

Consciousness without an Ego? Sartre's Challenge to Husserlian Phenomenology

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Abstract

This paper presents a rigorous comparative and critical analysis of the egological structures within the phenomenological frameworks of Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. It systematically evaluates Husserl's formulation of the "Pure Ego" as an absolute transcendental necessity isolated via the method of the *epoché*, and contrasts it directly with Sartre's radical non-egological elimination of the internal subject, which repositions the ego as a "Transcendent Ego" existing entirely in the world. This paper also examines the transition from Husserl's transcendental egology to Sartre's radical defense of a purified, non-egological consciousness. By analyzing the arguments of Husserl and Sartre alongside key commentators, this study discerns the core philosophical disputes regarding the unity, temporal continuity, and freedom of the human subject. The paper argues that while Husserl deemed the pure ego necessary to secure a rigorous foundation for transcendental science, Sartre demonstrated that the temporal, transversal structure of consciousness is capable of unifying and individuating itself from within. When integrated with the facticity of the lived body and the teleological trajectory of the fundamental project, Sartre's non-egological model accounts for personal identity without relying on a substantial spiritual substrate.

Keywords: Pure Ego, Transcendental Ego, Transcendent Ego, Intentionality, Non-Egological Consciousness, Phenomenology

Introduction

The conception of Husserl's pure ego is deemed by Sartre as the transcendental ego. Whenever Sartre uses the term "transcendental ego," he refers to the pure ego of Husserl. However, for his own theory of ego, Sartre employs the term "transcendent ego." The main theme of this paper is to present critically the conception of ego given by both philosophers respectively. This paper is divided into four sections: 1) Husserl's conception of pure ego, 2) Sartre's critique of Husserl's conception, 3) Sartre's

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conception of ego, and 4) Critique of Sartre's conception.

1. Husserl's Concept of Pure Ego

The conception of pure ego varies across Husserl's writings, but this paper focuses on the conception described in *Ideas* (1913). Both Sartre and Husserl agree that consciousness is always consciousness of something—the concept of intentionality. When someone thinks, desires, wishes, or acts, it is always about something, always intended for something. In assertions like "I am thinking about this," the "I" exemplifies the pure ego, as the subjectivity of consciousness about anything is nothing but the "I."

The development of Husserl's phenomenological egology is marked by a profound historical shift. In the first edition of the *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901), Husserl explicitly rejected the concept of a "pure ego" distinct from the empirical ego, describing the mind as an interconnected unity of experiences rather than a system emanating from a central pole. However, by the publication of *Ideas*, Husserl had reversed his stance, concluding that the phenomenological reduction leaves a residue of "transcendental consciousness" which is inherently polarized. In this mature phase, every intentional act is characterized as a "ray" directed toward an object while simultaneously issuing from a central "source of radiance"—the pure or transcendental ego. This ego is a "non-constituted transcendence in immanence," remaining absolutely self-identical across the shifting stream of conscious experiences.

What happens when Husserlian *epoché* or bracketing is applied to the spatio-temporal existing ego? The worldly ego disappears. According to Husserl, two correlates remain: the intentions of the essence—the "Eidos" of objects—and the pure ego, which is the origin or reference point of all intentions. In this way, the pure ego is the phenomenological residuum of the *epoché*. The other function of the pure ego is that it unites all our experiences. Suppose I have experiences at t1, t2, t3, t4 intervals of time; all these experiences must come back to me. The stream of experiences is unitary in totality, and the reference point for this unitary stream is the pure ego. We cannot confine the pure ego to these two functions alone. In every act of intention, there is differentiation between hyle (material) and the noetic phase (noesis). Hyle is considered "blank" for sensory experiences, and when intention focuses on a certain object, hyle gets "meaning." Through the noetic phase, hyle acquires the quality of intentionality. The pure ego affects the noetic phase, but this is not Berkelian idealism—"the percipi does not contain the esse as a real constituent." As Husserl clarifies, "The tree escapes me and repulses me, and I can no more lose myself in the tree than it can dissolve itself in me. I'm beyond it; it's beyond me."

Thus, the pure ego has twofold functions: first, it provides a reference point to consciousness—"the pure ego as it lives, wakeful, in the passing thought is the center of reference"; second, it originates all consciousness and intentionality, making it the true I. Hence, Husserl called the pure ego a "transcendence and immanence." Scholars have noted that Husserl's egological approach is a continuous process of self-appropriating unfolding, referring to "modalities" of consciousness that unfold in a multiplicity of acts and subjects.

