DIRECTIONALITY AND FRAGMENTATION
IN THE TRANSCENDENTAL EGO

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In The Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre denies that there can be a transcendental ego in the Husserlian sense or in any sense resembling the Husserlian one. The ego, he says, is an object for, not a content in consciousness. Consequently, Sartre does not regard the ego as having the status of a pure, disengaged consciousness which would remain intact after all implicit, but questionable presuppositions, had been bracketed out by means of the phenomenological reduction. Rather, in Sartre's view the character and identity of the ego becomes uncertain and nebulous as a result of the reduction. This denial of the subjectively conscious transcendental ego then becomes one of the basic tenets of the worldview he develops in Being and Nothingness. I shall suggest, however, that such a denial puts the whole phenomenological movement in jeopardy by needlessly removing an essential element from its methodological foundation. The goal is to restore this element.

According to Husserl, (1) the transcendental ego consists ontologically of our immediate consciousness in its subjective purity; because this immediate consciousness remains unaffected by the phenomenological reduction, it is transcendental (Husserl, pp. 102-3). At the same time, (2) "One consciousness is bound up with another so as to constitute one consciousness, of which the correlate is one noema" (Husserl, p. 307). Husserl credits the "unity of the immanent time-consciousness" with this accomplishment of "[binding] consciousness with consciousness" (Husserl, p. 307). Because of this essential unity, pure consciousness has the structure of an ego, and not a mere succession of transcendental "consciousnesses." It is both transcendental and an ego—a transcendental ego.

Sartre considers it impossible that the same immanent consciousness as reduced can be both transcendental and an ego. He begins with Eugen Fink's thesis that the reflecting and the reflected-upon "I" can never be identical. The reflecting "I" is not immanently given in the act of reflection, but only the object of this reflection (the reflected "I," the "me") is given; and
this object, the "me," can never serve as subject-pole for a phenomenological reduction, for the obvious reason that, as reflected upon, it is an object. It stands outside the brackets of the reduction, just as does any scientific or historical claim. Essentially, then, says Sartre, if the transcendental ego cannot be immediately given to me in any of the particular moments of my consciousness, then it is nothing but a hypothetical construct which is both unknowable and unnecessary; but, on the other hand, if the ego could be given in some actual moment of consciousness, then it would no longer be the transcending unifier of all these moments of consciousness, but would be merely the content of one of them. Thus it would be no transcendental ego at all.

I shall maintain on the contrary that the transcendental ego can be simultaneously both a principle of unification and an immanently experienced concrete consciousness; that to reflect on this consciousness is merely to attend to the respect in which it is directly and immediately conscious of itself as an unfolding (.... "from" background noetic meaning contexts, "toward" ones yet to come....) which is part of the essence of phenomenological time. Any conscious experience, no matter how instantaneous or unitary, must in principle be experienced as more resembling a line segment than a point, in the sense that it shows this directional dimension. This directionality of the immediate experience, which is experienced as such when we focus on the subjective meaning of the experience (the noesis), gives the subject of the experience a more direct affinity with the immediately preceding and the immediately following experiences than it could ever have with a mere object of experience. Sartre can ignore this point only by failing to take adequate account of the impossibility in principle of there ever being experienced an exact present moment in the stream of consciousness. To experience an exact "now" in the temporal dimension would be analogous to experiencing a figure without a ground in the spacial dimension. Even the closest we could conceivably come to experiencing a "now" would reveal itself as already having part of its meaning inseparably bound up either with the immediately preceding moment, or the immediately following. And because of this inherently time-consuming character of even the simplest experience (which Sartre of course does not deny), it becomes possible for consciousness to reflect on an essential aspect of itself, without thereby reducing itself or this aspect of itself to an object external to its own reflection.

That our thinking here could be derived directly from Husserl would not seem completely far-fetched if we were to follow commentators like Ludwig Landgrebe and Gerd
Brand. But whether we do or not, it is clear that in order to contend with the Sartrean problem we must further clarify that property of the transcendental ego which allows it to become coincident with our concrete consciousness at the instant when a reduction is performed, and this property, we assert, is the felt experience of directionality in the immediate consciousness.

