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## Sartre's Project of Understanding Pure Consciousness: A Reading on His Critique of Husserl's Ego<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Jean-Paul Sartre is most famous for his major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) which presents his journey from phenomenological ontology to existentialism. Some of the focal concepts of this work are consciousness, intentionality, and being human. Sartre's interest in these begins years earlier when he studies the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Sartre realizes that phenomenology enables us to think of consciousness in a non-substantial and non-reified manner. However, he detects a significant reification of consciousness even in Husserl's ideas: Transcendental I or the pure Ego. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), his first philosophical essay, Sartre claims that the Ego is transcendent, like an object in the world, rather than consciousness itself. In other words, it fails to escape epoché, which parenthesizes all the presuppositions out of the legitimate field of phenomenological investigation. In addition, he finds various issues regarding reflection, which is the condition of self-consciousness. He concludes that reflection serves the constitution of the Ego, rather than the observation of pure consciousness. This work aims to examine why Sartre takes a critical distance from the Ego and the role this criticism plays in phenomenology to become more consistent with itself and at the same time, clear the way for existentialism.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Consciousness, Ego, Intentionality, Reflection, Reification, Existentialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Bu makale yazarın yürüttüğü doktora çalışmasından türetilmiştir.



## Sartre'in Saf Bilinci Kavrama Projesi: Husserl'in Ego Kavramına Eleştirisi Üzerinden Bir Okuma

**Öz:** Jean-Paul Sartre en çok, fenomenolojik ontolojiden varoluşçuluğa doğru yolculuğunu ortaya koyan başyapıtı *Varlık ve Hiçlik* (1943) ile tanınır. Bu yapıtın bazı odak kavramları bilinç, yönelimsellik ve insan olmaktır. Sartre'in bu konulara ilgisinin başlaması yıllar öncesine, Edmund Husserl'in fenomenolojisini çalıştığı zamanlara rastlar. Sartre fenomenoloji sayesinde, bilinci tözleştirmeden ve nesneleştirmeden düşünebildiğimizi fark eder. Ne var ki, Husserl'in düşüncelerinde bile bilinci nesneleştiren bir öge tespit eder: Transandantal ben veya saf Ego. Sartre ilk felsefi denemesi olan *Ego'nun Aşkınlığı*'nda (1936) Ego'nun dünyadaki nesnelere benzer bir şekilde transandantal olduğunu ve kesinlikle bilincin kendisi olmadığını iddia eder. Başka bir deyişle, Ego, tüm varsayımları fenomenolojik araştırmanın meşru alanı dışında parantezde tutan epokhe'nin dışına çıkmayı başaramaz. Buna ek olarak, Sartre, öz-bilincin koşulu olan refleksiyona dair pek çok sorun tespit eder. Refleksiyonun saf bilinci gözlemlemediği, aksine, Ego'nun kurulumuna hizmet ettiği sonucuna varır. Bu çalışma Sartre'in Ego'ya neden eleştirel bir mesafe aldığını ve bu eleştirinin hem fenomenolojiyi kendisi ile daha tutarlı hale getirmekte hem de varoluşçuluğa giden yolu açmakta oynadığı rolü incelemeyi amaçlar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Fenomenoloji, Bilinç, Ego, Yönelimsellik, Refleksiyon, Nesneleştirme, Varoluşçuluk.

### Introduction

Most philosophy readers would agree that Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is where his philosophical brilliance shines brightest. In this work, Sartre develops the majority of his ideas that present his existentialism, along with his position toward numerous earlier philosophers who inspired those ideas: Including but not limited to Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Hegel, René Descartes. His early philosophy, however, began roughly seven years before *Being and Nothingness's* release. During this time, Sartre publishes four philosophical essays, all of which explicitly demonstrate the influence of Husserl's phenomenology.

Sartre's interest in phenomenology began in the early 1930s and he spent 1934 studying Husserl's writings in Berlin. At the time, he seems to be fascinated by the radical ideas of Husserl: "Husserl here appears as a revolutionary, almost as a savior, who has provided the necessary key for putting philosophy back in touch with the ordinary experience" (Sartre 1970: 4). While Sartre is occupied with studying Husserlian phenomenology and its key concepts (such as consciousness,

intentionality, perception, epoché) he starts to have his own opinions regarding the nature of consciousness. As a result, in the same year, he develops his first objection to Husserl, targeting his conception of the self; known as the transcendental Ego. He publishes these ideas a few years later under the title of *The Transcendence of the Ego* which is widely regarded as the point of separation between the two philosophers: "Any well-read student of philosophy is aware that Sartre's independence from Husserl began with his denial of the existence of a transcendental ego" (Barnes 1992: 27). Despite his efforts to denounce the transcendental Ego from the phenomenological philosophy, Sartre still seems to be amazed by Husserl and loyal to his phenomenological path of investigating consciousness as pure as it is.