2. Sartre's Critique of Husserl's Conception of Ego

According to Sartre, phenomenology should be truly phenomenological. Husserl's application of his method has distinguished the transcendental ego as subject and the

meant object as object. If we accept the pure ego, the study of objects becomes secondary, and phenomenology would forcibly investigate the constituting function of the pure ego. Sartre's intervention in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936–1937) was defined by a critical paradox: he utilized Husserl's own early methodology to attack Husserl's later transcendental turn. Sartre argued that the postulation of a transcendental ego was not only descriptively inaccurate but also structurally harmful. Introducing an ego-pole into the translucent field of consciousness "substantializes" it, sliding into the mind like an "opaque blade" and destroying the absolute transparency that defines conscious life.

According to Sartre, it is not the pure ego which is responsible for creating consciousness. Consciousness is like Spinoza's substance—it can be limited and differentiated only by itself. The "I" which exemplifies our consciousness is constituted by consciousness; it is simply the expression of consciousness, not its condition. Consciousness unifies itself through retention of past experiences, having not only consciousness of objects but also of itself as "pure inwardness." Thus, consciousness is primordial and needs no unifying I.

Sartre further claims that phenomenological description does not reveal any pure subject of experience. He distinguishes two modes of consciousness: unreflecting and reflecting. In unreflecting consciousness, there is no awareness of "I" but only awareness of objects. Sartre states, "There is no I on the unreflected level. When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I." This mode is "non-positional" and "non-thetic"—it does not posit itself towards an object. To establish a non-egological theory, Sartre formulated the distinction between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness. In pre-reflective experience, consciousness is characterized by absolute transparency and a lack of self-reference. This first-order experience consists of two simultaneous dimensions: (1) a positional consciousness of the external object, and (2) a non-positional, non-cognitive awareness of itself as experiencing. Because this non-positional self-awareness lacks any subject-object split, it is entirely impersonal and egoless.

Sartre's critique operates on the principle that intentionality must be radicalized—the ego is a worldly object constituted by intentional consciousness when such consciousness becomes reflexive. The research is directed towards understanding how a consciousness that does not have, *a priori*, any egological structure ends up constituting the ego as an "object." Sartre acknowledges that phenomenological description needs phenomena to be described—not only objects of consciousness but the unreflecting consciousness of those objects—yet still there is no "I." As Sartre describes, "I was absorbed just now in my reading... while I was reading, there was consciousness of the book, of the heroes of the novel, but the I was not inhabiting this consciousness." These descriptions resemble Husserl's noetic descriptions but include references to conscious acts, not to the subject of those acts.

The second mode—reflective consciousness—posits itself to its object. Whenever we use the word "I" in describing reflective experiences, this "I" (which Sartre later calls the "Me") is not Husserl's transcendental ego but a person in the world revealed by reflection. Sartre argues that the existence of the transcendental ego is inconsistent with the freedom of consciousness. He concludes that reflection serves the constitution of the Ego, rather than the observation of pure consciousness.

3. Sartre's Conception of Ego

Sartre's theory of the ego comes from the concept of consciousness. According to Sartre, the ego is constituted by consciousness and the world both. He describes the self or ego as "transcendent" in two senses. First, it is transcendent as opposed to Husserl's transcendental ego—it is part of the world, not beyond it. Second, it is not immanent as Husserl claims; it is not wholly "in" the phenomena but may have hidden aspects, a past, and a future. Phenomenological description does not reveal any transcendental ego but reveals conscious acts and reflected objects to which Sartre referred as "me." There is no need for a transcendental ego to explain phenomena or to unify experiences and constitute objects. Sartre agrees with Husserl only that present memory unites consciousness of now with past consciousness. What is needed is proper understanding of intentionality and synthesis, and there will be no need for a transcendental ego for unity of consciousness. As Sartre summarizes: "Consciousnesses are first [and thus primordial]; through these are constituted states; and then, through the latter, the ego is constituted."

The ego arises only when consciousness shifts its orientation from the world to its own past activities through a secondary, objectifying act of reflection. In reflection, a reflecting act takes a previous, reflected act as its intentional object. This reflective act synthesizes past experiences and projects them onto a newly constituted entity: the ego. Consequently, the ego is not the subject of consciousness but its object—a transcendent entity situated in the world.

