



Jean-Paul Sartre: The Consciousness and the Self

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Abstract

The following philosophical work aims to address Jean-Paul Sartre's reflections on consciousness and the self. The article will mainly cover the work *The Transcendence of The Ego* and others when necessary.

Keywords: Sartre; Ego; Consciousness; Self

Introduction

We allow ourselves to begin this reflection in such a way: we have found the truth, by supposing that we commit to it. If we suppose, on the contrary, that there is nothing that can be regarded or named as truth, then we may question what fiction and faith would mean, for example¹. So, it is a mystery to ask ourselves about who we are, and the meaning of our freedom, and Jean-Paul Sartre put this problem as the center of his philosophical investigation.

For the French philosopher, the theme of freedom is fundamental since he characterized our being as "condemned to be free"². Sartre refers to our awareness of freedom as vertigo, which is revealed through anguish and still reiterates that the ego is a mask that hides the spontaneity of consciousness of ourselves. So, what would be the relationship between consciousness and ego³ regarding

revealing and hiding our freedom? While we commit, for example, with such questioning, we believe that we open a horizon and a new orientation, both towards ourselves, towards others, and the world in which we live, so there is interest and an existential concern that arises according to these phenomena.

In this article, we will try to highlight such an existential orientation as far as possible. The first step will be to analyze Sartre's descriptive approach to his notions of consciousness, ego, and the relationship between them in his philosophy, which is conceived by him with the aim, later, in answering the question of freedom. There will be an attempt on our part to reveal that our self⁴, in addition to creative, is an original production of our consciousness, in this way to be able to affirm that we can be considered as a product of art, since we are in a continuous process of creation of ourselves and, in Sartre's philosophy, it is possible to emphasize that we are authors of our lives⁵.

1 This fact we can find in the novel *Nausea* written by Jean-Paul Sartre, in which the question of fiction and art come to the fore as a way of understanding reality, but through fiction and what is not accurate. Through art, artists can detach themselves from material reality, thus, being possible to understand it. In short, the way Sartre brings his fiction to life, in a way, makes us reflect both on it and the arbitrariness of reality itself; it is as if the character himself has the insignificance of his own life and the world.

2 Ver em: Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993, p. 186.

3 Sartre, Jean Paul. *The Transcendence of the Ego: A sketch for*

Phenomenological Description. Translated by Andrey Brown. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 47-48.

4 The self is never in itself, but always for itself, or "for itself" or "pour-soi." Self means nothing, despite being the source of all senses. Moreover, the self, besides being entirely free, is unstable, impermanent, and knows it.

5 See: "Every existent is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance." From this point of view, therefore, we run into a state of *Nausea*, which does not go away until the next close our eyes before we sleep. (Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. Translated by Baldick, R. London: Penguin, 1938, p. 11).

The Transcendence of the Ego

In his work *The Transcendence of the Ego*⁶, Sartre exposes his phenomenology and introduces his idea of self and consciousness⁷. The French thinker defines phenomenology as “[...] scientific, and not a critical, study of consciousness”⁸, then agrees with Husserl in the sense that it is a science of *fact*; thus, he claims that the problems of phenomenology are dilemmas of *fact* and the questions that arise from it are part of the existential field⁹. The problem, according to Sartre, is 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”¹⁰. To better understand what this statement means, it is necessary first to clarify what Sartre thinks about consciousness.

Sartre defines consciousness by intentionality, that is, as something beyond itself and at the same time aware of itself: “By intentionality it transcends itself. It unifies itself by escaping from itself”¹¹. According to Sartre, it is from this idea that Kant¹² e Husserl develop the notion of the transcendental ego since they claim that there must be a transcendental entity which is the basis of all our intentional acts. From this point of view, our ego would answer for the unity of my intentional acts; however, Sartre disagrees with this angle¹³. He points out that the self only appears in a reflexive mode, since in a pre-reflexive mode, consciousness does not focus on itself; on the contrary, it is directed towards the external. For example, the self is not part of the experience when we rinse the garden plants, given that it is only when my consciousness departs into the reflexive mode that the self appears.

(Sartre) Consciousness knows itself only as absolute

6 Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness*. Translated by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. The Noonday Press, 1960. Daqui em diante citarei essa obra com a abreviação TE.

