

NOM  
NAME

SARTRE'S CRITIQUE OF THE HUSSERLIAN  
EGO

No. D-6

D0008



Re-Order No. GL-210R

D0008

# THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN

*A quarterly journal of philosophy*

---

## **Sartre's Critique of the Husserlian Ego**

ROBERT M. DORAN, S.J.

Reprinted from Vol. XLIV, number 4, May 1967

---

**Saint Louis University**

*The College of Philosophy and Letters and the Department of Philosophy, SAINT LOUIS*

Printed in Belgium

SARTRE'S CRITIQUE  
OF THE HUSSERLIAN EGO

MR. ROBERT M. DORAN, S.J., received his M.A. degree in philosophy at Saint Louis University. He is now pursuing theological studies at St. Mary's College, St. Marys, Kansas.

He has translated Joseph de Finance's *Essai sur l'agir humain*, soon to be published by Herder and Herder.

A properly philosophical understanding of Sartre demands careful research into the philosophical background of his thought and especially into the precise relation of Sartre to German phenomenology. It is the purpose of this paper to clarify a basic methodological point in Sartre's procedure against the background of the thought of Edmund Husserl; the precise point at issue is Sartre's criticism of Husserl's theory of the ego as the transcendental unifying agent of intentional consciousness. Sartre's handling of this problem in the article *The Transcendence of the Ego* can legitimately be considered as the epistemological starting point of his entire philosophy. We will attempt to study this article in its historical context and to present a detailed analysis of this difficult but important question.

I. A RADICALIZED PHENOMENOLOGY

The major commentators on the work of Sartre all seem to agree that the central motif of his thought thus far has been the radical freedom of man.<sup>1</sup> It is to this that all of the major factors of his thought are directed, and it is in terms of this that they receive their ultimate explanation. The popular conception of Sartre's existentialism focuses on a heroic philosophy of responsible freedom in an absurd world into which man has been unwittingly and unwillingly hurled. Basically, this is a legitimate interpretation. It only receives its full contextual meaning, though, when viewed against the philosophical background of Sartre's thought.<sup>2</sup> This background is, as we

have said, mainly that of German phenomenology and particularly the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, James Collins, *The Existentialists* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952); Wilfrid Desan, *The Tragic Finale* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954); Maurice Natanson, *A Critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1951) and "Jean-Paul Sartre's Philosophy of Freedom," *Social Research*, Vol. 19 (1952), pp. 364-80; Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (2 vols.; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>A complete explanation of Sartre's thought would of course have to outline the details of more than just his philosophical background. Literary factors are important: a biographical study is badly needed; of special relevance is the socio-political milieu of France during the period of Sartre's philosophical coming of age.

<sup>3</sup>This article originally appeared in *Recherches Philosophiques*, Vol. 6 (1936-37) pp. 85-123. It has been translated into English by Forest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick: *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness* (New York: Noonday Press, 1957). The subtitle is misleading, since Sartre did not adopt the trade name of existentialism until after the writing of *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

Spiegelberg (*Phenomenological Movement*, pp. 459-62) describes Sartre's pre-phenomenological period, marked by an extreme skepticism, especially about the central problem of the relation of man's freedom with being. From 1932 to 1934, Sartre studied in Germany and had personal contact with Martin Heidegger.

<sup>4</sup>Two later sources which we will employ are Sartre's article "Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: L'Intentionnalité," *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 31-35; and the introduction to *L'Etre et le néant* (5th ed.; Paris: Gallimard, 1949). The article on Husserl originally appeared in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (janvier 1939). *L'Etre et le néant* has been translated into English by Hazel E. Barnes: *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosoph-

ical Lib., 1956). The introduction is on pp. xlvi-lxix.

<sup>5</sup>*The Transcendence of the Ego*, pp. 38, 39, 41. "Une idée fondamentale" sounds a jubilant note at the triumph of Husserl in refuting once and for all the "assimilation" theories of consciousness and proclaiming the indubitable fact of the transcendence of human knowledge. Sartre in this article is tactically ignoring the idealism of Husserl. In *Being and Nothingness*, however, he roundly castigated Husserl for his strange type of intentionality which, while conferring upon knowledge the indispensable characteristic of being knowledge of, yet remains an immanent intentionality completely constructive of the very being of its intended objects.