The main focus of both philosophers is to comprehend consciousness without situating it in the world like an entity. This is not an easy task; Husserl calls our attention to a dominant tendency in our daily, philosophical, and scientific way of thinking about everything as though they were natural, physical, and spatio-temporal beings. Therefore, he is aware that the task requires a radical shift in perspective to go "back to the things themselves" (Husserl 1983: 35) as they are in the immediate experience. Only then, would it be possible to uncover the true nature of consciousness and finally establish a science that studies it without reification. The difficulty is also demonstrated by Sartre's critique of Husserl in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, where, ironically, he claims that Husserl himself was unable to free himself from all the reification of consciousness due to the influence of Cartesian and Kantian conceptions of the self. Sartre does not believe that we find a self in the immediate experience; therefore, he is convinced that Husserl's Ego is transcendent, (meaning that it is beyond our immediate grasp) outside, foreign, like an object in the world. Nevertheless, by carefully distinguishing Ego and consciousness, Sartre maintains his master's goal in phenomenology, of understanding consciousness as pure as it is, while paving the way to his existentialism. The development of a non-substantial understanding of self and

consciousness is crucial for a consistent and persuasive theory of absolute freedom. In this sense, both his devotion to and his distance from Husserl play a significant role in the movement from phenomenology to existentialism. In *Being and Nothingness*, while his stance toward the Ego remains unchanged, it is clear that, after further elaboration on the subject, he comes to argue that consciousness is a “non-substantial absolute” (Sartre 2003: 12).

### 1. Husserl's Phenomenology and the Ego

At the beginning of the 20th century, Husserl's phenomenology was put forward as a rigorous, solid, presuppositionless, and -for the time being- the only possible way to study the subjective processes as they are; Pure, spontaneous, and immediate. For this purpose, Husserl calls us “back to the things themselves” (Husserl 1983: 35). But here we must not read “things” as the objects that are the components of the physical world around us, but as they appear to consciousness; to us as subjects. Since “phenomena” refers to anything that manifests in consciousness, the rigorous science that studies them is called “phenomenology”. Husserl sees that, at the time, there is no discipline available to investigate consciousness purely; without reducing it to an object. He ultimately found phenomenology to be the science and philosophy of the pure psychic states. Phenomenology is both science and philosophy because he believes that once the epistemological basis is founded correctly, we would need only one discipline that encompasses all knowledge possible.<sup>2</sup> If we acknowledge that every intuition, perception, imagination, knowledge, and so forth is a content of consciousness, we must be able to study all of them together using the phenomenological method.

Husserl's main objection in philosophy and science is directed towards naturalism. He believes that we need to deactivate the natural attitude that is dominant in our scientific and daily thinking by bracketing/parenthesizing our

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<sup>2</sup> The description and the purposes of phenomenology is found in detail in the Introduction of *Ideas I* by Husserl, 1983: XVII-XXIII.

belief in the existence of the physical/natural world. This is called the “epoché” (a.e., 60-2) method and it can be used radically against all our beliefs, presuppositions, metaphysics and so on, giving us a fresh start in the search for true knowledge. In contrast to naturalism’s reduction of all things -including humans and consciousness- to natural entities, Husserl uses epoché to reduce everything to consciousness; back to where they first belonged. Doing so, he does not believe we lose the world and its objects, but rather that we find them back in the consciousness as contents. In other words, we reduce the existence of the thing to its essence, which is what it is for consciousness; thus, eidetic reduction is another proposed method to be used by the phenomenological thinker. Finally, these phases together are generally called “phenomenological reduction” (a.e., 66) which, according to Husserl, allows us to think in an utterly new way and produces a rigorous, all-inclusive, and new science. The new science of consciousness requires a retreat from all our former beliefs, a break from the traditional doctrines, and a radical shift in philosopher’s and scientist’s perspective: “First, anyone who seriously intends to become a philosopher must ‘once in his life’ withdraw into himself and attempt, within himself, to overthrow and build anew all the sciences that, up to then, he has been accepting” (Husserl 1960: 2). In many ways, Husserl’s epoché is a rebirth of the Cartesian method of doubt; except epoché is modified so that it does not imply any denial; it simply puts our beliefs and judgments “in suspension”.

Husserl’s primary concern is not the so-called outside existence; phenomenological reduction is merely introduced in order to lead us to start the philosophical inquiry from our first-hand, immediate, and subjective experience. With phenomenology Husserl tries to turn our gaze towards the subject itself; once we apply epoché to our belief in the existence of the world, the human being -that is assumed to be a part of the physical world in natural attitude- is also bracketed/parenthesized/suspended and reduced to pure conscious content. However, Husserl adds that the self must stay unaffected by the phenomenological

reduction because it belongs to the consciousness itself as a constitutive element.<sup>3</sup> Consciousness cannot merely be a stream of subjective processes always changing and passing by; there must be something about consciousness that unifies them altogether; giving me my identity, making the stream “me” and a particular process “mine”. Husserl calls his notion of self “the transcendental I” and “pure Ego” (Husserl 1983: 132). Husserl believes, after all, that all “my” processes must belong to this one personal Ego: an organizing pole of self.

The relationship between the pure consciousness and its content is intentionality: Consciousness is always the consciousness of something. In phenomenological science “we engross ourselves in the essence of the consciousness of something, in which, for example, we are conscious of the factual existence of material things, animate organisms, human beings, the factual existence of technical and literary works, and so forth” (a.e., 67). The most obvious form of intention is perception, where consciousness is towards a material object. On the other hand, Ego/I is not found among the world of objects that the consciousness generally intends towards; its intuition of itself relies upon a specific kind of intention called “reflection” (a.e., 78-9). Reflection occurs when consciousness turns its intentional gaze inward and recognizes itself as the I/Ego that accompanies every particular subjective process. For example, instead of just casually holding a book in my hand, through reflection, my consciousness would change to realize, “I am holding a book in my hand”. According to Husserl the pure Ego penetrates all my lived experiences; it is just always there, organizing and unifying. Therefore, Ego is both the consciousness itself and the center/pole that ties the experiences together. Since the Ego belongs to the consciousness, Husserl is convinced that it gets out of the radical epoché parenthesis and becomes a legitimate subject of the pure phenomenological investigation that he carefully built with solid arguments.

