

Transcendence of the Ego

(an excerpt)

Jean-Paul Sartre

[Sartre is talking consciousness and is making the distinction between "reflected" consciousness (when you are FULLY aware of yourself) and "unreflected" consciousness (when you are not really thinking about how you are conscious...typically you are "fully" engaged in doing something and your "mind goes blank.")

A few notes before we read Sartre.

1. He is talking about consciousness – the idea that we are aware of our existence. Not just that we are alive, but that we are thinking...we are pondering our existence.

The common reference to this idea is mostly pointing to the famous statement made by Rene Decartes:

"I think, therefore I am."

2. There are several different forms of consciousness:

a. I am aware that I am alive as I am driving my car.

b. I am more aware when I am struggling with a "personal" problem – maybe I said something to my wife in anger.

*c. When I am engulfed in an activity: watching an intense movie, a great football game, playing a video game...
I am not as aware of my consciousness (because I am not thinking about myself).*

3. When Sartre speaks of "I" he is talking about "ego."

Εγώ – ego – Greek for referencing "I...me...myself."

*4. Are we conscious of ourselves when we are asleep?
What if we are unconscious? Put to sleep for surgery?
Are we conscious when we are dreaming?]*

Sartre on the Transcendence of the Ego:

But I must point out that the memory of the unreflected consciousness is not opposed to the data of the reflective consciousness. No one would deny for a moment that the *I* appears in a reflected consciousness...

The validity of a present reflection, in fact, does not reach beyond the consciousness presently apprehended. And reflective memory, to which we are obliged to have recourse in order to reinstate

elapsed consciousnesses, besides its questionable character owing to its nature as memory, remains suspect since...reflection *modifies* the spontaneous consciousness...all the non-reflective memories of unreflected consciousness show me a consciousness *without a me...*

there is no *I* on the unreflected level.

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no *I*. There is consciousness *of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken*, etc....In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects; it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousnesses; it is they which present themselves with values, with attractive and repellant qualities – but *me*, I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself. There is no place for *me* on this level. And this is not a matter of chance, due to a momentary lapse of attention, but happens because of the very structure of consciousness. [pp.48-49]

[*This blog contains notes from a group reading and discussion of a reading from Sartre. The notes below were helpful to me – just to make sure I was following Sartre's thoughts...which are really abstract for me.]*

<https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2011/12/02/some-additional-thoughts-on-sartre/>

Sartre takes consciousness to be ‘intentional’...

This means that consciousness is always consciousness of something – it always has an object (*something* external to it).

This does not mean that consciousness is a ‘subject’ – *it is typically not the focus of the mind*...it is simply the unity of all of the moments of being conscious of something. If you like, you can think of it as the unity of experience or perception.

Unreflective consciousness is the bare act of consciousness of external objects without awareness of being conscious. (emphasis added)

Sartre talks about being in the moment (looking at a landscape, chasing a bus) and we discussed maybe a sliding scale where some animals experience without any awareness of it.

People though, have an awareness of being conscious in unreflected consciousness, but it is not the awareness of self-reflection. It is not an awareness of 'self'. It is simply an awareness that consciousness is not the object that it is intending (apprehending, experiencing). At this point, awareness is "impersonal". Consciousness is not taking itself as an object.

In reflected consciousness, consciousness *takes itself as an object* – or more precisely takes its states, etc. as objects.

This gives rise to self-awareness and a concept of an "I" or an ego. At this point one can talk about a 'me' that has consciousness and it becomes personal. It's kind of like the birth of identity.

In a similar way to that in which consciousness is the unity of intentionality (experience), the ego is the unity of reflected consciousness. It arises from the motion of

consciousness rather than being a separate substance that grounds or makes possible consciousness.

At the level of unreflective consciousness, consciousness doesn't belong to a subject. "Impersonal" here can be read as 'in common'. It's a restatement of the phenomenological thesis that our experience shows that we are all conscious of the same objects and that those objects are external. This counters skepticism about both the existence of the external world (or at least our epistemic access to it) as well as providing a way to bridge experience with others.

By making the ego a unity that arises from consciousness rather than an object, Sartre places limits on how we can know or experience the ego when we try and take it as an object – when we take an intentional stance towards it.

Because the ego is the totality of consciousness, even though consciousness can take the ego as an object, it can't take it all in at once. He talks about the ego as being at the horizon of consciousness – always an object you can only see at the periphery, as it were.

This inversion of the traditional view of the ego is pretty unsettling: the ego no longer grounds your identity and experience, nor is it something to which you have privileged access. It is fluid and constantly being constituted by consciousness. You have access to the states that make up your reflected consciousness – and no access to other's reflected states – but this doesn't guarantee some kind of superior epistemic position. Rather, they are simply more 'intimate' than those of others.