Sartre characterized the transcendent ego as a synthetic, ideal totality of "states" (love, hatred), "actions" (writing, calculating), and "qualities" (irascibility, talent). Rather than being a substantial source that produces mental states, the ego is their retrospective result. In lived experience, the spontaneous act of consciousness is primary. The reflective mind subsequently groups these acts into a permanent disposition and finally projects these dispositions onto a central, transcendent horizon—"the ego." Sartre's conception represents a "non-egological" phenomenology, which does not deny the existence of ego but regards it as a constituted, worldly being—something transcendent concerning the domain of consciousness. The ego is "a transcendent pole of synthetic unity, like the object-pole of the unreflected attitude." Just because something is constituted by consciousness does not mean it is not real independent of our awareness of it.

4. Critique of Sartre's Conception of Ego

Having characteristics of intentionality, each spontaneous consciousness is consciousness only towards an object. The question arises: how does one consciousness connect with another? Sartre answers that this happens "by a play of 'transversal' intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses." One may ask where these retentions reside and how a spontaneous consciousness can retain past consciousness. Sartre would say it is because of memory, but then consciousness connects not only to objects but also to memory, which goes against the intentional nature of consciousness.

The other major problem arises when we consider Sartre's intentionality claim. Consciousness must be totally about its object, where each spontaneous consciousness is only about its particular object. We reach the same problem: unification of consciousness. It has been granted that in non-reflective consciousness there is no

consciousness of I, but one cannot say there is no I. Sartre claims we do not say "I have consciousness of this chair" but "there is consciousness of this chair." This assertion is similar to Descartes' *Cogito*—"I think." Sartre himself points out that there is "I" already pre-assumed in "I think." Saying "there is consciousness of..." is not pre-assumed with "I," but we are nonetheless pre-assuming "I" in claiming there is consciousness of the chair.

Critical Interrogations and Phenomenological Gaps

Despite the elegance of Sartre's non-egological framework, his critics have identified significant problems that challenge its validity. One of the most important criticisms comes from Aron Gurwitsch, who has questioned how Sartre explains the shift from pre-reflective to reflective consciousness. Gurwitsch made a simple but powerful point; As he asked if reflection is supposed to be a neutral, descriptive tool that simply reveals what is already there, then it cannot introduce anything new. But Sartre insists that the ego does not exist at the pre-reflective level and only comes into being through reflection. This creates a troubling paradox. If reflection actually creates something new—the ego—that did not exist before, then reflection is no longer a neutral method of description. Instead, it becomes a creative act that changes consciousness itself. The problem is clear: if the ego is genuinely absent from pre-reflective experience, then reflection must be creative; but if reflection is creative, it cannot reliably describe consciousness as it truly is. This tension remains unresolved in Sartre's account.

An even more damaging critique came from Izchak Miller, who challenged Sartre's claim that pre-reflective experience is entirely impersonal. Miller used Sartre's own method of looking back at past experiences against him. He asked us to consider a simple act like perceiving a cup of coffee. When we remember a just-elapsed pre-reflective act of looking at a cup, we realize that the experience is full of personal, perspectival features. The cup is experienced as impinging on our senses, as being within reach, as oriented toward us, and as anchoring a specific point of view. These features only make sense if there is a bodily, subjective anchor—that is, if there is already a sense of "self" present. Even at the pre-reflective level, there must be a non-attentive background awareness of one's own body, and thus, of oneself. If, as Sartre himself admitted, the body-subject is the "I" of experience, then Miller's argument proves that pre-reflective consciousness is already personal. This strikes at the very heart of Sartre's project. If the "I" is already present in pre-reflective experience, then the ego cannot be merely a product of reflection.

John Scanlon raised another important objection, drawing on what philosophers call the Aristotelian Principle of Change. His argument is simple: we experience ourselves as changing over time, and this experience logically presupposes that there is something identical that persists through the change. If consciousness is purely temporal and self-unifying, it remains unclear how we can experience ourselves as the same person across different moments unless there is some substantial ground of identity. Sartre's defense against this is that the stream of consciousness is self-temporalizing—it unifies itself from within. He argues that we do not need a substantial ego to explain the continuity of experience because the intentional structure of consciousness itself provides unity through its temporal horizons of retention and protention. However, Scanlon also pointed out that the reflecting act and the reflected act must share a single, identical "I" for memory claims to be true. Sartre responded

that the identity of the "I" in reflection is a conceptual assumption rather than something we directly experience. But this response may not fully satisfy the logical demands of personal identity over time.