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the Ego that is observed with reflection and the epoché as the phenomenology's ultimate tool of reduction is discussed in Husserl, 1983: 190-1.

## 2. Sartre's Criticism of Husserl's Ego

Sartre's first criticism of Husserl targets his conception of the self; the transcendental I/Ego. He thinks that the Ego does not serve Husserl's primary aim of investigating consciousness in its purest form -free from any reification. On the contrary, Sartre views the Ego as a divergence from the pure phenomenological path. One of the main reasons behind this divergence is the Kantian influence; while Husserl tries to discover the pure conscious field, he introduces Kantian notions of self into his philosophy that contradicts some of the fundamental thesis of phenomenology (Sartre 2005: 2-5).

According to Sartre the resemblance between Husserl's transcendental Ego and the Kantian transcendental apperception is quite obvious. Kant states that the manifold of intuitive data cannot be interpreted unless they are synthesized by the concepts of the faculty of understanding. He states in his famous quote: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant 1998: 193-4, A51/B75). Yet even then, the manifold of experience is not completely overcome; there must be something that unifies all conscious experience. Thus, the unity of consciousness is presented among the other necessary and universal conditions of experience. Since all necessity comes from the subject according to Kant, the unity of consciousness must also be given by the subject itself: "Every necessity has a transcendental condition as its ground. A transcendental ground must therefore be found for the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions. (...) Now this original and transcendental condition is nothing other than the **transcendental apperception**" (a.e., 232, A106). We can see that the transcendental apperception is the primary and necessary condition for me to call a particular experience "mine" and identify myself as a subject, self, and "I". A thought or an image that goes through my mind, memories, dreams, etc. are mine because they are synthesized into the unity of "I", otherwise they would be impossible to grasp at all: "The **I think** must **be able** to accompany all my



representations; for otherwise something would be presented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me" (a.e., 246, B131-2). In many aspects, Husserl follows Kant's understanding of the subject and implements it in his phenomenology:

In every actional cogito the ego lives out his life in a special sense. But all mental processes in the background likewise belong to it; and it belongs to them. All of them, as belonging to the *one* stream of mental processes which is mine, must admit of becoming converted into actional cogitationes or incorporated into actional cogitationes as immanent constituents. In Kant's words, "The 'I think' must be capable of accompanying all my presentations" (Husserl 1983: 132-3).

Here, Sartre questions whether this understanding of self is actually consistent with the new science of consciousness, and more so whether it was necessary at all.

According to Sartre, Husserl's introduction of the Ego into the phenomenological field is not only unnecessary but also dangerous. We can investigate his criticism in two parts: First, Sartre thinks that Husserl either misunderstands or misinterprets Kant regarding the relationship between "I think" and the representations. Sartre remarks that Kant's statement "I think must be able to accompany all my presentations" (Kant 1998: 246, B131-2) indicates possibility, not necessity: Every representation has the potential to be accompanied by the "I think" and thus be identified as "mine". But for him this is as far as Kant leads us into the field of transcendental consciousness; for Kant aimed to determine the conditions of the possibility of experience, not the possibility of an empirical consciousness. On the other hand, Sartre believes that Husserl stretches the Kantian understanding of "I think" to the point where the empirical consciousness becomes the constitutive element of transcendental consciousness: Now, it does not only unify all of my experiences, it also underlies -and accompanies- every single one of them. "Husserl takes up Kant's transcendental consciousness and grasps it by means of the epochē. But this consciousness is no longer a set of logical conditions, but an absolute fact. (...) Do we need to add to it a

transcendental I, as a structure of absolute consciousness?" (Sartre 2005: 2-3). Sartre notes that Husserl initially believed that "I" was a production of consciousness when he first introduced us to his phenomenology in *Logische Untersuchungen*, (1900-01) but he changed his thought in the *Ideas I* (1913). From that point forward, the accompanying I made consciousness look like a personality, a background, and an object in the world.

This leads us to the second part of Sartre's criticism: He thinks Husserl's idea of the Ego contradicts his own goal of understanding consciousness as pure as it is. By inviting traditional philosophy's notions into his new science, he violates his own rule which was put forward and conserved with epoché. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre seems to adopt the goal of freeing phenomenology from the unnecessary weight of the previous philosophies and any system of thought that reifies and substantiates consciousness. For this purpose, the understanding of the Ego and its relation to consciousness must be thoroughly re-examined. Sartre questions whether the Ego really can get out of the epoché parenthesis and be found within the pure conscious field -as a constant, a unifier, and support-. Unlike Husserl, Sartre claims that Ego is far from being within the consciousness, it is rather a construction made out of consciousness's reflections towards itself. He thinks that what consciousness finds through reflection is a transformed, solidified, and detached version of itself. Ego, therefore, is a mutant, foreign to consciousness, and what is most dangerous for phenomenology, is that it is like an object in the world.

