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Me, myself and I: Sartre and Husserl on elusiveness of the self

Pierre-Jean Renaudie

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Abstract In his early essay on transcendence of the ego, Sartre attempted to follow Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and to draw the consequences of his phenomenological criticism of subjectivity. Both authors have emphasized the elusiveness of the self as a result of intentionality of consciousness. However, Sartre's analysis of ego led him quite far from Husserl's philosophical project, insofar as it was somehow already raising the question about the moral nature of the self, and was thus establishing the basis of the conception of moral consciousness that has been displayed later in *Being and Nothingness*. This article stresses the importance of such a turn in Sartre's philosophy, which reorients him from a strict description of consciousness toward a moral assessment of the structure of the self.

Keywords Self-consciousness · Reflection · Intentionality · Self-knowledge · Bad faith · Interiority · Transcendence

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I want to examine the roots of Sartre's conception of moral consciousness and to show its relations with the analysis of ego we can find in his first philosophical essay, *La transcendance de l'Ego* (*Transcendence of the Ego*). One of this text's main interesting points is to disclose the reasons that led Sartre from a phenomenological description of self-consciousness to the well known moral conclusions drawn in *L'Être et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*). Such an analysis emphasizes some kind of decisive turn in Sartre's thought, a turn that allowed him to bridge the gap between a descriptive and neutral analysis on the one hand and a normative or moral conception of consciousness on

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the other hand. This leads me to the second purpose of this article, which is to assess the validity (I mean the phenomenological legitimacy) of such moral consequences in relation with Husserl's conception of intentional consciousness in the *Logical Investigations*.

2 The criticism of the "I"

Sartre claimed to be following Husserl in his descriptive analysis of consciousness, and pretended to be especially faithful to the *Logical Investigations*, i.e. to the earliest and non-transcendental version of Husserl's phenomenology. It must be noted, though, that such a claim is not exactly justified, and the differences between Sartre and Husserl can be very enlightening in order to indicate some turning point in Sartre's phenomenology (and some difficulties related to such a turn). But it remains nevertheless obvious that the conception of consciousness defended in *Transcendence of the Ego* is very close to the kind of analysis developed in Husserl's Fifth *Logical Investigation*, and I first need to show why.

The first paragraphs of the Fifth *Logical Investigation* are very surprising if we read them in retrospection and from the transcendental perspective. This is notably one of the reasons why Husserl encountered so many difficulties when he tried to rewrite his *Logical Investigation* after the so-called "transcendental turn," about 1913. Indeed, contrary to the stress Husserl laid later on the decisive role of the Ego in phenomenological analysis, the definition of consciousness he gave in those paragraphs gets rid of any mention of an ego understood as a pure identical pole shared by all experiences, and that would take charge of their subjective dimension. As Husserl writes, it is "clear that the relation in which experiences are thought to stand to a psychic Being or a me points to *no peculiar phenomenological situation*."¹ Consciousness is nothing but the field of our lived experiences, and one could not find any track of a pure Ego or any other form of subjectivity in it, if sticking to a metaphysically neutral description of the structures of those experiences. Husserl makes this point against the neo-Kantians in the 8th § of the 5th *Investigation*, and he aimed particularly at Natorp, who took the "I" for "the *subjective center of relation* for all contents in my consciousness."² Husserl raises two different arguments, based on his rejection of any metaphysical presupposition within the descriptive practice and on his constant suspicion regarding inner perception. These two arguments make Husserl's analysis of the stream of consciousness very close to the position defended in Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego*, since both of them can be called non-egological conceptions of consciousness.³

First, while Natorp analyzes the pure ego as a "fundamental fact" that is "given" and should "become perceptible by abstraction," Husserl claims that it is strictly not possible to locate it, as a third element given in any intentional experience of

¹ Husserl (1984b, p. 353; text from the first edition, my translation).

² Natorp (1888, §4); quoted by Husserl (1984b, p. 359).