It is Sartre who declares that Husserl has defined consciousness as intentionality. The translators of *Transcendence* assert that "Husserl never concerned himself with a final definition, but certainly he regarded intentionality as essential to consciousness" (p. 114, n. 7).

<sup>6</sup>*Transcendence*, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33. The error involved in this case is, says Sartre, a case of conceiving transcendental consciousness as a pre-empirical unconscious. But "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 consciousness, 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. Consequently, to make into a reality the transcendental I, to make of it the inseparable companion of each of our 'consciousnesses,' is to pass on fact, not on validity, and to take a point of view radically different from that of Kant" (*ibid.*).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup>Quentin Lauer, s.j., *The Triumph of Subjectivity* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1958), p. 49.

Indispensable to any understanding of the entire philosophical enterprise of Sartre is a careful and scrupulous study of a very important article which Sartre published early in his philosophical career, "La Transcendance de l'ego: Esquisse d'une description phénoménologique."<sup>3</sup> This significant entry serves to define the position of Sartre in the history of the phenomenological movement, for he vehemently contests several of the positions and implications of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and suggests a new approach to this current Continental philosophical method.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre accepts the Husserlian "definition" of consciousness as "intentionality."<sup>5</sup> But he declares that Husserl has contradicted himself by simultaneously defining consciousness in this fashion and positing a unifying, actually existing transcendental ego.<sup>6</sup> Let us study Sartre's mode of argumentation on this point.

A question that can be asked against the background of the Kantian consideration is whether "the *I* that we encounter in our consciousness [is] made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or is it the *I* which in fact unites the representations to each other?"<sup>7</sup> For Kant, transcendental consciousness is a set of logical conditions for the possibility of experience; for the neo-Kantians these conditions are made into a reality. "This is the tendency which leads certain writers to ask, for example, what 'transcendental consciousness' can *be*."<sup>8</sup>

For Husserl, on the other hand, transcendental consciousness becomes an absolute fact, "a real consciousness accessible to each of us as soon as the 'reduction' is performed."<sup>9</sup> The phenomenological reduction is the basic methodological technique of Husserlian phenomenology; it is reminiscent of Descartes's methodical doubt with its systematic and ruthless elimination of all that does not smack of absolute certitude. Husserl goes a step beyond Descartes, however, (Looking at the situation from a different angle, he could be said to stop short of Descartes.) Husserl suspends all question of existence, for he feels that to doubt existence is to take a position with regard to it. Husserl is interested in the essences intended by consciousness; and since "reality simply does not enter into the question of *what* things are,"<sup>10</sup> he feels that he can simply bracket the question of existence.

The Cartesian *cogito* and Husserl's original contribution of the

*Sartre's Critique of the Husserlian Ego*

Robert M. Doran, S.J.

intentionality of consciousness are the foundations of Husserl's phenomenology.

What the *cogito* first contributed was an apodictic certitude of the subject, afforded by the very fact of consciousness—not, it is true, the certitude, which Descartes thought he had found, of a substantial subject of consciousness, but rather the certitude of a subjectivity from which all the contingent elements of factuality could be eliminated, leaving only “pure consciousness” or subjectivity as such.<sup>11</sup>

The elimination of contingency is accomplished by the *epoché* or phenomenological reduction, which leads us to “concentrate on the concrete phenomenon in all its aspects and varieties, intuit its essence,

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup>Spiegelberg, *Phenomenological Movement*, Vol. 1, p. 135. Spiegelberg, in a very interesting article entitled “Husserl's Phenomenology and Existentialism” (*Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 57 [1960], pp. 62-74), lists the following as the most important constants in Husserl's phenomenology:

“1. Phenomenology is a rigorous science in the sense of a coherent system of propositions; it goes even beyond positive science by aiming at absolute certainty for its foundations and at freedom from presuppositions that have not passed phenomenological scrutiny.

“2. Its subject matter is the general essences of the phenomena of consciousness; among these phenomena, the phenomenologist distinguishes between the intending act and the intended objects in strict parallel; he pays special attention to the modes of appearance in which the intended referents present themselves; he does not impose any limitations as to the content of these phenomena.

“3. Phenomenology is based on the intuitive exploration and faithful description of the phenomena within the context of the world of our lived experience (*Lebenswelt*), anxious to avoid reductionist oversimplifications and over-complications by preconceived theoretical patterns.