In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre's main purpose is not to renounce reflection or the Ego altogether: He believes that consciousness does have the ability to reflect upon itself and constitute an Ego through those reflections. But it is exactly that: A constitution. For this reason, Ego and consciousness must be separated carefully. "I 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 in the world, like

the Ego of another" (a.e., 1). This suggests that my own Ego has the same proximity and similarity to my consciousness as anyone else's. Therefore, Husserl's Ego should never have gotten out of the epoché parenthesis with the pure consciousness; it could either remain in there or come out of it as a content of consciousness -as worldly objects do- but not with consciousness itself. Sartre thinks that the Ego is transcendent; in the sense that it goes beyond the consciousness's immediate grasp like a material object, or another person's being. "The I is an existent. It has a type of concrete existence, doubtless different from that of mathematical truths, meanings, or spatio-temporal beings, but just as real. It gives itself as transcendent" (a.e., 9). This makes the Ego utterly superfluous for an investigation of pure consciousness. What is more, the phenomenologists' efforts to find something constant and stable within the consciousness will always be futile.

Husserl and Sartre agree that consciousness is, at all times, intentional; that is, it is always the consciousness of something: Every psychic process is "directed to", "adverted to" something as its correlate. When I am reading a book, I am conscious of the book, when I am walking down the street, I am conscious of the neighborhood around me and my body moving. In Barnes's clarifying words, consciousness "cannot exist except as there is something to be revealed" (Barnes 1992: 16). It is also noteworthy to mention that for Husserl, intentionality is what constitutes the content of conscious experience: Since we parenthesize/suspend what was believed to be/supposed/posited "really out there", there is nothing left to know other than the phenomena which is constituted by consciousness. It is mainly for this reason that Husserl is classified as a transcendental idealist and Kantian philosopher. Now, although Sartre accepts that consciousness can certainly change and determine some aspects of the experience through its intention, he gives intention a much more limited constitutive role, especially in regards to perceptive intentions. For instance, Husserl thinks that, when the consciousness experiences the absence of the thing it intends, these are empty

intentions. Sartre upfront rejects both his master's idealism and his idea of empty intentions: He believes that the absence of the intended thing indicates the primary and radical character of consciousness. For Sartre objects are full of themselves and can manifest nothing other than their fullness. Consciousness, however, seems to have a unique ability to reveal things as empty, absent, negative or different than expected. This is due to the "negating" (Sartre 2003: 38) act of the intention, and for Sartre it is not merely an ability that consciousness "has" but it is exactly what consciousness is. In other words, consciousness presents itself -and intuitively itself- as various negating acts<sup>4</sup>.

While consciousness is often found intending something transcendent - something other than itself- Husserl thinks that reflection is an exception, since it is intention that is directed towards within. When I turn my gaze upon myself, he believes, I find my own consciousness in the purest form. This notion adds reflection a massive role in Husserl's philosophy: Consciousness's awareness of itself and thus phenomenology as a pure science is only possible through this special form of intention.

When we take a look at the self -called transcendental Ego- however, we shall see that it is not just the discovery of one momentary reflection, but a unifying pole of every single introverted intention. Behind the Husserlian understanding of reflection and Ego, we find the Cartesian cogito argument. Husserl believes that reflection and Ego -although not named so at the time- are in fact found in Descartes's meditative thought processes. In the "I think therefore I am" (Descartes 2018: 45) argument, the thought is directed towards one's self, and for Husserl, each introverted intention -reflection- is a discovery and proof of the Ego cogito: "in philosophy, the *Meditations* were epoch-making in a quite unique sense, and precisely because of their going back to the pure *ego cogito*" (Husserl

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre dedicates an entire part of *Being and Nothingness* to the question of nothingness and negation. For a more detailed exposition of the subject, see Sartre, 2003, pp.25-94.

1960: 4). According to Husserl, reflection observes and reveals an absolute, indubitable, and non-bracketable existence of the ego cogito.

Sartre criticizes Husserl, once again, for introducing previous philosophers' thoughts into his phenomenology, at the expense of the purity of consciousness. Descartes believes that what he found through the indubitable "I think" statement is a substance and ends up with two substances -thinking and extended- that are very different from one another in nature (Descartes 2018: 44-73). By all means, Husserl rejects this belief up-front; in the hope that this early divergence would save his philosophy from such a dualism and his conception of Ego from reifying consciousness. Nevertheless, Sartre thinks he drifted with the tide of Descartes enough to depart from his own ideal of presuppositionless science that reveals consciousness in its purity.

### **3. Sartre's Objections to Reflection**

Within the scope of his criticism of his master, Sartre points out a few problems with reflection. He argues that if self-consciousness was only achieved by reflection, it would always be incomplete. According to this logic, when an intentional process is reflected on, the newly arisen reflective intention would now be blind to itself: For a full awareness, we must reflect on the last reflection, and then on the reflection of that reflection, and so on. No matter how many times we repeat this act, the last conscious state will lack self-consciousness. Thus, we would find ourselves in an endless loop. Sartre warns that this understanding of self-consciousness is problematic, in which consciousness has to reflect upon itself to infinity; like a cat chasing its own tail. In addition, it leads us to a multi-layered understanding of consciousness. For Sartre, such a complicated understanding of self-consciousness is utterly unnecessary and an incomplete self-consciousness is absurd.

Sartre also objects to the idea that consciousness can be unconscious of itself, at any given moment; He states that by nature, consciousness is an

indivisible whole, which means it is conscious through and through. Although it is mostly found intending towards some transcendent X, Sartre believes that "the consciousness of X" being unconscious of being the consciousness of X is a contradiction. He states that "for consciousness, to be and to know oneself are one and the same thing" (Sartre 2005: 21). Eventually, instead of relying on secondary reflective intentions that end up in an infinite spiral, Sartre suggests that we seek self-consciousness within pre-reflective states.