³ Zahavi (2005, p. 32).

something. As the phenomenologist describes and displays the structures of intentional lived experiences, he might be able to distinguish such experiences from the object towards which this experience is directed—the object which this experience is an experience *of*—but he will never find any “I” or pure ego that would be supposed to support this intentional relation: “I must frankly confess, however, that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive, necessary centre of relations.”⁴ The Humean aspect of this assertion has been highlighted many times by commentators. Such a critical analysis might remind us David Hume’s criticism of Descartes’ cogito in the 4th section of the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. However, we must be cautious in establishing such connection, for Husserl did not only mean that no ego could be found in inner perception as if the “Me” was necessarily supposed to be given as an element of my lived-experiences, besides sensation contents and intended objects. We could probably hold this argument against Hume, for it presupposes that the “me” necessarily has to be somehow given in inner perception, but certainly not against Husserl’s critical account on ego in the *Logical Investigations*. By saying that the “me” does not point to any “peculiar phenomenological situation,” Husserl keeps his analysis away from this line of criticisms, and he insists on the fact that no ego can be described as an irreducible *structure* (and not only as an element) of lived-experiences.

Accordingly, if it seems clear that Husserlian criticism of the ego does justice to what has been called the “elusiveness of the self,”⁵ I think it is necessary to be more specific and add that the *Logical Investigations* defend an original version of this thesis, a *phenomenological* elusiveness of the self. The question is not whether it is possible to find out if the ego is or is not a content or a part of my consciousness (an “inhabitant of my consciousness,” as Sartre would say); the point is that consciousness does not need an egological structure to build its intentional relation to an object. This leads us to the second argument Husserl put forward against Natorp: if the ego does not belong to the structure of consciousness nor command the intentional relation to objects, and if it nevertheless remains true that we are acquainted with something we usually call our “me,” then this “me” can be nothing else than the result or the product of this intentional structure of consciousness. In other words, if we are somehow legitimated to speak about an ego or to describe something as our “I,” such an ego can be nothing else but a peculiar object towards which our consciousness is turned.

So far, the situation can be summarized by positing an alternative leading egological analyses of consciousness to an irreducible dilemma: either I have to describe myself as an object, and from a third-person point of view, either I have to presuppose a subject that constantly vanishes through the intentional lived-experiences and disappears within the intentional relation to object (like the transcendental “I” Kant used to analyze as a mere function of thought, that must be able “to accompany all of my representations”⁶). To experience something is to “live” within an intentional relation to the world or to any object so that our “I” is

⁴ Husserl (1984b, p. 361; 2001, p. 209).

⁵ Cassam (1994, p. 3).

⁶ Kant (1999, §16).

necessarily absorbed in this relation, as I can be absorbed in the contemplation of a landscape, captivated by the story I am reading or fascinated by the movie I am watching: “While I was reading, there was consciousness *of* the book, *of* the heroes of the novel, but the *I* was not inhabiting this consciousness.”⁷ The language we use to describe those situations is very clear and makes it explicit: the intentional relation to the objects we are aware of is a matter of capture and rapture, so that our subjectivity vanishes within the intensity of this relation. Intentionality of consciousness dispossesses us of ourselves. “If we simply ‘live’ in the act in question, become absorbed, for example in the perceptual ‘taking in’ of some event happening before us, in some play of fancy, in reading a story, in carrying out a mathematical proof, etc., the ego as relational centre of our performances becomes quite elusive.”⁸ One would look in vain for any kind of ego in such experiences, for their main phenomenological feature is to direct our consciousness towards an object we are precisely not, and towards an object we cannot be identical to. Husserl’s famous claim that intentionality defines the “universal fundamental property of consciousness” and according to which consciousness is always “consciousness *of* something”⁹ means that consciousness as intentional is nothing in itself and cannot even exist apart from such directedness towards something other, that is to say something consciousness is *not* by nature.

