

Discussion 3: Sartre, Transcendence of the Ego, Part II

I'll start by summarizing Sartre's argument in "Part II: The Constitution of the Ego". [60ff]

1. Sartre begins section d, "The Constitution of the Ego as the Pole of Actions, States, and Qualities" by saying, "We have been learning to distinguish 'the psychic' from consciousness. The psychic is the transcendent object of reflective consciousness. It is also the object of the science called 'psychology'." [71] In other words, he is laying out a phenomenological/existential basis for the study of the mind (psyche) that accounts, among other things, for our occasional lack of self-knowledge, albeit **without appeal to the unconscious**. (Remember, Sartre claims the very **idea** of the unconscious is a contradiction and the unconscious an impossibility!) With regard to self-knowledge he says, "The metaphysical hypothesis according to which my ego would not be composed of elements having existed in reality (ten years ago or a second ago), but would only be constituted of false memories, is not excluded." [76] In other words, it's possible in principle for us to be totally misled about the real nature of our egos. This is an interesting notion. Unfortunately, the TE provides only a brief sketch of that fundamental Sartrean concept, "bad faith" (self-deception), developed in his subsequent writings. So it's difficult to say much more about it at this stage.

2. Relevant to our immediate concerns is the extended phenomenological description of the ego "as it reveals itself in intuition". [77] What Sartre finds is that each state (hatred, love, etc.) **appears** to originate from the ego. (This characterization occurs from 77-80.) But, in fact as Sartre points out (at the bottom of 80 and continuing at the top of 81), this is just the **opposite** of what really happens. "The Ego is *not* the producer and generator of my acts of consciousness (through the qualities and states); on the contrary, the Ego is *produced or constituted* by my reflecting on my momentary acts of consciousness." [Spade, 110] And furthermore, Sartre says, "really to know oneself" is inevitably to take toward oneself the point of view of others, that is to say, a point of view which is necessarily false." [87]

Thus, the account given on 77ff is a description of how in reflection we both objectify and systematically **deceive** ourselves into thinking there is an ego which gives rise to our states and our momentary feelings.

But then how, you might ask, can Sartre claim to know the truth about the ego if reflection is misleading? Unfortunately, there's not much in TE that would help us resolve this dilemma. The key is the distinction between **pure reflection** and **impure reflection**.

We get into a problem reflecting on acts of consciousness if we go **beyond the given**, i.e. if we make inferences about what is given directly in intuition. In other words, there is a tendency for us to fall back into "the natural attitude". "Pure reflection", Sartre claims, "...keeps to the given without setting up claims for the future." [64] IN pure reflection, one makes no inferences. "One can even suppose a consciousness performing a *pure* reflective act which delivers consciousness to itself as a *non-personal* spontaneity." [91]

Thus, he claims, it's possible to reflect without exceeding the given and without invoking a personality or ego as the origin of our acts of consciousness, feelings, and states. Unfortunately, he does not describe clearly how to effect such reflection nor how to determine whether one has accomplished it or not. And yet it is central to the success of his phenomenological project! Perhaps he thinks we can engage in reflection, see the ego **as** an agent, but not buy into it, so to speak. That is, we might be expected to bracket all claims with regard to the ego, states, etc. Another possibility is that pure reflection is the reconstitution of the original act of consciousness without the "extra baggage" (states, ego, etc.) In other words, it would be equivalent to viewing the cube without anticipating the other sides that are not visible. (This would be equivalent to Spade's characterization of perception, but this time without the "promises".)

But, as I've said, there's not much in TE that would clarify this matter for us.

3. Now, why would anyone make the shift from the natural to the philosophical attitude? And if the epoché and reflection **can mislead** us so frequently, why would anyone engage in such acts?

Sartre explains the shift from the natural attitude to the philosophical attitude and the epoché as the result of an **anxiety**. [102f] This anxiety is a common occurrence in life. One is pushed by experience to the limits of the common sense attitude and, as a result, looks for another explanation. This marks the emergence of the philosophical attitude in one's life.

If it is a common occurrence, why aren't we all philosophers? Why do we fall back into the natural attitude? According to Sartre, our lapse back into "common sense" is the result of "bad faith" or self-deception -- a fear in the face of the radical spontaneity (freedom) of consciousness. Even philosophers fall back into bad faith by sliding from wonder and the confrontation with anxiety back into a system-building and theorizing which masks the spontaneity of consciousness.

The confrontation with Being, human "being-in-the-world", and authenticity are issues we'll continue to work with as we confront Heideggerian thinking.

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