“4. In order to secure the fullest possible range of phenomena and at the same time doubt-proof foundations it uses a special method of reduction which suspends the beliefs associated with our naive or natural attitude and shared even by science; it also traces back the phenomena to the constituting acts in a pure subject, which itself proves to be irreducible.

“5. Its ultimate objective is the examination and justification of all our beliefs, both ordinary and scientific, by the test of intuitive perception” (p. 64).

<sup>13</sup>*The Phenomenological Movement*, Vol. 1, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup>See Sartre, *Transcendence*, pp. 35, 37 f.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38. (Sartre is here, of course, expressing the doctrine of Husserl.)

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. lvii, lxi, 73.

<sup>17</sup>*Transcendence*, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.* On p. 625 of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre accuses Husserl of the error of “pure immanence.” And, on p. 83 of *The Psychology of Imagination*, he states that Husserl was “a victim of the illusion of immanence” (New York: Philosophical Lib., 1948). This is a translation of *L'Imaginaire*, which was first published in 1940.

analyze and describe it without any consideration of its reality.”<sup>12</sup> The residual element can be stated in the formula *ego cogito cogitata mea*.<sup>13</sup> It is the ego that we are particularly interested in. Husserl differs from both Hume and Descartes, in addition to his abovementioned variance with Kant. Hume and others had rejected the idea of an identical subject over and above the intentional acts of consciousness, whereas Descartes had interpreted the ego as an immediately intuited substance. The pure ego for Husserl is constitutive of our empirical consciousness by unifying our perceptions and thoughts into an identical frame of subjective reference.<sup>14</sup> “The *I* is the producer of inwardness.”<sup>15</sup>

Sartre simultaneously denies the necessity and asserts the encumbrance for phenomenology of the transcendental ego of Husserl. It is interesting and all-important to note that Sartre’s reasons for taking the stand which is peculiarly his own are found in the ultimate implications of a doctrine of Husserl which Sartre unqualifiedly accepts: the doctrine of the radical intentionality of consciousness. Thus Husserl is charged with betraying what is most fruitful in his own phenomenology.<sup>16</sup>

First of all, the transcendental ego is not necessary, for intentionality, the escape of consciousness from itself, grasps a transcendent object which itself serves to unify the intending consciousness. “The unity of a thousand active consciousnesses by which I have added, do add, and shall add two and two to make four, is the transcendent object ‘two and two make four.’ ”<sup>17</sup>

For Sartre, Husserl’s transcendental ego is inescapably bound up with his ultimate immanentism and idealism. This is a major factor in Sartre’s rejection of Husserl’s pure ego.

It is possible that those believing “two and two make four” to be the *content* of my representation may be obliged to appeal to a transcendental and subjective principle of unification, which will then be the *I*. But it is precisely Husserl who has no need of such a principle. The object is transcendent to the consciousnesses which grasp it, and it is in the object that the unity of the consciousnesses is found.<sup>18</sup>

*Sartre’s Critique of the Husserlian Ego*  
Robert M. Doran, S.J.



This point is brought out more clearly in Sartre's declaration that not only is the pure ego unnecessary for phenomenology but it is also a hindrance to the intentional activity of consciousness. Sartre here sets forth a key notion in his entire philosophical project, the concept of consciousness as a complete "being-for," weighed down by absolutely no content or personal identity of its own and apart from the objects which it intends. In *Being and Nothingness*, this spontaneity will be developed into a philosophy of the utter, radical freedom of man in the world.

Sartre argues that if a transcendental ego is allowed to an intentional consciousness, contact with some independent reality is impossible; the intentionality which defines consciousness takes on the freakish character of immanence; and the constitution of the objects intended is completely dependent on the activity of consciousness. The reason that a transcendental ego is incapable of establishing contact with independent reality can be summarized in three points: (1) consciousness is necessarily consciousness of itself; (2) consciousness is aware of itself precisely insofar as it is aware of a transcendent object; (3) this sheer spontaneity is impossible if consciousness is weighed down by the presence of an *I* inhabiting it. "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."<sup>19</sup>

It is through this basic criticism of Husserl that Sartre thus introduces us to the conception of consciousness that means so much in his philosophy. The consequences of this new phenomenological starting-point, this "radicalization of phenomenology,"<sup>20</sup> are, says Sartre,

First, the transcendental field becomes impersonal; or, if you like, "pre-personal," *without an I*.

<sup>19</sup>*Transcendence*, pp. 41 f. Notice the metaphorical language—a Sartrean trademark.

