



# Sartre's "The Transcendence of the Ego"

## Chapter 1 — The *I* and the *me*

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## Chapter 1 — The *I* and the *me*

### Section A - The theory of the formal presence of the *I*

"We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially *in* consciousness: it is outside, *in the world*. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another." Jean-Paul Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, page 31

→ Kant's proposed "transcendental consciousness" was only ever the conditions of the possibility of empirical consciousness, not an existent *something*. "The preoccupation of

Kant was never with the way in which empirical consciousness in *in fact* constituted." [33]

— Sartre thus strongly opposes any proposal of a transcendental I which is *in* consciousness. This making-substantial of the transcendental "I" is precisely what leads one to propose a pre-empirical unconscious as the transcendental consciousness. [→ Freud]

— An example of this might be Richard Boothby's attempt at a "Freudian phenomenology" in his *Freud as Philosopher* where the unconscious serves as the manifold which dynamically synthesizes consciousness from moment to moment. The insights of the Gestalt psychologists and Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty seem to impel in this direction.

→ The *I think* must be able to accompany every act of consciousness, but this by no means implies the existence of the transcendental I. Thus, Sartre formulates this question:

"Is the I that we encounter in our consciousness made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or is it the I which in fact unites the representations of each other?" [34]

→ Sartre's claims about phenomenology [35]:

- "Phenomenology is a scientific, not a Critical, study of consciousness"
- Its essential way of proceeding is by intuition. "Intuition, according to Husserl, puts us in the presence of *the thing*."
- "Phenomenology is a science of fact" and "the problems it poses are problems of fact."
- Phenomenology is "a descriptive science."
- "Problems concerning the relations of the I to consciousness are therefore existential problems." ← Not sure where he gets this claim, as the word "existential" has not been used to this point in the text.

"...transcendental consciousness...is a real consciousness accessible to each of us as soon as the "reduction" is performed."

[35]

"Like Husserl, we are persuaded that our psychic and psycho-physical *me* is a transcendental object which must fall before the epoche. But we raise the following question: is not this psychic and psycho-physical *me* enough? Need one double it with the a transcendental I, a structure of absolute consciousness?" [37]

→ Sartre claims that while Husserl initially determined that "the *me* is a synthetic and transcendent production of consciousness," he later "reverted" to "the classical position of a transcendental *I*." Sartre portrays this *I* as "behind each consciousness," "whose rays would light upon each phenomenon presenting itself in the field of attention." [37]

→ Sartre addresses what he sees as a common argument for the necessity of the transcendental *I*, namely, that transcendental consciousness requires something to provide its unity.

→ However, Sartre articulates a theory of consciousness in which consciousness is its own principle of unity. "Consciousness is defined by intentionality" → "By intentionality, consciousness transcends itself." → "[Consciousness] unifies itself by escaping from itself." Thus, "the unity of a thousand active consciousnesses... is 'the transcendent object'..." [38]

"... it is in the object that the unity of the consciousnesses is found."  
[38]

→ Is not a principle of unity within duration required though? Sartre says that phenomenology does not need recourse to the transcendental *I* to have this though. "It is consciousness which unifies itself, concretely, by a play of "transversal"" intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses. Thus consciousness refers perpetually to itself."

— Sartre resorts to some highly technical phenomenological terminology here to say that past "instances" of consciousness exist for consciousness as objects to which it can refer in order to unify itself across time.

— Sartre makes a comment which struck me as interesting "... the I can evidently be only an expression (rather than a condition) of this incommunicability and inwardness of consciousness." He's saying that the I emerges as an object for consciousness as a stand-in for each of consciousness' instances as radically individual. [Lacan's Object a?] [39-40]

→ Sartre's verdict: "The phenomenological conception of consciousness renders the unifying and individualizing role of the I totally useless. *It is consciousness, on the contrary, which makes possible the unity and the personality of the I.*" [40]

→ Not content to simply argue that the postulate of the transcendental I is unnecessary, Sartre feels impelled to proceed further by claiming that "this superfluous I would be a hindrance." [40] The existence of this transcendental I would "tear consciousness from itself," cutting like a knife. "The transcendental I is the death of consciousness."

→ Sartre absolutely refuses to introduce any "opacity" (a word he returns to again and again) into consciousness. "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 conscious of that object." And in the next paragraph, "... consciousness is not for itself its own object."

→ Sartre opposes the transcendental "I" because of its power to introduce division and "opacity" into consciousness, thus making it no longer a "non-substantial absolute." "A pure consciousness is an absolute quite simply because it is consciousness of itself."