7 The intention in this introductory moment is to provoke a reflection about Sartre’s rejection of the transcendental ego and unconsciousness to enter the idea of ego as an object of consciousness and for it. Therefore, our fundamental goal is to display the idea of consciousness and self elaborated by Sartre.

8 TE, 35.

9 Ibid.

10 TE, 31.

11 TE, 38.

12 According to Sartre: “The preoccupation of Kant was never with the way in which empirical consciousness is in fact constituted. He never deduced empirical consciousness, in the manner of a Neo-Platonic process, from a higher conscious, from a constituting hyper-consciousness. For Kant, transcendental consciousness is nothing but the set of conditions which are necessary for the existence of an empirical consciousness.” (TE, 33).

13 “[...] The transcendental I is the death of consciousness”. (TE, 40).

inwardness. We shall call such a consciousness: consciousness in the first degree, or *unreflected* consciousness. Now we ask: is there room for an *I* in such a consciousness? The reply is clear: evidently not¹⁴.

This fact happens when our attention comes from the act of rinsing the plants to other types of thinking as if we stopped to think about the time we were rinsing the plants, or even realize that we had been thirsty during our entire act. Therefore, we never find the self through an experiment as a substance that directs or drives our conscious acts to the extent that the self is not discovered in reflection but is constituted from reflective acts of consciousness. In *Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre emphasizes, when analyzing the structure of consciousness and ego, there is no transcendental ego and there is no need for its existence.

(Sartre) 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 my *I*. The transcendental *I*, therefore, has no *raison d’être*¹⁵.

Stating that there is no self, which inhabits our states of consciousness, does not mean that there is no unity of consciousness since it exists as the consciousness of an object and of itself¹⁶. According to Sartre, consciousness can only be limited by itself since it is pure absolute and spontaneous¹⁷; moreover, the ego is an object for consciousness as an object that is always carrying opacity with itself. Therefore, in the same way, when placing an object in consciousness, an opacity in its purity, absolute and spontaneous unity is added to it¹⁸.

Ego and Consciousness

The consciousness which says *I Think* is precisely not the consciousness which thinks¹⁹.

14 TE, 41.

15 TE, 40.

16 According to Sartre: “This is to say that the type of existence of consciousness is to be consciousness of itself. And consciousness is aware of itself in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object”. (TE, 40).

17 Ibid.

18 “[...] the I, with its personality, would be a sort of center of opacity [...] Thus, if one introduces this opacity into consciousness, one thereby destroys the fruitful definition cited earlier. One congeals consciousness, one darkens it. Consciousness is then no longer a spontaneity; it bears within itself the germ of opaqueness.” (TE, 41, 42).

19 TE, 45.

It is a fact that we are aware of our existence, and Sartre accepts this idea. The problem for him is the self, which is conceptualized as the basis of our experiences and thoughts. In other words, he criticizes the appointment of the self as a thinking substance by Descartes and as a transcendental ego by Kant and Husserl, for example. To resolve this issue, Sartre introduces a distinction between pre-reflexive and reflexive consciousness, and it is through this differentiation, he tries to debunk the idea of the transcendental ego since according to him, there is no reason to do so.

According to him, in the pre-reflexive or non-reflexive mode, consciousness does not focus on itself and does not take it as an object, and this stage, what is called by Sartre “consciousness in the first degree”²⁰, the knowledge of consciousness is present in its interiority²¹. As an example, when we are doing the dishes, the objects that are there and that are intentional are the dishes, the soap, the sponge. Therefore, our attention is directed and focused on these objects and not on ourselves. However, when our attention is oriented to ourselves, our actions become our intentional objects; that is, it is at that moment when the self appears in reflexive mode. It is like the example cited about rinse the plants and the escape from that act itself, that is, to a place other than that, but which concerns the self.

It is for this reason that Sartre affirms what is in the epigraph of this chapter since there was this evasion of the act to another that concerns us, the self becomes part of our reflecting consciousness; the self of the phrase “I am sure,” for example, has already become an object of my reflexive consciousness.

(Sartre) Or rather it is not *its own* thought which it posits by thisthetic act. We are then justified in asking ourselves if the *I* which thinks is common to the two superimposed consciousness, or if it is *5* not rather the *I* of the reflected consciousness. [...] since a consciousness has no need at all a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object²².