<sup>20</sup>James Collins, *The Existentialists* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952). Collins says "[Husserl] introduced a special zone of reality so that phenomenological studies could be made to yield results relevant for a theory of being. But this supposes that the inquiry into essential structures and the conditions of intentionality is

not adequate by itself to found an ontology. Sartre calls this assumption into question" (*ibid.*). We might add that Sartre also feels that it is precisely the introduction of the pure ego, with its immanentist consequences, which renders impossible an ontology within the Husserlian framework.

<sup>21</sup>*Transcendence*, pp. 36 f.

<sup>22</sup>"Husserl's Phenomenology and Existentialism," pp. 71 f.

Second, the *I* appears only at the level of humanity and is only one aspect of the *me*, the active aspect.

Third, the *I think* can accompany our representations because it appears on a foundation of unity which it did not help to create; rather, this prior unity makes the *I think* possible.

Fourth, one may well ask if personality (even the abstract personality of an *I*) is a necessary accompaniment of a consciousness, and if one cannot conceive of absolutely impersonal consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

Several criticisms of Sartre's procedure thus far are, I think, justified. First of all, as Spiegelberg points out,<sup>22</sup> the primary reason that Sartre proposes for eliminating the Husserlian ego (that is, that it is not necessary for phenomenology), would receive the approval, perhaps, of William of Ockham; but it is a phenomenologically inadequate reason. Phenomenology does not use the razor technique beyond the point of eliminating from consideration those aspects of the naive, natural standpoint of men which lack absolute certitude; if Sartre wants to eliminate the ego of Husserl, he should appeal to experience or the question of certitude, but not simply state that the pure ego is phenomenologically unnecessary.

This criticism is intimately connected with a consideration which should be kept in mind at every level of criticizing Sartre: he has a dominant penchant for postulating and begging the question. In the matter at hand, he has, first of all, postulated the radical self-sufficiency of the phenomenological technique and has simply set about the task of "purifying" phenomenology of its Husserlian stains, so that it may be capable of founding an ontology. Secondly, by assuming that intentionality is equivalent to pure, spontaneous lucidity, he begs the question when he asserts that the presence of an *I* will weight down consciousness to the extent of rendering it incapable of transcending itself and intending the real world. This point is connected with what in *Being and Nothingness* is referred to as the "ontological proof" of the existence of an independent reality. Contained in the very notion of "intentionality" is the characteristic of transcendence to a "transphenomenal world."

*Sartre's Critique of the Husserlian Ego*  
Robert M. Doran, S.J.

In the course of his process of eliminating the transcendental ego, Sartre also states the beginnings of his doctrine on the object of consciousness, hinting at his famous "prereflective *cogito*." As we have seen, all consciousness for Sartre is consciousness of itself, but only insofar as it is consciousness of a transcendent object. Sartre calls this immediate consciousness of consciousness "nonpositional" in the sense that consciousness is not for itself an object, even though all consciousness is consciousness of itself.<sup>23</sup> As Sartre points out in *Being and Nothingness*, the *conscience de soi* which characterizes all consciousness should really be written *conscience (de) soi*.<sup>24</sup>

This nonpositional consciousness-in-the-world is the basic starting point of Sartre's phenomenology. In *Being and Nothingness* it becomes the inseparable dyad of *l'en-soi* and *le pour soi*. Collins refers us to the first two pages of *L'Imagination*<sup>25</sup> for a description of this primordial given:

I am looking at this white sheet of paper which is lying on my desk. I perceive its form, its color, its position. These different qualities have characteristics in common. In the first place, they are given to my observation as existences that I can only assert, but whose being does not depend in any way upon my caprice. They are for me, but they are not me. . . . They are present and inert at the same time. This inertness of the sensible content—which has been described so often—is existence in-itself. It is useless to discuss whether this sheet of paper is reducible to a collection of representations, or if it is and must be more than that. What is certain is that the "white" which I assert can

<sup>23</sup>*Transcendence*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup>See *Being and Nothingness*, p. liv. In addition to his metaphorical trademark, mentioned above, Sartre also frequently employs such clever ways of expressing himself as this *conscience (de) soi*. It is not an altogether unfounded criticism of his procedure in *Being and Nothingness* that metaphors and clever aphorisms help him to escape the confining rigor of the principle of contradiction! A. J. Ayer has referred to Sartre's entire philosophical enterprise

as "a misuse of the verb 'to be.'" In this vein, it is interesting to note that while Sartre claims to be purifying phenomenology, at the same time he introduces elements that utterly vitiate the strict scientific claims and ideals of Edmund Husserl.