Another problem that comes with reflection lies in the very definition of intentionality. Consciousness is directed to -what appears to it as- its object. What Sartre wants to ask here is whether consciousness and the object (the intended) can be the same. If consciousness were to find itself only through reflection -like Husserl claims- wouldn't it always find itself like an object confronting it? Sartre cannot imagine that the reflecting consciousness and the one being reflected on can be one and the same. So much so that he calls the former "the I" and the latter "the me" (a.e., 1). In addition, as mentioned above, he does not believe that consciousness can actually divide itself into two or more parts; which is another reason why "the me" must be an object: The object of the reflective intention. He thinks that consciousness is always a whole: "There is an indivisible, indissoluble being—definitely not a substance supporting its qualities like particles of being, but a being which is existence through and through" (Sartre 2003: 11). The illusion that consciousness can sometimes be unconscious of itself stems from our habit of thinking of it as a substance: As a result, we tend to think of intention like a substance reaching out to another. Naturally, we imagine that consciousness leaves its own essence behind in the dark, in order to reach the transcendental. We conclude, then, that whenever consciousness intends toward something other than itself, it must be unconscious of itself. Sartre relieves us from both of the problems at once: First, consciousness is not a substance, therefore there is nothing -like an Ego or I- left behind when it intends. Second, since nothing is left unconscious, consciousness is one and fully aware of itself.

Sartre reaches the conclusion that the being that is observed during reflection is not the pure consciousness that phenomenology has been searching for. Instead, he insists that the Husserlian Ego cogito is a "de facto statement" (Sartre 2005: 5) that reduces pure mental states to facts. There is only one possible solution for Sartre: Consciousness in a pre-reflective state must be fully aware of itself: "Every conscious existence exists as consciousness of existing. We understand now why the first consciousness of consciousness is not positional; it is because it is one with the consciousness of which it is consciousness" (Sartre 2003: 10). Here, we do not find layers of reflections that pile on top of each other, but one single, transparent unity. Blackham summarizes Sartre's unique understanding of self-consciousness by saying "to be conscious of something means being aware of being conscious of it" (Blackham 2020: 114). Sartre believes that we do not need an indirect route from consciousness to consciousness, or secondary (reflective) acts on primary acts. It is equal to say that we intuit that we exist as soon as something is revealed to us: Whenever a thought, a perception, or an imagination appears, we must, simultaneously, be the awareness of that revelation.

As a result, Sartre removes Husserl's reflection from the equation of self-consciousness. Moreover, he goes as far as saying that a mental state under reflection is so transformed that it cannot belong to the pure conscious flow anymore. Instead of reflective self-consciousness, Sartre argues that consciousness has the intuition of itself along with each intentional act it performs. No matter what it is directed towards consciousness must be conscious of itself as well. This way he tries to evade both the aforementioned infinity of reflective layers problem and the subject-object problem that reflection creates. At some point, consciousness needs to be aware of its object and itself at the same time. This way, Sartre believes, the complete self-awareness of consciousness can be justified and Husserl's idea of Ego is permanently set aside to be redundant. Furthermore, since the conception of Ego is dangerous for pure phenomenology, the new science can thus be purified from this reification.

Here we must further elaborate on the danger that Sartre sees in the Ego: Sartre believes that Husserl's reflective consciousness is a "positional consciousness" (Fr. conscience positionnelle) (Sartre 2003: 12) in the sense that, while reflecting, it positions itself in front of itself like it places an object in the world. Since what intends and what is intended cannot be the same for Sartre, when a psychic state is reflected upon, it gets unified, solidified, and separated from the conscious flow. This is the transformation and mutation that Sartre warns us about: Husserl's Ego makes consciousness "heavy and ponderable. All the results of phenomenology are in danger of crumbling away if the I is not, every bit as much as the world, a relative existent, i.e. an object for consciousness" (Sartre 2005: 5). While the reflective consciousness positions itself like an object in front of itself, its self-intuition is purely non-positional: "every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself" (Sartre 2003: 9). What is more, as humans, if our awareness of ourselves only came through reflection, this would mean that our only apprehension of ourselves would be as objects in the world. Philosophically, this would defy most of the purposes phenomenology stands for: The pure and spontaneous nature of consciousness would be impossible to conceive and the pure science of consciousness would be an ideal. Yet this danger goes beyond the purposes of Husserl as an idealist philosopher: If the Ego is the only "me" that I can ever know of, -since Ego is in the world among the objects of the world- I can hope nothing more than conceiving myself like an object. Thus, the Ego debate goes beyond the theoretical philosophical domain and tackles a big question that anyone might ask themselves: "Who am I?"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, asks two questions: "(1) What is the synthetic relation which we call being-in-the-world? (2) What must man and the world be in order for a relation between them to be possible?" (Sartre, 2003: 4). The question "who am I?" is also closely related with these questions. In this paper, we will focus on Sartre's early views, and leave this discussion out. However, those who would like to relate this question with the problem of "World" can see the division 1 of Heidegger's (2010) *Being and Time*. For a short and compact exposition of the subject, see Yıldız, 2024: 165.



Nonetheless, we do know what it is like to be conscious beings through our subjective experiences, firsthand. Whether it is through intuition or else, we have a means to separate ourselves from the objects around us. It is also plausible for us to say that our knowledge of ourselves has a different source and nature than how we know others. This may be the reason behind Sartre's conviction that self-consciousness cannot stem from reflection but pure intuition; there must be another basis for self-knowledge that does not reify and solidify "me". According to Sartre, every time I am conscious of something, I intuit my very existence pre-reflectively along with that thing.