→ Sartre wishes to preserve consciousness in "all lightness, all translucence[,] and he identifies this precisely as the difference between the Husserlian *cogito* and the Cartesian *cogito* — Sartre's interpretation of Husserl advances a notion of cogito as non-substantial, spontaneous, and absolutely self-unifying (echoing perhaps Scholastic notions of God as One?) phenomenon in which "'to be' and 'to appear' are one." [42]

— Sartre seems mesmerized with this vision of consciousness as an Absolute. "... it is the absolute existent by virtue of non-existence." [42]

## **Section B - The *cogito* as reflective consciousness**

→ Distinction: "The Kantian *I think* is a condition of possibility" | "The *Cogito* of Descartes and of Husserl is an apprehension of fact" [43] [Condition of possibility vs Apprehension of fact]

→ "The factual necessity of the *Cogito*..." "In the *I Think* there is an *I* who thinks." — Sartre [43] He attempts to demonstrate this —

"": each 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, and which is given, in addition, as transcending this thought and all other possible thoughts." [43]

"Such is the *factual* guarantee of the Kantian claim *concerning validity*." [44]

→ A conclusion Sartre draws: "Thus it seems that there is not one of my consciousnesses which I do not apprehend as provided with an *I*." ← The original observations of Freud and the entire psychoanalytic method seems directed against just such a claim. However, I have a hunch that Sartre's inclusion of "this seems" indicates that he wishes to problematize this viewpoint as well.

→ Sartre continues: the cogito as "reflective operation." "Such a *Cogito* is performed by a consciousness *directed upon consciousness*, a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object."

"Let us agree: the certitude of the *Cogito* is absolute, for, as Husserl said, there is an indissoluble unity of the reflecting consciousness and the reflected consciousness."

→ But Sartre does admit the difficulty — "But the fact remains that we are in the presence of a synthesis of two consciousnesses, one of which *is* consciousness of the other." [44]

"Thus the consciousness which says *I think* is precisely not the consciousness which thinks." [45]

→ Why? Reflecting consciousness is consciousness of itself — Sartre: "non-positional consciousness" Becoming positional: "by directing itself upon the reflected

consciousness"

"All reflecting consciousness is, indeed, in itself unreflected, a new act of the third degree is necessary in order to posit it. Moreover, there is no infinite regress here, since a consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object." [45]

→ Sartre proceeds by raising a preliminary objection — "is it not precisely the reflective act which gives birth to the *me* in the reflected consciousness?" In other words, is the passage from reflective to reflected consciousness the introduction of the *I think*?

→ His rescue attempt is, here, pitiable —

- "every unreflected consciousness, being a non-thetic consciousness of itself, leaves a non-thetic memory that one can consult. [46] In other words, every act of unreflected (reflective) consciousness leaves a mark which contains a trace of its non-positionality.
- From this Sartre contends that it *must* be possible (through "a sort of conspiracy with [unreflected consciousness]") to "[draw] up an inventory of its content in a non-positional manner." "I must direct my attention to the revived objects, but *without losing sight of the unreflected consciousness...*" [46]

→ Sartre concludes with the observation that "there was no *I* in the unreflected consciousness." Later, "all the non-reflective memories of unreflected consciousness show me a consciousness *without a me...*" "we must therefore conclude: there is no *I* on the unreflected level." [48]

→ This unreflected consciousness simply is immediate im

mersion in the world of objects. There is no *I*, simply consciousness of reading or consciousness of the taxi-to-be-hailed. [49] "I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself. There is no place for *me* on this level."

*Don't miss this* → "In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects; **it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousness...**" ← Lacan!!!

→ Sartre lodges a reproach against Husserl — We cannot move from the *I* to the *think* as though they are on the same level (as Descartes does). The *I* in the *I Think* may affirm itself as transcendent, Sartre concedes, but immediately notes that this is precisely the proof that it is not the same transcendental consciousness.

- Sartre thinks that the *I* is simply too opaque. It requires further investigation and enunciation once apprehended, thus testifying to a lack of unity and simplicity, unlike the purity and punctuality of consciousness being aware of itself as consciousness. [50-51] "... like a pebble at the bottom of the water. For this very reason the *I* is deceptive from the start, since we know that nothing but consciousness can be the source of consciousness."
  - Sartre seems to be arguing from the principle that consciousness is consciousness of itself as consciousness, and thus consciousness is perfectly transparent to itself. The *I*'s lack of transparency thus means that the *I* cannot have its origin from consciousness. The absolute transparency of consciousness seems to be a crucial cornerstone of Sartre's thought and argumentation.
- Sartre in passing notes "the problem of the three I's," essentially, the "insoluble" problem of how an *I* of unreflective consciousness would relate to the *I* of reflected consciousness, as well as the additional complication of Fink's "I of the transcendental consciousness" which is the standpoint of consciousness having performed the *epoche*.