With regard to the danger of psychologism, we must also show that this subjectively-sensed meaning which immanently discloses the direction of consciousness in its unfolding is the residuum of a phenomenological and not a psychological reduction, which it is, precisely because the reduction produces a coincidence between human and transcendental consciousness in the particular instant when the reduction is accomplished. Furthermore, "I," the human being who performs the reduction, prereflectively already was essentially my transcendental ego.

The argument then hinges on the question: Must we equate "reflection" by definition with making oneself into an object, or is it possible for "me," as my ongoing process of relatively unified experience, to "reflect" on the immanent consciousness (which has and can subjectively experience itself as having this directional aspect) in some other way than by making it into an intentional object? If so, then to focus on a "moment" in the flow as inherently meaningful only in terms of other moments, is to disclose, in however limited a fashion, the Husserlian transcendental ego.

The importance of this problem has become increasingly obvious since the publication of The Transcendence of the Ego in 1937. If the impossibility of reflecting on the prereflective negates the possibility of a transcendental ego, then the philosopher performing the reduction can never be sure whether he has escaped the prejudices and limitations of his immediate perspective, as Merleau-Ponty points out. What seems to be an intuition of essence may be merely a "prejudice rooted in language," or possibly rooted in the prevalent theoretical concepts and research paradigms and values of our historical situation. Nor could we ever be sure an imaginative variation had indeed varied culturally-relative attitudes of which we still may be unaware. In short, the whole phenomenological enterprise would be jeopardized, for there could be no method of overcoming the fragmentation of consciousness.

Thus we must ask two interrelated questions, and answer them on Husserlian grounds, or at least on grounds that support the Husserlian view:
(I) Is there a transcendental ego, as distinguished from particular states of this ego's consciousness?

(II) If so, how does the ego escape from the prejudices of the particular perspectives that limit all of its particular moments (thus rendering possible a phenomenological reduction)? (Conversely, how can we know whether the "essences" we intuit in the reduction are indeed true essences and not prejudiced and distorting category structures arising from the limited nature of each perspectival state of consciousness within the flow of consciousness?)

In the Crisis and in some of the later manuscripts, Husserl did in fact express an uneasiness about the relationship between his concept of the pure, disengaged transcendental subjectivity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the corresponding concrete and human experiencing which necessarily sees and thinks from a situated point of view.

Who are "we," as subjects performing the meaning- and validity-accomplishment of universal constitution? Can "we" mean "we human beings," human beings in the natural-objective sense, i.e., as real entities in the world? But are these real entities not themselves "phenomena" and as such themselves object-poles and subject matter for inquiry back into the correlative intentionalities of which they are the poles, through whose function they have and have attained their ontic meaning?

If transcendental subjectivity ultimately disengages itself from the real, psychophysical entity that "I" am in my everyday being, then from an ontological perspective the question arises: Where can the consciousness we call "transcendental" reside? Does not consciousness-as-experienced become a mere phenomenon alongside others? And if so, then where is the "subjectivity" of transcendental subjectivity? Must it not derive from my own shadowy consciousness and thus remain pulled this way and that by my own prejudices, value-laden thematizations and limited category structures? Can the subject of the philosophical experience bracket himself?

To confront this problem, we must proceed from Husserl's earlier discussions of attention, especially in the Fifth Logical Investigation, and then analyse the process whereby the consciousness of the present moment succeeds in transcending the limitations of the immediate
perspective, thus becoming the purely transcendental subjectivity which sees this limited perspective as a phenomenon in its own right. We shall demonstrate that (1) for a particular state of consciousness to decide to divorce itself from its own limited perspective, in order to relate this perspective to other actual perspectives and to a whole horizon of other possible perspectives, is to become one's own transcendental ego. (2) To become one's own transcendental ego is to attend to a kind of consciousness which is already taking place within one, but on a prereflective level, which has the function of unifying one actual perspective with another, and finally with possible perspectives. This becomes most evident when the epoche is performed. Implicit interconnections which tie one intentional thread to another become visible when the epoche loosens those threads from their ordinarily constricted meanings. When consciousness attends to this preconscious network of interrelations of felt meanings, it becomes transcendentally unified by seeing the respect in which on a "preconscious" level it already is such a unity. (Here Sartre's discussion of the impossibility of "unconscious consciousness" will come into play.)