In line with Sartre, the self never appears except on a reflexive act. When we are doing something, we do not realize ourselves as if we were reflecting on the self during this action, but if something occurs and it is interrupted, we come to realize what we were doing, but it does not mean we did not already know, we just did not realize ourselves while we were doing it, we were just aware of the act itself.

20 TE, 41.

21 “Consciousness knows itself only as absolute inwardness.” (TE, 41).

22 TE, 45.

Therefore, after being interrupted, we can answer for our acts since our consciousness merely sticks to it and does not find a self in our pre-reflexive activity of what we had been doing there²³.

Also, it is essential to highlight that there are two types of consciousness, one pre-reflexive and one reflexive. As much as there is a difference as to the presence of the self and how it is involved or not in these two types of consciousness, there is temporality between one and the other, one before and after, and a transformation from one to another.

(Sartre) [...] reflecting consciousness could not exist without the reflected consciousness. But the fact remains that we are in the presence of which is consciousness of the other. Thus, the essential principal of phenomenology, “all consciousness is consciousness of something,” is preserved²⁴.

So, what can we say about being aware of ourselves? Sartre states that there is a differentiation between being aware in a positional and non-positional way. If our pre-reflexive consciousness is aware of ourselves, it is non-positional; however, when our pre-reflexive consciousness is aware of our reflexive consciousness, it is positional²⁵. It is exemplifying that Sartre gives clarity to this reflexive light and reports that when he is reading and is purposely aware of the book, on the contrary, he is not positionally aware of himself²⁶. Therefore, Sartre states: “there is no *I* on the unreflected level”²⁷. This means, that there is no self in pre-reflexive mode.

Unity and individuality of consciousness are only possible when they concern an object or themselves. With that said, we can attest that the ego is an object of consciousness and is constructed through its reflexive acts. Consciousness in the world is individualized, and it does so through the constitution of the self, which for Sartre is “[...] an *existent*.”

23 According to Sartre: “[...] the complex structure of consciousness is as follows: there is an unreflected act of reflection, without an *I*, which is directed on a reflected consciousness. The latter becomes the object of the reflecting consciousness without ceasing to affirm its own object (a chair, a mathematical truth, etc.). At the same time, a new object appears which is the occasion for an affirmation by reflective consciousness, and which is consequently not on the same level as the unreflected consciousness (because the latter consciousness is an absolute which has no need of reflective consciousness in order to exist), nor on the same level as the object of the reflected consciousness (chair, etc.). This transcendent object of the reflective act is the *I*.” (TE, 53).

24 TE, 44.

25 TE, 45.

26 TE, 46, 47.

27 It is like there is an experience of the world without realizing that we are having such an experience. (TE, 48).

It has a concrete type of existence, undoubtedly different from the existence of mathematical truths, of meanings, or of spatio-temporal beings, but no less real. The *I* gives itself as transcendent²⁸. In short, both the ego and the self are in the world and space.

Self and the World

The search for the ego's understanding, whether as it is constituted or whether it is part of transcendence or not. To some extent, Sartre in *Transcendence of the Ego* approaches a conclusion about this inquiry. He says that "the ego never appears, in fact, except when one is not looking at it"²⁹. What is that supposed to mean? It means that the more we try to find it or understand it, the more disappears. While the ego becomes an object of our consciousness to understand in this way, we transfer our reflexive act to the non-reflexive one, so it disappears accompanied by our reflexive act³⁰.

This disappearance is like the self's emptying when there is its fall³¹ from the reflexive to the non-reflexive mode. The self, in this case, loses its intimacy, "it degrades itself"³². The thought when we affirm that "I think" can be considered as an object of the self, as if it were a passive product, however, as this is affirmed, there is an abandonment or forgetfulness of a pure state of reflection, which according to Sartre is where the ego appears, but "appears on the horizon of a spontaneity"³³. Nevertheless, what would this spontaneity of consciousness be? Sartre reiterates that the source of consciousness's existence is itself; it does not need anything else to exist³⁴. Even so, what about our control? Is it not possible for us to control our consciousness?

(Sartre) It is *by essence* necessary that the will be maintained and preserved *by that consciousness which is radically opposed* to the consciousness it wants to give rise to (if I *will* to fall asleep, I stay awake; if I *will* not to think about this or that, I think about *precisely on that account*). It seems to us that this monstrous spontaneity is at the origin of numerous psych asthenic ailments³⁵.