3 Reflective consciousness versus pre-reflective self-awareness

However, this is not to say that we cannot speak of any ego *at all*. Husserl’s point in the *Logical Investigations* only consists in showing that we have no phenomenological legitimacy to speak of any other ego than the empirical one, this ego to whom we can ascribe properties from a third-person point of view. But such an empirical ego cannot have the kind of privilege Natorp wanted to assign to it, since its phenomenological status in description is the one of “any physical thing,” such as “a house or a tree”¹⁰: “We perceive the ego just as we perceive an external thing.”¹¹ Here we reach exactly the main point Sartre wanted to establish in *Transcendence of the Ego*: what I call my “I” or my “ego” belongs as much to the world and to the outer experience as any other “ego.”¹² Therefore, such an ego is by nature transcendent. By saying that, Sartre appropriates Husserl’s analysis of intentional consciousness and radicalizes its consequences: because of its intentionality, consciousness cannot do anything but creating a gap between itself and the ego. What Sartre calls the “intentional translucency” of consciousness is responsible for the opacity of the ego, as the latter is always given as an object and

⁷ Sartre (2003, p. 30; 1960, pp. 46–47).

⁸ Husserl (1984b, p. 217).

⁹ Husserl (1973, p. 72; 1960, p. 33).

¹⁰ Husserl (1984b, p. 204).

¹¹ Husserl (1984b, p. 210).

¹² Sartre (1960, p. 31): the ego “is outside, *in the world*. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another.”

in reflection. Our ego can only appear when we adopt a distancing and objectifying attitude towards our own experience, and thus, what emerges when we try to reach ourselves as subjects of our experience is the object rather than the subject of such a reflection. Each time we think we just grasped the ego, we actually just missed it and grasped nothing by its shadow, that is to say the objectified result of our reflection. To reflect is to posit an object or to objectify what we are reflecting upon, so that we cannot obtain through this intentional consciousness of ourselves the kind of certainty Descartes was looking for in his Second *Meditation*, founded on the so-called immediate access I am supposed to have to myself in the cogito. Therefore, as Sartre writes in *Transcendence of the Ego*, “my “I” is *no more certain for consciousness than the “I” of other men.*”¹³ I cannot pretend to have a specific access to my own Ego that other people would be lacking in (and consequently, according to him, the question of intersubjectivity should be redefined on such basis).

However, if Sartre would concur with Husserl that it is categorically not possible to bridge the gap created by intentionality between consciousness and ego, such a radical thesis that was in the *Logical Investigations* closely linked with the Elusiveness thesis does not exactly have the same meaning and the same consequences in Sartre’s analyses. Indeed, while Sartre clearly follows Husserl’s 1901 book by underlining the empirical nature of ego on the one hand, he nevertheless stresses on the other hand the importance of this gap between consciousness and the “me,” in order to give a new understanding of its significance. Here we meet up with Sartre’s second main thesis in *Transcendence of the Ego*, namely his distinction between two different sides or aspects of our lived experiences, giving way to the opposition between pre-reflective self-awareness and reflective consciousness. Sartre claims that consciousness necessarily has a twofold structure, insofar as our experiences are at the same time intentionally directed towards an object and lived in first-personal mode of givenness. So we should distinguish, according to Sartre, between intentional consciousness of objects and non-intentional self-awareness. While the former mode of consciousness is objectifying and consists in positing an object as something transcendent, the latter is on the contrary characterized as non-positional kind of immanent consciousness, which does not imply any form of reflection for it does not posit that which it is aware of as an object.

Insofar as my reflecting consciousness is consciousness of itself, it is *non-positional* consciousness ... A consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object.¹⁴

In other words, Sartre’s reasoning could be displayed as the following: consciousness has to be somehow given to itself prior to reflection, if one wants

¹³ Sartre (2003, p. 85; 1960, p. 104).

¹⁴ “En tant que ma conscience réfléchissante est conscience d’elle-même, elle est conscience *non-positionnelle*. [...] Une conscience n’a nullement besoin d’une conscience réfléchissante pour être consciente d’elle-même. Simplement elle ne se pose pas à elle-même comme un objet.” Sartre (2003, pp. 28–29; 1960, pp. 44–45).

to be able to explain how we manage to take it as an object when we are reflecting on our own lived-experiences. When Sartre analyzes the example of the reader absorbed by the story and concludes that such a consciousness is only consciousness of the object, he adds that this very consciousness is at the same time “non-positional consciousness of itself.”¹⁵

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* ... Consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence.¹⁶