It is true that Husserl concludes that the transcendental ego, on the whole, is different from the human, psychophysical ego. But he does not elaborate enough at this juncture in his writing as to what the ontological status of such an ego would have to be in light of the problem as later posed by Sartre, and as to whether the two egos can ever coincide in consciousness. However, if we compare what he says here with elsewhere, we can see at least one possible answer to the ontological question. Four pages after the above-quoted passage, Husserl says,

... Each human being 'bears within himself a transcendental "I"' ... insofar as he is the self-objectification, as exhibited through phenomenological self-reflection, of the corresponding transcendental "I."15

The human person is therefore not to be considered ontologically prior to the transcendental ego. He merely is the self-objectification of this ego. "Self-objectification" does not seem to refer to the process in which I, as the person I happen to be, objectify the person I happen to be; but rather, I as a person somehow get constituted in the process wherein this transcendental ego objectifies its self, and I end up being this objectification. At each instant, my transcendental ego seems to have already existed in some rudimentary form before I became the person with the perspective from which
I now see—but to have existed prereflectively. By combining with the particular accidents of my life, it seems always previously to have produced a changing, idiosyncratic field of consciousness with the capacity to focus attention from any number of limited points of view, but floundering often aimlessly from one set of prejudices to another. My everyday consciousness, stuck in its own point of view, then becomes like a beam of light that shines forth but cannot illumine its own source.

That the transcendental ego somehow precedes or underlies the concrete human being is also suggested by Husserl's view that there is a different transcendental ego for every person. I have my transcendental ego and you have yours. This would be consistent with the supposition that the transcendental ego, which is achieved or would in principle be achieved in the performance of a complete epoche, is not some ideal state of consciousness which would be the same for everyone and which would do away with the individuality of the human being, but on the contrary is to be found already there in the existing consciousness of the human being, as the directed tendency of that person's consciousness toward its own amplification through explication, symbolization and the unpacking of meaning.

Why does Husserl choose to introduce this theme of self-objectification at this point, rather than merely citing imaginative variation and suspension of the naturalistic viewpoint as means toward the epoche? It appears that, like Sartre, he regards these procedures alone as inadequate to the solution of the dilemma. The function of the epoche is to describe phenomena as they present themselves. But phenomena present themselves as having meanings or essences, so that a description of a phenomenon will make references to the phenomenon's essence. Although imaginative variation can help us to decide what is or is not properly called an essence, imaginative variation has its practical limitations, which in terms of the problem we are considering are crucial. Natural philosophers of old could not imagine a physical event without a material substratum, whereas modern physicists go so far as to question the meaning of the word "material." One thinker may see a unity of meaning exhibited where another denies it, as in the case of Kurt Goldstein's "impairment of abstract attitude," which many psychologists cannot intuit as an essential organismic phenomenon, but instead see as a manifestation of several other essential categories working together. In general, we may indeed try to vary the imagined objects along the lines of "existing in this or that cultural milieu," or "in light of different theoretical presuppositions," but never know for sure whether we have forgotten to vary just those aspects of phenomena which our cultural and
theoretical attitudes do not easily dissociate, thus contaminating our seeing of the genuine essence or essences involved. Thus each person to some extent comes to an experience with conceptual or preconceptual categories which influence what essences he will see a phenomenon as exhibiting. His description should therefore include not only a description of the thing seen, but also of the system of categories that contributes to his perspective on the thing.