<sup>25</sup>Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948. This work, one of Sartre's earliest, was originally published in 1956. It has never been translated into English.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 1 f. (Translation mine.)

certainly not be produced by my spontaneity. This inert form which exists over against all conscious spontaneities, and which must be observed and learned little by little, is what is called a "thing." In any case my consciousness can not be a thing, because its mode of existence in itself is precisely that of a being for-itself. For it, to exist is to have consciousness of its existence. It appears as a pure spontaneity facing the purely inert world of things. We can then posit, at the very outset, two types of existence. It is, in effect, inasmuch as they are inert that things escape the domination of consciousness; it is in their inertness that their autonomy is protected and preserved.<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious that this description is not made at the level of a non-positional and prereflective *cogito*, for in this description consciousness is taken as an object of consciousness. There is, then, for Sartre, a second level of awareness, a true "conscience *de soi*." This is the level of reflection.

The process of reflection for Sartre can be divided up into the following points: (1) an intentional consciousness of a transcendent object, which consciousness is also a nonpositional *conscience (de) soi*; (2) a continuity between this nonpositional *conscience (de) soi* and a positional reflective consciousness of this original consciousness, which is at the same time a nonpositional prereflective *conscience (de) soi*.

In this setup, Sartre declares a position opposed to that of Descartes. Sartre would claim that, while the *cogito* attains to an absolute certitude, the *I* that is attained is not the *I* that intends, unifies, and individualizes consciousness as a subject, but is rather an *I apprehended in* a previous nonpositional consciousness of a transcendent object.

We are in the presence of a synthesis of two consciousnesses, one of which is consciousness of the Other. . . . Now, my reflecting consciousness does not take itself for an object when I effect the *Cogito*. What it affirms concerns the reflected consciousness. Insofar as my reflecting consciousness is consciousness of itself, it is *non-positional* consciousness. It becomes positional only by directing itself upon the reflected consciousness which itself was not a positional consciousness of itself before being reflected.

*Sartre's Critique of the Husserlian Ego*  
Robert M. Doran, S.J.

Thus the consciousness which says *I think* is precisely not the consciousness which thinks. 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 consciousnesses, or if it is not rather the *I* of the reflected consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

The essential point is that the *I* appears only at the level of reflection; that is, as an element in the reflected consciousness.

There is no doubt about the result: while I was reading, there was consciousness of the book, of the heroes of the novel, but the *I* was not inhabiting this consciousness. It was only consciousness of the object and nonpositional consciousness of itself. . . . There was no *I* in the unreflected consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

The reason, again, is found in the intentional nature of consciousness, with its basic act of intuiting essential structures.

What is the *I*? It is, first of all, an existent, which gives itself to reflective consciousness as transcendent. There is a special intuition of reflective consciousness which apprehends the *I* behind the reflected consciousness. The *I* is a new object, affirmed only by reflective consciousness; it is not therefore on the same level as the original unreflected act, which can exist without being reflected upon, nor is it on the same level as the object of the reflected consciousness. The *I*, itself a product of the natural, naive attitude of men, must fall before the radicalized phenomenological reduction, since it is not a part of the original prereflective *cogito* which is a man's being-in-the-world. "The certain content of the pseudo-'Cogito' is not '*I have consciousness of this chair,*' but '*There is consciousness of this chair.*' This content is sufficient to constitute an infinite and absolute field of investigation for phenomenology."<sup>29</sup>

In the "Conclusion" to *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre anticipates the major themes of *Being of Nothingness* in terms of his new meaning for man's being-in-the-world. The spontaneity of consciousness is portrayed as a "*nothing* which is *all* because it is *con-*

<sup>27</sup>*Transcendence*, pp. 44 f.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 46 f.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 52 ff.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98 f.

consciousness of objects,"<sup>30</sup> as "a sphere of *absolute* existence, of pure spontaneities, which are never objects and which determine their own existence,"<sup>31</sup> as "*individuated* and *impersonal* spontaneity" which "determines its existence at each instant, without our being able to conceive anything *before* it. Each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo*."<sup>32</sup> The frightening aspect of this utter projection of spontaneous freedom which is man constitutes pure consciousness in the dread and anguish which are the inescapable marks of man's life.