28 TE, 52.

29 TE, 88.

30 TE, 88, 89.

31 "[...] But the I, by falling from the reflexive level to the unreflected level [...]" (TE, 90).

32 TE, 90.

33 TE, 97.

34 "Transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity. It determines its existence at each instant, without our being able to conceive anything *before it*. Thus each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo*." (TE, 99).

35 Ibid.

Given this, what it seems is that our wills are at the mercy of our spontaneity of our consciousness, thus not having control of this spontaneity since it depends only on itself both to exist and to persevere. Moreover, freedom can be an unexpected consequence, which arises from this overwhelming fact of lack of control on our part. Sartre even exemplifies such a situation when a young wife is left alone by her husband, thus free to act the way she wants, as if she had too many possibilities for action in the face of this acquired freedom³⁶. As a result, we realize that we put ourselves in place of author of our own life and, while we understand this authorship, it also reveals in us a creation of responsibility towards our actions and on the contrary, is not the ego that makes us who we are, because the essential role of the ego "is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity"³⁷.

Our ego is not our consciousness but a set of acts of our consciousness. When we tell a friend that we love someone, he has access to the same love that we have said we feel, however, in the sense that we are talking about the same thing. The ego is like an object that is in the world, and we can judge our actions as objects as well because, in this way, we can go beyond them and, apart from them, we see them from outside through another point of view. That is how Sartre brings his notion of freedom. Our peculiarities do not define us as if we were reduced to them, but they are objects that belong to us, so we can change them, transform them, or even deny them.

(Sartre) Everything happens, therefore, as if consciousness constituted the ego as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself before this ego which it has constituted, absorbing itself in the ego as if to make the ego its guardian and its law. It thanks to the ego, indeed, that a distinction can be made between the possible and the real [...]³⁸.

Nevertheless, what does that mean? It is a personal note of encouragement because even if we comfort ourselves by saying that we are this or that; it is as if we were covering up the fact that we constitute our ego, since it is a construction of our consciousness, so our ego does not make us who we are. What happens is that we are constrained by the ego as much as we want. Nonetheless we ask: are we lucid about it? No, since our consciousness is in pre-reflexive mode.

Sartre finishes his work *Transcendence of the Ego* taking into consideration some implications and ethical and

36 TE, 100.

37 Ibid.

38 TE, 101.

political points about everything he said in his work. He points out that “for centuries we have not felt in philosophy so realistic a current”³⁹ and ascertains that phenomenology “have plunged man back into the world”⁴⁰. However, these words are not accurate if phenomenology preserves the transcendental ego⁴¹. Sartre rejects the transcendental ego and, next to the self, places us in the world and not in an unattainable or inaccessible state.

(Sartre) The world has not created the *me*: the *me* has not created the world. These are two objects for absolute, impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected. [...] No more is needed in the way of a philosophical foundation for an ethics and a politics which are absolutely positive⁴².

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to understand Jean-Paul Sartre’s reflection on both consciousness and the self. At first, it seems that consciousness is something already known to all of us, however, when we try to define it, this judgment disappears. We ask: how do we know that other people are aware as we are if we assume sincerity in our view of ourselves? In response, what should be kept intact

39 TE, 105.

40 Ibid.

41 [...] as long as the *I* remains a structure of absolute consciousness, one will still be able to reproach phenomenology for being an escapist doctrine, for again pulling a part of man out of the world and, in that way, turning our attention from the real problems.” (Ibid).

42 TE, 106.

is a statement by Sartre about the consciousness needing an object because it only exists if it is about something, as well as about it is an intentional aspect, so there is a need for exteriority beyond itself. Similarly, if we try to detect the self, for example, when we were children, the thought becomes cloudy as to its location, even because, if we question the existence of consciousness at this same stage of life, the fog remains. Sartre identifies the self from our reflexive acts, that is, from the moment we become aware of our consciousness, but if we assume that there is no reflection, where would the self be? To answer this question, it would be necessary to explain the distinction made by Sartre between the types of human beings or states in the world, such as the reality that lies behind our conscious experiences. However, what is important to emphasize is that consciousness is always about something, so it is directed from a void to something specific, such as an object.

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