This is precisely the problem, however, for nothing would seem to be accomplished by a description of this category structure in order to describe it. For to describe a category structure itself would leave out of account precisely those aspects of the category structure which limited or rendered inaccurate the conceptual categorization of the original phenomenon whose description was attempted. Thus it would appear that to attempt a description of one's own category structure would be like attempting to stand on one's own shoulders. This is just one instance of the conflict between human and transcendental consciousness. If my present consciousness is to be seen as merely an element of a larger totality, who sees it as such? And in seeing it as such, would not that consciousness necessarily have to reduce my consciousness to an intentional object?

Husserl, as we shall see, was aware of this question long before Sartre and Merleau-Ponty asked it, yet he did not think that it necessitated any major revision of the basic fabric of his thought. He certainly did not abandon the transcendental ego, and with good reasons which the body of his work discloses. Without some transcendental function, the stream of consciousness would be like listening to an endless series of speeches, all equally elegant, all contradicting each other, and feeling swayed by each in its turn, with no appeal to any higher authority. Such a consciousness would more resemble the consciousness Straus attributes to an animal and to a person dreaming than it would the consciousness of a wakeful, thinking person capable of remembering past consciousnesses almost at will, and of creating a more comprehensive viewpoint which enables him to relate them to each other. Consciousness with no transcendentality would not be consciousness as it in fact presents itself.

So conscious was Husserl of the problem of relating human to transcendental experience, that he at first rejected the transcendental ego as an idealistic hypothesis. At that early stage in his development, Husserl did not rule out the possibility that self-consciousness might be non-intentional in some cases, but neither did he explore the possibility. But after making the transcendental function one of his main themes, he
began also to allow that the hyle or "stuff" of consciousness can be non-positionally conscious of itself without thereby necessarily making itself into an intentional object for some further consciousness. Transcendental subjectivity is a unity which we achieve by becoming aware of the unity already functioning (in the way described in the lectures on time consciousness) on a preconscious level.

At this point, Sartre's analysis of the absurdity of positing an "unconscious consciousness" becomes crucial. How can the transcendental subjectivity be something already on-going in consciousness, which the concrete consciousness of this moment needs only to attend to in order to achieve its own transcendentality? Would this not involve positing the previous existence of the transcendental element (before we reflect on it) as a kind of unconscious consciousness? To answer this question, we must recall Husserl's treatment of attention as a conscious act.

II

In the second chapter of the "Fifth Logical Investigation," Husserl says that the process of attention is always intentional. His remarks on this subject become especially important for any attempt to treat the transcendental ego as something that is always prereflectively conscious until I suddenly choose to attend to it. Obviously, there can be such phenomena as prereflective consciousness in the sense, for example, that I can know that I know a name, yet not be able to remember it at that moment. This means that there is a content in consciousness to which at present I am not attending. But since any consciousness upon which attention is not focused is in this sense a prereflective consciousness, and since Husserl says that attention is always an intentional act, it would seem to follow that any consciousness to which attention is directed is a reflected consciousness, and therefore that if there is any consciousness which is not an intentional act, it can be non-intentional only in the mode of a prereflective consciousness.

But this is the same as saying that any consciousness can be reflected upon only to the extent that it is either already intentional, or made into a mere intentional object by means of such reflection. Thus any consciousness which is not intentional is as such doomed to a permanently unreflected-upon status. Since Husserl says that all attention is intentional, however, then to become attentively aware of a consciousness which is
already there is to make this consciousness into the intentional object of this attentive awareness, which means that insofar as I am attentively aware of a non-intentional consciousness (such as the non-positional self-consciousness of the transcendental ego), the latter is no longer a content in consciousness at all, but becomes the object of consciousness. As Husserl himself articulates in his lectures on time consciousness, "What is caused to appear in the moment-actual [Momentan-Aktuellen] of the flux of consciousness is the past phase of the flux of consciousness in the series of retentional moments of this flux."22

The essential injustice of interpreting this statement as meaning that phenomenological reflection reduces the reflected-upon consciousness to an intentional object can be seen in Sartre's theory of emotion, which seems to follow from the assumption of strictly universal intentionality.