#### **4. The Question of Unity**

One of the main reasons why Husserl introduces the transcendental I to his theory of consciousness is that it unifies the particular experiences into a whole that is "me". Husserl understands that each intentional process is unique in the consciousness which is a continuous flow of changing experiences. Then, what gives me my identity? What makes my conscious flow mine? Sartre understands that the transcendental I in Kant's and Husserl's philosophies has a constitutive role: It unifies those experiences. In Barnes's summarizing words: "It has been constituted by a consciousness reflecting on its own activities, ordering them in terms of imposed meanings and unifying them. The ego is fabricated out of the psychic residue of earlier experiences, and it is their unity." (Barnes 1992: 28). However, Sartre does not think it necessary for a consistent theory of consciousness, and the solution is already present in the conception of intentionality: "consciousness is defined by intentionality. Through intentionality it transcends itself, it unifies itself by going outside itself" (Sartre 2005: 3-4). Thus, Sartre agrees that there needs to be a unity of consciousness, however, he does not agree that we need an overbearing concept such as the Ego. The necessary unity can be based on the very definition of consciousness: On the concept of intentionality.

As mentioned earlier, both Husserl and Sartre agree that consciousness is always intentional -that is, there is no consciousness that is not directed, in one way or another, towards something. Unlike Husserl, who thinks that what is intended is the constituted content of consciousness, Sartre believes that by intending, consciousness transcends (goes beyond) itself: "Consciousness is consciousness of something. This means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness; that is, that consciousness arises oriented towards a being which is not itself" (Sartre 2003: 17). In addition, consciousness recognizes that the object it is directed towards is not itself, and thus, has no difficulty positing the object outside. Therefore, in Sartre's philosophy, each intentional act is, at the same time, a negating act<sup>6</sup>: Consciousness has the ability to separate what confronts it and identify it as "not me". Perhaps it is exactly this recognition of not-me-ness that makes, for me, what is intended (what confronts me) into an object (a limited, separate entity). However, this is the point where the study of consciousness takes a bitter turn in Sartre's philosophy: Because it can negate, it finds itself in a world that is foreign to its being; Nothing out there resembles what is happening within. When Sartre adopts the idea of intentionality, he interprets it as consciousness's escape from its own being: He even admits that "the intentionality of Husserl and of Brentano has also to a large extent the characteristic of a detachment from the self." (a.e., 49). In *Being and Nothingness*, consciousness is defined as "that being which flees itself while being what it is in the mode of not-being and which flows on while being its own flow, which escapes between its own fingers" (a.e., 176). That being said, Sartre finds the unity of consciousness in its intentional continuity and the fact that it cannot be anything other than itself. Through intending, it attempts to lose itself at the object; but no matter how much it tries to escape, it always finds itself where it starts: Intending.

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<sup>6</sup> Sartre dedicates the first chapter of *Being And Nothingness* on the subject of "negation", where he starts by asking the question "What is the original relation of the human being to nothingness?" (Sartre 2003: 36) and comes to explain, in much detail, how conscious acts are essentially negating acts that bring nothingness to the world.

It is always in the mode of "being towards" rather than being something, determined, fixed, or solid. Consciousness is bound to be intentional and the fact that it cannot be anything else justifies its unity but also condemns it to desolation. It finds itself as a continuous series of being towards beings that are not itself, and there is no way at hand to escape or change what it is. There is no exit.<sup>7</sup>

Sartre is convinced that we will never find something constant, stable, heavy or object-like within consciousness, because rather than having an essence of its own, it carries the essence of its choice: "in rising and to the center of being, it creates and supports its essence" (a.e., 11). All we find is a light, subtle, and transparent being that exists as towards-ness<sup>8</sup>. Thus, one of the inevitable results that comes with this understanding is that there is nothing opaque or hidden within consciousness; each content of it accessible to it. This is why Sartre believes that there is always a pre-reflective, immediate, and inherent self-awareness of consciousness: Whenever it performs an intentional act, it is immediately aware of what it is doing. This awareness is very different from knowing yourself like an object, and it does not reveal an Ego underlying that continuous intentional flow.

Even then, Sartre accepts Ego's existence only if we admit that it is a constitution of human beings:

The Ego is an object apprehended but also constituted by reflective knowledge. It is a virtual locus of unity, and consciousness constitutes it as going in completely the reverse direction from that followed by real production; what is really first is consciousnesses, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego (Sartre 2005: 20).

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<sup>7</sup> Sartre also addresses the issue of human being's desire to escape its own being, in his literary work *No Exit* (1945). The characters in this play are shown in a desperate need to define themselves as something, while being faced with the challenge of accepting the fact that there is nothing under their masks.

<sup>8</sup> Sartre also thinks that Husserl's claim that consciousness constitutes its object is another danger for it to be regarded as an opaque being. While Husserl implies that all phenomena is constituted content, Sartre argues that there is a certain resistance of the thing-in-itself that determines its phenomena. The very whiteness of the paper I perceive has nothing to do with my will, desire or determination; it simply manifests itself white. The fact that consciousness does not determine its object, for Sartre, means that it is empty and content-less, while Husserl's conception of consciousness is found, once again, heavy and opaque.