I would not be able to reflect and to describe our experiences from third-person perspective if I were not living these same experiences from a first-person perspective first. I would not have any consciousness of I if I were not experiencing an “I-consciousness.” This is the reason why Sartre criticizes in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* the “necessity of syntax” that compels us to speak about a “consciousness of self” (conscience *de soi*), whereas such a non-positing kind of consciousness should lead us to bracket this grammatical transitivity and to speak about self-consciousness (“conscience (de) soi”).¹⁷

Accordingly, it is to be emphasized that Sartre’s main point regarding transcendence of the ego goes hand in hand with a second thesis on the pre-reflective structure of self-awareness. The ego is an empirical being because it is posited by an intentional act of consciousness and so results of an objectifying kind of reflection. However, this does not mean that we have no direct and immediate relation to our self, even if this relation cannot correspond to a mode of knowledge reintroducing the intentional split or the subject-object duality. Sartre makes it more explicit a few years later, in *Being and Nothingness*, by writing that “self-consciousness ... must be an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself.”¹⁸ Yet, such an understanding of the structure of consciousness is already at work in *Transcendence of the Ego*, through the opposition between intentional consciousness and pre-reflective self-awareness. Indeed, the problem Sartre was taking into consideration is not only that the ego we are positing is always somehow transcendent. The problem is rather that *we do not know it*, and we are thus mistaken each time we take this transcendent ego for the immanent subject of our lived-experiences. And the reason why such a projection of the ego within our consciousness is so tempting and common in philosophical understanding of the self is precisely that we are experiencing such a non-positing consciousness of ourselves all along our conscious life.

¹⁵ Sartre (2003, p. 30; 1960, pp. 46–47).

¹⁶ “Le type d’existence de la conscience, c’est d’être conscience de soi. Et elle prend conscience de soi *en tant qu’elle est conscience d’un objet transcendant* [...] Elle est purement et simplement conscience d’être conscience de cet objet, c’est la loi de son existence,” Sartre (2003, pp. 23–24; 1960, p. 40).

¹⁷ Sartre (1976, p. 20; 1993, p. XXX). The English syntax has more plasticity than the French and does not require the “of,” while the French does.

¹⁸ Sartre (1976, p. 19; 1993, p. XXIX).

Therefore, the distinction between the reflective and pre-reflective modes of consciousness points out the mistake constantly made by egological conceptions of consciousness: such theories put the ego within the immanence of consciousness as if it was its “inhabitant,” while it is in fact nothing more than the object of reflection. Pre-reflective self-awareness is on the contrary to be understood as a pre-comprehension of the self, which allows *only in a second time* reflection and thematization,¹⁹ so that an Ego can emerge (yet always too late). Consequently, Sartre rejects from the very first pages of *Transcendence of the Ego* Kant’s “transcendental I,” claiming that such a form of subjectivity lacks of any necessity and is to be discarded. “The transcendental I has no *raison d’être*.”²⁰ Such an ego, Sartre argues, would be superfluous in pre-reflective self-awareness, as this self-giveness is nothing more than an essential feature of consciousness that does not need the contribution of any ego to be performed.

4 Interiority and self-awareness: brief insight in Sartre’s philosophical strategies

Yet, should we not apply the same analysis to the self? When Sartre writes that consciousness is each time essentially “consciousness of itself,”²¹ the question that can be asked is whether he means that a self is actually involved in such lived-experiences or not. There is a never clarified deep ambiguity in *Transcendence of the Ego* (that will be perpetuated in *Being and Nothingness*) regarding the very status of the self to which pre-reflective self-awareness refers. Here, Sartre goes further than the *Logical Investigations*, where Husserl only writes that lived-experiences, insofar as they are *lived*, are necessarily and by definition conscious, yet without implying any consciousness *of the self as such*.²² The ambiguity in Sartre lies in the question whether self-awareness is supposed to provide us with any notion of the self or not. If one answers affirmatively to this question, and if this self-awareness is to be understood as a genuine awareness of oneself *as a self*, then it seems incomprehensible how such consciousness *of* itself does not involve another disguised form of subjectivity that necessarily raises the same problems Sartre already mentioned regarding the Ego. How comes that the Ego brings on the one hand some opacity into consciousness while self is supposed on the other hand to fit its translucency?