But fear is not originally consciousness of being afraid, no more than the perception of this book is consciousness of perceiving the book . . . . Emotional consciousness is, first of all, consciousness of the world . . . . The emotion is a certain manner of apprehending the world.23

But it is for this very reason that Husserl allows consciousness to be directly and non-intentionally conscious of itself in the sense of its pure flux-character as revealed simply in the experience of directionality and already-ongoingness. If we assume a doctrine of radical transcendence such as the one Sartre expresses in his analysis of emotions, then it would be difficult to understand why it is that I take up this particular motivational stance toward the world as opposed to so many other motivational positions I could have taken up, and which ultimately would have resulted in different emotions. The teleological or emotional (and therefore temporal) directedness constituting my basic motivations and influencing in this way my interpretation of reality (through perspectival limitation, "bad faith," etc.) cannot be so reduced to consciousness of some object. If the motivation is not originary, but is rather a second order property of a perception, then there would be no way to account for the fact that what we see is always already motivated by our designation of the important parameters to look for as we bring phenomena into focus (the important Kantian influence on Husserl's Ideas).

If it is true that we to some extent selectively attend to just those intentional objects to which it is convenient for us to attend (in our mundane consciousness), and ignore objects which it is convenient
to ignore, then the motivational stance out of which I implicitly decide to attend to this while ignoring that (a motivational stance therefore partly constitutive of my perspectival limitations and category structures) must be logically prior to the decision in question. This perspectival limitation has an important role in choosing which objects to make thematic. The motivational stance which influences the perspectival limitation in this way may well be intentional in a sense, but in another sense it cannot be. It is conscious on the level of "looking-for" rather than "looking-at." In the same way, it is possible for the human person to "become" his own already-functioning transcendental unity, without thereby making the subjectivity previously at work in that unification into an object. We must clarify what we mean by this "looking-for" kind of intentionality.

Consider the example of a man who is told to check through a stack of tickets for all the ones numbered "7": He may not really see the other numbers besides 7, but may only see in each case whether the number he glances at is or is not a seven. To a certain extent, we see only the aspects of phenomena we are interested in, and we come to an experience equipped with categories that reflect our interests. Categorial intentionality (as we shall call this broader type of intentionality) functions to facilitate experiencing, precisely by limiting it. If we had to approach the world without categorial intentions, we could never make enough "inferences": from "sense data" to organize our experience meaningfully. The distinction is not merely between being presentatively aware of a generality of meaning, and being presentatively aware of a more specific fulfillment of that meaning. Rather, the meaning-intention is a looking-for the fulfillment of a certain experienced meaning, whereas the presentative-intention which fulfills this meaning-intention is a looking-at the object that fulfills the meaning. The word "intend" in the two cases describes an entirely different functional relation to the object.

For Husserl, of course, the meaning-intention is itself a presentative intention having the pure species as its object. But, in principle this presentative meaning-intention itself presupposes some other, prior categorial intention or looking-for which would lead me to look at and to grasp the essence of the species in question. And When I look at this looking-for, I find that some other looking-for must have led me to be interested in making this apprehension as opposed to others I could have made instead. Every presentative intention (whether of an individual or of a species) is a figure which presupposes as its ground a categorial (more general and "looking-for") intention. This movement from categorial to presentative intentionality is one instance wherein the
moment-transcending quality of experiencing makes itself self-evident in reflection, without becoming an intention object in its own right.

The intentionality (if any) accompanying such a way of experiencing must be a very broadened kind, and certainly not the narrower mode of looking-at. And at the same time, it must be the hyletic phase to which Husserl points when he says,

Not every real phase of the concrete unity of an intentional experience has itself the basic character of intentionality, the property of being a "consciousness of something." This is the case, for instance, with all sensory data, which play so great a part in the perceptive intuition of things . . . . The content which presents the whiteness of the paper as it appears to us . . . is the bearer of an intentionality, but not itself a consciousness of something. The same holds of other data of experience of the so-called sensory feelings, for instance.

There must be a variety of instances in the experiencing process wherein I am able to be conscious of the on-going experiencing process subjectively, and not merely by reflecting on it in an objectifying sense, which would make it the object for some other state of my consciousness to inspect as if from a distance; otherwise it would never be possible to feel anything at all, but merely to be presentatively aware that I was feeling or had been feeling some way, which would be absurded if I did not in fact feel that way.