Wilfred Desan and Alfred Schutz brought a different kind of criticism. They argued that practices such as bad faith, self-deception, and negation require a substantial ego to coordinate the deception. If consciousness is purely transparent and egoless, how can it deceive itself? Sartre's defense is that consciousness is not a substance but a movement of negation—what he calls "nothingness"—which is inherently free to deceive itself. The capacity for self-deception does not require a substantial ego but is rather a function of consciousness's structural ability to negate and transcend its own facticity. Peter Caws also raised a practical concern: if we reject the ego, we are left with "nobody to carry on the enquiry" or to act in situations. Sartre's response is that the lived, conscious body acts as the continuing subject of action, providing the necessary anchor for agency without requiring a transcendental ego. By replacing the immaterial ego with the lived body, Sartre secures unity while maintaining a non-substantial theory of consciousness.

Scholars have pointed out that Sartre's positions ultimately lead to the problem of consciousness unification. Moreover, Sartre's criticisms of Husserl can be turned back against him. Sartre's desire for individual freedom actually works against him in his response to the supposed hampering of consciousness caused by the pure ego. What is really at stake is a clear description of the self—specifically, the ego's relation to consciousness. The egological approach to subjectivity in Husserl's phenomenology is best understood as a continuous process of self-appropriating unfolding. This does not mean an undue multiplication of "I's," but rather points to the various "modalities" of a consciousness that unfolds in a multiplicity of acts and subjects. Sartre, when he concludes that the ego is a "product" of consciousness itself, projects himself and identifies with it as a way to escape his full spontaneity and freedom—the very things that cause anguish. In this context, it is argued that existential positions cannot be confirmed within the framework of transcendental phenomenology due to their "doxic character." The transcendental reduction, as Sartre describes it, is a pure reflective act that presents itself as a non-personal spontaneity.

Theoretical Implications and the Philosophy of Freedom

What does all this mean for human freedom? The answer is profound. By removing any pre-existing, substantial ego from the field of consciousness, Sartre directly connected consciousness to absolute freedom. To understand why, consider this: if the ego were a substantial inhabitant of consciousness, then all our choices, actions, and desires would flow from a fixed, established essence. We would be determined by our own internal character. But under Sartre's non-egological model, consciousness is not a substance at all. It is a pure, negating "nothingness" with no internal content of its own. Imagine a blank page that is not yet written upon—consciousness is like that, but even more radically empty. This means that our past actions and character traits do not determine our future choices. The subject remains perpetually free to transcend facticity, to negate established states, and to choose a new fundamental project. The elimination of the transcendental ego is therefore the foundational requirement for Sartre's famous dictum that "existence precedes essence."

Scholars have noted striking parallels between Sartre's non-egological consciousness and classical Indian philosophical systems. For instance, the Upanisadic characterization of consciousness (*Atman*) as "not this, not this" (*neti-neti*) resonates with Sartre's understanding of consciousness as a negating movement. Similarly, the Samkhya concept of pure subjectivity shares affinities with Sartre's vision of consciousness as a positive principle of freedom—a freedom that is realized precisely by negating its attachment to any objective, reified ego-character. In these traditions, as in Sartre's ontology, true freedom comes when we let go of the illusion of a fixed self.

Concluding Remarks

In this way, we can see that the transition from Husserl's transcendental egology to Sartre's refined, non-egological model is a crucial development in contemporary phenomenology, after having a comprehensive study of the primary literature. Husserl thought that in order to create a logical basis for transcendental science and to solve the Aristotelian problem of change—that is, how anything can change and yet remain the same—the pure ego was essential. However, Sartre showed that the temporal, transversal structure of consciousness is quite capable of individuating and uniting itself from within, independent of any external support. Sartre's approach effectively explains the continuation of personal identity without depending on a substantial spiritual substrate when his early non-egological theory is combined with his later concepts regarding the lived body and the fundamental project. The lived body provides the physical anchor for our existence, while the fundamental project—our basic life choice—gives direction and meaning to our actions. Together, these concepts explain how we remain the same person over time while remaining radically free. It offers a compelling vision of human freedom—a freedom that is possible only when the ego is exiled from the immediate, transparent field of consciousness. In the end, Sartre's great contribution is to show that we are not prisoners of our past or our character, but are always free to become something new.

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