But if one wants on the contrary to answer negatively to this question, and to consider that such consciousness is not consciousness *of* itself but self-awareness, as it seems to be Sartre’s claim when he argues in favor of non-positing consciousness and brackets the “de” in “conscience (de) soi,”²³ then, unfortunately, the situation

¹⁹ Zahavi (2002, p. 18).

²⁰ Sartre (2003, p. 23; 1960, p. 40).

²¹ Sartre (2003, p. 24; 1960, p. 40).

²² Husserl (1984b, p. 352). There is absolutely no difference between the conscious content that we are aware of and the lived-experience itself.

²³ Sartre (1976, p. 20).

does not look better. First, because such a non-positing kind of consciousness will by *definition* never let us grasp the self *as* a self and as *my* self, since the so-called self-givenness is supposed to *not* be a givenness of the self. Second, because the mention of the self in the expression of “self-awareness” or “self-consciousness” is totally superfluous if such consciousness is not consciousness of the self in a full-fledged sense. One can concur with Husserl and Sartre and take for granted that lived-experiences are in themselves conscious; yet what would one learn by saying that they are not only conscious but self-conscious? If the word self was somehow meaningful and bore some conceptual significance in this expression, it should be possible to distinguish between those two different modes of consciousness. It should make a difference to say that our experiences are not only conscious but *self-conscious*. But it is precisely not the case if one grants to Sartre that being self-conscious is nothing but “the law of the existence of consciousness.”²⁴ Therefore, his distinction between self-consciousness and object-consciousness appears to be suspicious: one cannot see why we should speak of self-consciousness rather than mere consciousness, if the former does not add any significant determination to the latter (if it does not say anything more than the latter), and if “self” is not supposed to refer to anything within this expression. So we must conclude that the self is as superfluous as was the “transcendental I” in Kant’s *Critique of pure reason*.

Here, Sartre is discreetly using two very classical and common strategies in philosophical rhetoric. I would call the first one the “scarecrow strategy.” It consists in building up a philosophical aberration that is supposed to have been defended by most of the past philosophers and is obviously wrong. It makes it then quite easy to point out how mistaking such a theory is, and so to substitute a new theory for the former in order to relieve the reader. This is exactly what happens with Sartre’s criticism of the I considered as an “inhabitant” or possessor of consciousness, while his analysis of the self involved in self-awareness is supposed to stave off this trap (even if we just saw it commits exactly the same mistake). The second strategy is commonly used by what I would call the “greedy philosophers” (and, as everyone knows, greed is one of the seven cardinal sins). It can be characterized as the “having your cake and eating it too” strategy. It is most often the case when one refuses to choose between two philosophical alternatives, in order to be winning on both levels. Again, this is clearly what happens when Sartre tries to hold together the intentional and the pre-reflective thesis about consciousness, by arguing that consciousness is *at once* objectifying consciousness *of* something and pre-reflective self-awareness: in doing so, he wants to distinguish two modes of consciousness without having to separate two different levels of consciousness, so he is able to maintain at once that the ego is opaque and transcendent while self-consciousness is translucent and immanent.²⁵ In other words, Sartre aims at criticizing on the one hand the ego as the empirical result of an objectification, while he refuses on the

²⁴ Sartre (2003, p. 24; 1960, p. 40).

²⁵ Sartre (2003, p. 24; 1960, p. 40): “All is therefore clear and lucid in consciousness: the object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence.”

other hand to give up the possibility of having myself somehow given within my lived-experiences.

However, we already saw that this strategy has an expensive price, since it involves a very blurred and unclear conception of the self never explicitly outlined. Indeed, while Sartre happens to be very harsh when he rejects the egological theories of consciousness, he nevertheless constantly uses a weaker but as pernicious form of subjectivity in his analysis of self-awareness. This discrete coming back of egology within Sartre's descriptions of consciousness appears more clearly when he speaks of consciousness as a radical form of interiority, and claims that consciousness "knows itself only as absolute inwardness" (la conscience "ne se connait que comme intériorité absolue").²⁶ It seems difficult to not be suspicious towards such an analysis that ends up by founding consciousness on a form of interiority (and an absolute form). My point, here, is not to question the legitimacy of a pre-reflective kind of consciousness. But it seems obvious to me that it remains extremely problematic to comprehend this self-awareness as "absolute inwardness," as such a vocabulary brings back the metaphysical opposition between inner and outer perception.