The question remains, can we apply these concepts to Sartre's argument against the transcendental ego? "Ego," for both Sartre and Husserl, implies the transcending unity across time of the many moment-actuals comprising the stream of consciousness. Sartre says that the transcendental "I" would have to be either the direct consciousness of this moment, or a transcending unity which "has" all of these particular feelings. If I am the former, then the transcendence across time cannot be explained; if the latter, then "I" would not myself be a consciousness, since all the states of consciousness would be ontologically distinguished from what "I" am.

However, it would seem that there is the possibility, in fact the necessity, that I am both. In the directional experience of the "looking-for," for example, I am this motivation to see, which at the same time is already felt on the one hand (thus it is a concrete consciousness), yet on the other hand also unifies all the other consciousnesses of the intentional complex by motivating
the order and pattern in which my circumspective gaze looks around in its looking-for and therefore also in its looking-at. One unitary source, from which this gaze ultimately takes its direction, at the same time that it is consciousness of a transcendent object, can also be directly conscious of itself (as having the character of a directional, on-going process). In the naturalistic viewpoint, when I live primarily in the looking-at which results from the process, this self-consciousness is non-theletic and prereflective. (It is also possible to look at myself in this objectifying way, but then no coincidence is guaranteed between the human and the transcendental "self.") But if this always-presupposed "looking-for" categorial intentionality should choose to involve itself in a phenomenological reduction, to just this extent I become aware of the hooks and arrows connecting my seemingly objective worldview with the prior interest-motivated pattern in the systematic direction of attention, that is, with my category structure or perspectival limitation. The perspectival limitation, which is now part of the directly felt subjectivity of the time during which this experience takes place, becomes conscious of itself. Then in the instant when this limited category structure attends to itself intentionally, it automatically changes: At least some of the prejudice which formerly limited it (and which it formerly was, being its own limitation through selective attention) is now in the process of dropping away. And precisely in this experiencing of the change in our perspective, we experience consciousness itself as having a direction, from something to something (and these somethings themselves are not at this moment experienced as isolated moments of consciousness, but as further-away segments of the same flow). We then see that its meaning cannot be described in terms of an immediate "now" which in reality is only an abstraction. The experience, rather, exhibits the unity of a flow from one perspective to another, and this flow—which is both unifying and directly experienceable—is the transcendental ego.

We do not therefore conclude that "I," in the instant that I become conscious of myself as my transcendental ego, am nothing more than the original teleological directedness of my category structure, nor would Husserl say this. We do say, however, that this is at least one example of what goes on in the "self-objectification of the transcendental ego," and that experienceable directionality in general allows a commensurability between human and transcendental subjectivity. The possibility of this commensurability in turn ensures the possibility of a phenomenological reduction.

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NOTES


3 Edmund Husserl, Ideas (London: Collier, 1962), p. 102, where he says, "It is from out these centres of experience (Erlebnisse) themselves that through the adoption of the new standpoint the new domain emerges . . . The phenomenological epoche renders 'pure' consciousness accessible to us."


5 Contrary to Sartre's statement (p. 88) that "The ego is a noematic rather than a noetic unity. A tree or a chair exist no differently."

6 Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego, p. 69.


As Thomas Kuhn suggests in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).


Knut Erik Tranoy, in "The Foundations of Cognitive Activity," *Inquiry*, 1976, pp. 131-50, points out that the values and priorities of the scientific and academic communities determine what kinds of research will be considered important, and therefore carried out. Thus the value-determined direction of thought indirectly limits its content.

Jacob Needleman, in *Being in the World* (New York: Harper, 1968), pp. 9-31, develops the idea that quasi-Kantian category structures can limit what we see by limiting the preconceptual categories in terms of which we thematize our perceptions, and that there can be such category structures which differ in individuals, and which change.


Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 157, where he refers to a "fundamentally different [ego] for each separate stream of consciousness."