Ego resembles a conception we create about ourselves; a bundle of facts we find with reflective observations. We do not find an Ego within our consciousness each time we reflect on ourselves, but we rather constitute the Ego through our reflective acts that make pure conscious processes into facts. This is because reflection makes an intentional process heavier; resulting in consciousness to appear like an object. It also makes it look like there is a constant subject that acts in the mode of intention. This is not the case according to Sartre: Just like an intentional state precedes reflection, -because otherwise there is nothing to reflect upon- consciousness precedes Ego. Consequently, it is consciousness that constitutes the Ego and not vice versa.

The most obvious and clearest example of reflective observation in philosophy is the Cartesian "I think" statement. Whenever someone says "I think" - as Descartes does- they are observing a fact right in the middle of the world: "the past is substance. In this sense the Cartesian *cogito* ought to be formulated rather 'I think; therefore I was.'" (Sartre 2003: 142). Yet, this is not limited to the thinking acts; each statement like "I perceive" or "I remember" is a reflective statement that can be added to the composition of the Ego. It is me who thought, perceived, or remembered that thing: Thus, we see that the "I" is very much involved in them. However, the pure, pre-reflective mental state was an intentional processes that was lived just as it is. This distinction can also be intuited in the difference between living something and narrating it: We intuitively know that there is no way of recollecting the whole essence of an experience once it has passed. In a way, this is the difference between pure consciousness and Ego: The former is a flow of instantaneous mental states, while the latter is a work of patching together. We can even say that the transcendental I is not a unifier but a collector and narrator: It is a collection of stories that we like to tell about ourselves.

The stories of the Ego are essentially different than the pure processes of consciousness which are spontaneous and contingent; they come and go like a

breeze. This conception of Sartre is best explained in an example of running after a tram:

When I run after a tram, when I look at the time, when I become absorbed in the contemplation of a portrait, there is no I. There is a consciousness of the tram-needing-to-be-caught, etc., and a non-positional consciousness of consciousness. In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects, it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousnesses, which present themselves with values, attractive and repulsive values, but as for me, I have disappeared, I have annihilated myself. There is no place for me at this level, and this is not the result of some chance, some momentary failure of attention: it stems from the very structure of consciousness. (Sartre 2005: 8).

When consciousness is towards a transcendent thing like a tram, Sartre sees neither an Ego nor the need for it. In fact, the Ego, which was utterly a surplus for the experience, is lost from the gaze; while the unity of consciousness remains.

Sartre claims that the necessary unity of consciousness is already found in the unity of the object intended. In the example above, the tram-needing-to-be-caught captures the whole of my consciousness. At any given time, my consciousness being towards an object is one; "indivisible, indissoluble" (Sartre 2003: 11). Another example of pure conscious unity is being towards a friend in need: "I feel pity for Peter and I come to his aid. For my consciousness, one thing alone exists at that moment: Peter-having-to-be-aided. This quality of 'having-to-be-aided' is to be found in Peter. It acts on me like a force [...] there is no me: I am faced with the pain of Peter in the same way I am faced with the colour of this inkwell" (Sartre 2005: 10). Here, the force of the object affecting me is like a pull: The object demands or attracts my attention by being exactly what it is; a "being-in-itself" (Sartre 2003: 21). On the other hand, consciousness has the ability to decide for and determine itself; therefore, earning the name "being-for-itself" (a.e., 19). It also has the ability to lend itself to be captured by the very thing it intends towards. Since consciousness has no essence of its own, this lending, surrendering, and escaping itself encompasses the whole of its being. Once consciousness lends itself to the object of intention, there is nothing left behind: No self, no ego, no "me". My whole being is a being of towards-ness, i.e. being towards a tram, being

towards helping Peter etc. Sartre's understanding of intentionality is unique exactly in this sense: Intending towards something means lending yourself wholly to something transcendental -something other than yourself-. When I am running after the tram, there is no consciousness left other than the consciousness of the tram. It holds no content other than the one it is currently intending towards: Not even its own essence, since there is none. Therefore, Sartre's unique understanding of intentionality leads him to another conception of the unity of consciousness, which resides already, in its pre-reflective states.

On the other hand, the unity of the Ego appears to have a very different nature. Consciousness in its pure spontaneity is in various states like perceiving, thinking, desiring, valuing, hating, and so on. Once the reflection is applied, these states become external: They become perceptions, thoughts, desires, values, and hates. In a way, they start to have a life of their own, outside the continuous conscious flow. Even in our daily language, we have the habit of calling these things "mine", because they actually resemble the objects in our possession. What were pure experiences in the conscious flow turn into facts, situations and qualities under reflection and are subsumed under the concept we call Ego. Therefore Ego is a collective unity of those perceptions, thoughts, desires, values, and hates along with the facts, situations, and qualities about self. For instance, I could define myself as a person with this-and-this values and who performed this-and-this acts. The person I describe would be the I/Ego: A unity of facts I observed about myself through many reflections.

