

## Discussion 4: Sartre, Transcendence of the Ego (Final Remarks)

---

### The Ego is a Transcendent Unity of Transcendent Unities

I want to begin with some observations and questions which will complete our reading of Sartre.<sup>1</sup>

According to Sartre's theory of consciousness, the **ego** is a synthetic unity of psychic objects—**actions**, **states**, and **dispositions** (qualities). It is nothing more than "a transcendent unity of transcendent unities". What does this mean?

#### States

As in all good phenomenological analyses, Sartre begins with an example, in this case, a description of my hatred for Peter. Suppose that the very sight of Peter produces an intense aversion, repulsion, disgust. I want to avoid all contact with him. Feeling as I do I say, "I hate Peter".

This feeling of disgust is grasped in reflection. About the character of this feeling there can be no doubt. But when I say that I hate him, I am going beyond the immediate consciousness of disgust. I refer, instead to a somewhat permanent **state** that exists **prior** to my feeling and will continue to exist **after** the feeling is gone.

Thus, there is a difference between its **being** and its **appearing**. My hatred is a **constituted** synthetic unity; a **transcendent object** which is manifest through my individual conscious experience (*Erlebnis*). My hatred appears **through** the feelings of repulsion, aversion, and disgust. Just as a house in its entirety is perceived through each act of seeing it from a particular point of view, so too is my hatred of Peter perceived in its entirety through each feeling of disgust, repulsion, etc. experienced from a perspective (*Abschattung*).

It is true of states generally that they are **transcendent** both

1. in the sense of **overflowing** what is directly given to consciousness, and
2. in being beyond or **outside** consciousness in the same sense that any objects (house, cube, tree, etc.) are outside consciousness.

Each state shows up through partial views and incomplete aspects, perspectively. But it is still "the whole thing" (intentional object) that is presented through its (partial) aspects.

Just as a material object in its entirety must be distinguished from the aspects or views presented to consciousness, so too my hatred for Peter must be distinguished from the feelings through which its existence is made known to me. To the naive viewer, it seems as if my disgust emanates **from** my hatred of Peter. Sartre refers to this as "magical...an irrational synthesis of spontaneity and passivity". [68] It is an attempt to combine or confuse "being-in-itself" (roughly "matter") with "being-for-itself" (consciousness). Much of *Being and Nothingness* is an exploration of such confusions.

Two things follow from this analysis:

1. **States** are similar to perceptions in that they are always subject to doubt. Reflection is only certain about the **feelings**—the phenomena given to consciousness. It is, however, open to doubt about the transcendent **unities** (such as hatred or love) that are constituted out of such phenomena. Thus, we can understand and explain our mistakes about states without positing an unconscious.
2. When I talk to Denise about my hatred of Peter, we are both talking about the same thing, i.e. **a constituted unity distinct from the phenomena through which it is**

---

<sup>1</sup> The following analysis draws from an excellent article by Aron Gurwitsch, "A Non-Egological Conception of Consciousness", *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966.

**given to consciousness.** Uncertainty and knowledge concerning my hatred of Peter are, in principle, no greater for her than for me. **Our states are public and available to others.** It is only one's individual **acts of consciousness** that are impenetrable, hidden, and private. Thus, if the ego and its states were a part of the structure of consciousness, they would be hidden from others just as consciousness is and we would understand one another only by means of analogy, which is not real understanding. (This is Sartre's solution to the problem of solipsism.)

### **Actions**

Actions are also transcendent, noematic entities, both temporal and concrete. According to Sartre, they are not simple isolated acts, but always complex and temporally extended "projects", e.g. driving to Boston, writing a story, going for a walk, etc.

### **Qualities**

Qualities are **dispositions**—potentialities of action that fall into various types associated with habits—virtues, vices, character traits, etc. They are intermediate between states and actions. They are, according to Sartre, methodologically "optional", i.e. they are not necessary for explaining behavior. (70f)

### **Conclusion**

My ego is a **synthetic unity of all my states and actions**, i.e. it is a transcendent unity of transcendent unities. The ego is to psychic objects what the world is to material objects. I grasp my states through reflection on conscious acts. The naive observer takes the act as issuing from a state which itself issues from the ego. The ego is seen as a "magical" source or origin. However, the spontaneity of actions "belongs to" the **consciousness**, not to the ego. The states are **constituted**—bound together **as** an ego or unity in **reflection**. (Exactly how this occurs needs further description.)

### **Critique**

Sartre's analysis and theory of consciousness depend on data given in reflection. Does this undermine his theory of consciousness? (See TE 45f and Spade 112.)

Timothy Quigley  
Revised 4 Apr 14

Timothy Quigley  
Revised 30 Mar 14