, and I'm, at some level, (non-positionally) **conscious of myself**, according to Sartre. Note that I am not generally aware of myself as a separate object of consciousness. The only thing that is "there for me" is the movie.

Note also (and this is a crucial point) that the act in virtue of which I'm conscious of the movie and the act in virtue of which I'm conscious of myself are **not two separate acts of consciousness**.

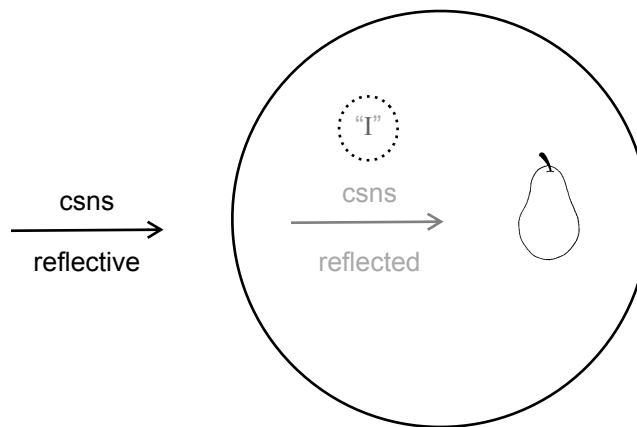
They are two **levels of the same act**:

- positional consciousness of the movie
- non-positional consciousness of oneself<sup>4</sup>

Now for the other two **types** of consciousness:

- **unreflected** consciousness: the **primary** ("first order") act of consciousness.
- **reflected** consciousness: a consciousness which is the **object** of another distinct act of (non-reflected) consciousness. The "I" arises or "lights up" in the reflected consciousness.

Note that the reflected and the unreflected acts of consciousness are, **unlike** positional and non-positional, **two different acts** of consciousness. Make sure you keep this straight. We can see how this works in the following diagram:



Notice that in positing the prior **act** of seeing-the-pear, the "I" attributed to the act "lights up" from the non-positional level. It is, in this sense, "recovered" from its latency.

[E]ach time we apprehend our thought, whether by an immediate intuition or by an intuition based on memory, we apprehend an *I* which is the *I* of the apprehended thought,

<sup>4</sup> Before going further, a word of caution regarding the "I" and the "me". At the beginning of TE, Sartre draws a distinction between the "I" = TE and the "me" which is the psychological entity we often think of as the self or personality with all its desires, interests, moods, etc. Unfortunately, he doesn't always maintain the distinction. After having argued that the TE is superfluous and impossible, he more or less drops the distinction altogether and starts referring to consciousness's consciousness of itself as giving rise to the "I". [NSTE 33f]

Notice that the apprehended thought is "transcendent", i.e. outside the **act** of consciousness which takes a prior act of consciousness as an object. Sartre claims there is no additional / explicit at the **positional** level of the **unreflected** consciousness, i.e. the act which takes the **act of seeing-the-pear** as its object. However, that first-order, unreflected act of consciousness does contain a **non-positional** consciousness of itself. But this does not give rise to the "I" as an explicit object of consciousness. [44] **This is a very subtle and extremely important aspect of Sartre's account.** Study the diagram carefully and make sure you understand what's going on in both acts and at both levels.

Sartre also claims that **recollecting** a prior experience and **recognizing** it as mine provides evidence for Kant's "I think".

If...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.... In other words, I can always perform any recollection whatsoever in the personal mode [**reflective** cns], and at once the / appears. **Such is the factual guarantee of the Kantian claim concerning validity.** Thus it seems that there is not one of my consciousnesses which I do not apprehend as provided with an / . [43f, emphasis added.]

There are crucial claims and distinctions here that need careful scrutiny. Sartre is, after all, trying to establish the plausibility of non-positional self-consciousness in relation to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. So there's a lot at stake.

Notice that in the example above of recalling the landscape seen from the train, Sartre makes reference to a **memory** of a "landscape **as such**". What does the "as such" add to his assertion? Is the intentional object of this recollection **a landscape viewed from a train**? Or is it just **a landscape**, which happens to have been viewed from a train? Let's say it's the latter. In that case, being very precise now, we are distinguishing **a memory of a positional consciousness of a landscape** — a **memory of a consciousness of a landscape** — as our intentional object. But then we also have the possibility of a first-order **unreflected** (?) consciousness directed toward a memory of a landscape **as such**. What is Sartre describing? Which is it? Is it consciousness remembering an object (a visual landscape)? Is the memory of the visual image the intentional object? That seems to me the most accurate way of describing it.

So what's the point? From phenomenological analysis, Sartre claims, I learn that when I recall an experience in an act of remembering, I (typically) not only recall the scene but the fact that I experienced it — that the perception was **mine**. [46] (This is Kant's point about the "I think".) But this only occurs in an act of **reflective** consciousness, where the **reflected** consciousness is accompanied by an "I", but the **reflecting** consciousness is not.

We are then justified in asking ourselves if the / which thinks is common to the two superimposed consciousnesses [reflective and reflected], or if it is not rather the / of the reflected consciousness. [45]

Sartre acknowledges that, as good phenomenologists, we can only resolve these issues by reference to the phenomena, not by inference and argument. So he proposes an experiment "which may seem impossible", namely reconstituting the "complete moment" in which a recent and particular unreflected consciousness of reading a novel appeared, that is, to revisit the first-order unreflected consciousness of reading the novel **without positing it as an object of reflection**. This would amount to "a non-reflective apprehension of one consciousness by another consciousness". [46f]

On the contrary, I must direct my attention to the revived objects, but without losing sight of the unreflected consciousness, by joining in a sort of conspiracy with it and by drawing up an inventory of its content in a non-positional manner. [46]

The goal is to determine if there is consciousness of the object without an I "inhabiting this consciousness". Sartre proclaims there is no doubt about the result!

[W]hile I was reading, there was consciousness *of* the book, *of* the heroes of the novel, but the *I* was not inhabiting this consciousness. It was only consciousness of the object and non-positional consciousness of itself. [46f]

Thus, he declares, “there was no *I* in the unreflected consciousness”. [47]

Next, Sartre considers the objection that this “non-reflective apprehension of one consciousness by another consciousness” can occur “only by memory”.

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