Unlike the absolute presence of consciousness, the unity of the Ego exists, for Sartre, as a constitution, a fiction, or a figure. During its spontaneous moments consciousness only is. Furthermore, these moments exist prior to reflection and therefore they always have "ontological priority" (Sartre 2005: 11) over the reflected. That is to say that the intentional states exist by themselves, prior to possible reflections. On the other hand, reflective states are always secondary

conscious acts: They require prior acts to reflect upon. This is another reason why the Ego is a constitution: "the Ego is an object apprehended but also constituted by reflective knowledge (...) what is really first is consciousnesses, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego" (a.e., 20). The spontaneous being of consciousness always comes first; before any reflection is made. But it is also crucial to note that these reflections do grasp any spontaneous moment wholly as it is. The pure, original, transient being slips through our fingers; facts, situations, and qualities remain under the gaze of reflection. The tram-need-to-be-caught becomes the fact that "I" was running after the tram. Therefore every single reflection presents a section of consciousness that is separated from its original flow. The Ego which is the totality of those separate sections is foreign to the consciousness.

## 5. Sartre's Reasons

Sartre's purpose in slighting the Ego is not to banish it from the philosophical debate altogether: Despite the obvious problems it brings, Sartre admits that this kind of a unity of self may be necessary for practical reasons. He even, at times, takes a more hospitable attitude towards the Ego:

Perhaps, indeed, the essential function of the Ego is not so much theoretical as practical. I have pointed out, after all, that it does not bind closely together the unity of phenomena, that it is limited to reflecting an ideal unity, whereas real, concrete unity has long been achieved. But perhaps its essential role is to mask from consciousness its own spontaneity (a.e., 27).

As mentioned earlier, Sartre takes consciousness as a being that continuously tries to escape itself. In *Being and Nothingness* this tendency is given a proper name: "Bad faith" (Fr. Mauvaise Foi) (Sartre 2003: 68). According to this thought, the constitution of the Ego appears to be merely one of the many attempts of conscious beings -which mainly addresses humans- to escape the immanent meaninglessness of their own existence: "Reflection (reflexion) remains for the for-itself a permanent possibility, an attempt to recover being. By reflection the for-itself, which has lost itself outside itself, attempts to put itself inside its own being" (a.e.,

176). Being-for-itself attempts so, just to avoid the existential pain that Sartre calls "anguish" (Fr. *angoisse*) (a.e., 41). However, Sartre concludes that all of these attempts are futile, because we cannot escape from our own existence. He suggests, instead, that we embrace the fact that under the mask of the Ego -and other characters we take on- there is nothing stable, solid or opaque.

It is quite obvious that while Sartre takes a critical distance from Husserl's Ego and self-consciousness through reflection, he remains loyal to the phenomenological project of relieving consciousness from natural positing. This is due to the fact that at the time he was writing *The Transcendence of the Ego*, he believed in Husserl's ideals and methodology -even though he would later explicitly oppose his epoché and idealism. It appears to him that the problem with Husserl's philosophy is not that he set the wrong ideals, but the fact that he could not remain unaffected by the earlier understandings of the self -that of Descartes's and more so of Kant's- in order to stay true to his ideals. Stawarska summarizes this by saying: "Sartre makes Husserl taste his (Husserl's) own medicine by pointing the sharp end of the phenomenological razor back onto the field of the masters own philosophy; he thus uses the method borrowed from Husserl to suspend the validity of claims made by Husserl" (Stawarska 2013: 17). Sartre thinks that the idea of Ego cogito is contradictory to pure phenomenology simply because it reifies consciousness. Based on this point of view, we can state that Sartre's criticism of Ego serves to render phenomenology more consistent with itself. Having said that, Sartre has another agenda that vaguely shows a glimpse of his existentialism: To relieve consciousness from any reification is the first step towards the freedom of conscious beings, the task of which, unsurprisingly, Sartre will take very seriously in his later periods. Sartre's intensive involvement with consciousness focuses on separating it from worldly objects and our understanding of their natural, causal, mechanical patterns of relationships. In short, what Sartre sees in a consistent phenomenology is a path to human freedom.



According to Sartre, even if we admit that Ego is a constitution, it is still a dangerous concept that must be excluded from the field of phenomenological investigation, and more so from his own philosophy which he will later call "existentialism". He even admits at once that "the problems of the relations between the I and consciousness are thus existential problems" (Sartre 2005: 2). The thesis that there is no content, essence, or constant in consciousness leads Sartre to a life of thinking about absolute freedom. Early in his philosophy, he adopts the idea that consciousness is light, transparent, and breeze-like. Once this conception is settled, the transition from phenomenological ontology to an existentialist ethic gets easier: Such a light being cannot be coerced by outside forces, but only by itself; with the tasks, values, roles, or goals it gives itself. For Sartre, pure consciousness can be nothing but "a non-substantial absolute" (Sartre 2003: 12). For this reason consciousness is a peculiar kind of existence that has the ability to decide for-itself and determine itself.

### **Conclusion**

While Sartre respects and adopts Husserl's phenomenological method, he despises his master's understanding of the Ego. He believes it to be unnecessary and dangerous for a consistent phenomenology that aims to investigate consciousness as pure as it is. On the contrary, he claims that Husserl's Ego results in a reification of consciousness and jeopardizes the phenomenological project. Therefore, from the very beginning of his philosophy, Sartre rejects the idea that the consciousness's intuition of its own can reveal a constant, stable, fixed self; like the transcendental I or the Ego. This is why his first written philosophical essay, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, points out the vast difference between the Ego and pure consciousness while examining whether or not Husserl's conception of reflection can reveal genuine knowledge about the true nature of consciousness. Sartre discovers that self-consciousness through the indirect path of reflection is problematic and suggests that consciousness is aware of itself directly through

intuition. By doing so, he not only proves a great loyalty to phenomenology but also sets himself up for his own phenomenological ontology that we today call "existentialism".

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