Sartre concludes his analysis with these points: [52-53]

1. The *I* is an existent.
2. The *I* proffers itself to an intuition of a special kind which apprehends it, always inadequately, behind the reflected consciousness.
3. The *I* never appears except on the occasion of a reflective act.
4. The transcendent *I* must fall before the phenomenological reduction.
  - a. Contrast: "I have consciousness of this chair" vs. "There is consciousness of this chair."

## **Section C - The theory of the material presence of the *me***

→ Contrast: Kant and Husserl "the *I* is a formal structure of consciousness." [54] Sartre says:

"We have tried to show that an *I* is never purely formal, that is is always, even when conceived abstractly, an infinite contraction of the material *me*." [54]

→ Sartre devotes the next few pages to addressing what he calls the "self-love moralists." By this term he seems to denote psychoanalysts who take consciousness to be founded by a "primary narcissism." Sartre absolutely can't accept a theory of consciousness built on a primary narcissism because he is deeply committed to consciousness as transcending itself *towards* objects, that is, that consciousness' fundamental orientation is outwards towards the world, not a circular movement of constant return to the me.

- He first references La Rouchefoucauld, who Sartre claims spoke of the unconscious without naming it as such, and identifies his primary concern with R as this notion of a constantly lurking self-love which appears under diverse forms. One could reference Nietzsche here as well, although Sartre does not, in his rejection of any truly self-less acts, positing the primacy of selfishness. For Nietzsche, even the formation of consciousness is through a constant searching return to itself in either boundless affirmation or relentless negation.
- Sartre identifies what he takes to be the "frequent error" of psychologists: "confusing the essential structure of reflective acts with the essential structure of unreflected acts." He posits two always possible forms of consciousness

→ Sartre operates with the common conception of desire as a force acting on me from without, such as when Aristotle says "the desirable is that which moves the desiring." In his example, Sartre asserts that going to Peter's assistance is simply the consciousness of Peter-having-to-be-helped. [56]

- Sartre contends that, for instance, a Nietzschean reading of helping Peter as me attempting to distinguish an unpleasant feeling in myself requires a reflective moment of assessing a particular situation as disagreeable and thus requiring to be an object of repression. He thus reads the "self-love theorists" as supposing that "the reflected is first, original, and concealed in the unconscious."

- We could probably frame Sartre's claim this way — any action which rests on an evaluative judgment cannot be primary because it must be preceded by consciousness of the situation *as such* prior to any judgment whatsoever. The data must precede the interpretation, and the interpretation must follow the data in a second *reflective* act.
  - "Even if the unconscious exists, who could be led to believe that it contains spontaneities of a reflected sort? Is not the definition of the reflected that it be posited by a consciousness?" [57]

"We arrive then at the following conclusion: unreflected consciousness must be considered autonomous. It is a totality which needs no completing at all, and we must acknowledge with no qualifications that the character of unreflected desire is to transcend itself by apprehending on the subject the quality of desirability."

— Operative assumptions in this quote...

1. I feel there are a host of assumptions in the word "autonomous." Does this mean it lacks dependencies? Is it not dependent for its structure and operation on physiology?
2. We still have not established that consciousness is a totality. Why would it be? Everything in nature is incomplete, lacking, evolving, changing... What totalities have we ever witnessed in this world? I fail to see the need for consciousness to be a totality instead of the result of multiple systems interacting with one another. Why can it not be composite?
3. We have not established that "unreflected desire is to transcend itself by apprehending the subject of the quality of desirability" — we have not established a rigorous account of desire's origin or its function. We have not examined what causes something to be desirable, or what inflames our desire. We have simply taken the folk psychological account which everyone believes about desire, and have baptized it with the language of phenomenology. There is still so much work to do to establish this account of desire.

"It is not my fault if my reflective life poisons "by its very essence" my spontaneous life. Before being "poisoned" my desires were pure. It is the point of view that I have taken toward them which has poisoned them." [59]

→ Sartre thus takes thinkers like La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche, and Freud to be describing the life of our *emotions*, not of consciousness. He takes emotions to be our second-order reflective evaluation of spontaneous conscious acts. [59]

"The *me* must not be sought *in* the state of unreflected consciousness, nor *behind* them. The *me* appears only with the reflective act, and as a noematic correlate of a reflective intention." [59-60]

Goal for the proceeding sections:

"We are going to try to show that this ego, of which *I* and *me* are but two aspects, constitutes the ideal and indirect (noematic) unity of the infinite series of our reflected consciousnesses."

→ "The *I* is the ego as the unity of actions. The *me* is the ego as the unity of states and quantities. The distinction that one makes between these **two aspects of one and the same reality** (emphasis mine) seems to us simply functional, not to say grammatical."  
— [60]

- The ego is the single underlying object of which the *I* and the *me* are simply two grammatical modes — one as the unity of our actions and the other as states.