Of course, Sartre describes this self-awareness as an immediate relation to my interiority rather than a special kind of perception directed towards the inner; however, the difficulty, here, is exactly the same Husserl was trying to avoid when he criticized Brentano's distinction between inner and outer perception in the appendix to the *Logical Investigations*. Sartre's reasoning lies on a metaphysical rather than a descriptive distinction between on the one hand an immediate and non-intentional access to myself, and on the other hand a mediated and intentional access to objects, among which is to be located the empirical ego. Thus, when Sartre writes that "my "I" is *no more certain for consciousness than the "I" of other men,*" he nevertheless does not mean that I do not and cannot have any kind of direct access to myself. We have to be very suspicious and cautious when Sartre immediately adds that my "I" is "only more intimate,"²⁷ for such an analysis of the intimacy of consciousness does not seem as harmless as Sartre pretends it to be. Rather, it appears to be quite problematic, insofar as it forces us to distinguish two different and irreducible concepts of interiority in *Transcendence of the Ego*.

Indeed, by saying that my "I" is more intimate than the "I" of other men, Sartre only means that I am more used to it as I have more contacts with it, even if such an "I" "participates in all the vicissitudes of the world"²⁸ and is discovered within the world among other egos. Consequently, this empirical intimacy with my own ego is radically unable to found the "absolute inwardness" previously mentioned, and falls short of this "strong" concept of interiority. Ego is nothing more than the "degraded projection of interiority," for it is, as Sartre writes, "interiority seen from the outside."²⁹ At this point, Sartre's reasoning becomes perfectly clear: if self-awareness can be described as an "absolute inwardness," the reason is that, contrary

²⁶ Sartre (1960, p. 41).

²⁷ Sartre (2003, p. 85; 1960, p. 104).

²⁸ Sartre (2003, p. 85; 1960, p. 104).

²⁹ Sartre (2003, p. 67; 1960, p. 85).

to the ego, such an interiority is supposed to be directly reached “from the inside,” even if Sartre never admits it explicitly. Therefore, the whole analysis lies on an insuperable gap between two opposite sorts of relation to my self (from the inside or the outside), which constitutes a new version of the old metaphysical distinction between inner and outer sense, bringing back its shortcomings and limitations. Sartre rejects the “I,” but he reintroduces at once an absolute interiority. While he describes lived-experiences as impersonal and criticizes egological conceptions of consciousness on the one hand, he maintains on the other hand the direct and immediate access I am supposed to have to myself whenever I am aware of something.

5 The moral turn in Sartre’s phenomenological description of consciousness and the analysis of “bad faith”

So far, though, I kept staying within the field of phenomenological description: my main criticism to Sartre was only to not be measured enough in his analysis of consciousness, and thus to go one step too far when he implicitly holds that object-consciousness implies a consciousness *of the self as such*. However, this twofold structure of consciousness that conceals a distinction between an absolute and a relative kind of interiority has a basic moral consequence, even if Sartre does not draw his reader’s attention on it in *Transcendence of the Ego*. Indeed, the impossibility to bridge the gap between objectifying consciousness of my ego and pre-reflective awareness of my self gives a moral significance to the former, which redefines the meaning of *transcendence*. If my ego is nothing more than an “external gaze” on my interiority, which is necessarily distant from my self, if consequently I am compelled to miss my self each time I posit an ego, and if the ego is the very result of this failure, then such a transcendent ego is “necessarily false.” The position of ego is the outcome of an impossible act of consciousness that is unable to reach the object it was aiming at, so that *the ego is never what it is supposed to be*. Accordingly, transcendence of the ego has a moral significance, insofar as it means that I am fostering an illusion and lying to myself about myself each time I am entering the world scene and positing myself as an ego. Sartre makes it very explicit at the end of the book, where he writes: “Really to know oneself is inevitably to take toward oneself the point of view of others, [so far, I would concur, and so would Husserl, but Sartre goes further by adding:] that is to say, a point of view which is necessarily false.”³⁰

Such a conclusion initiates a moral turn in Sartre’s analysis, since it establishes a very strong linkage between description of lived-experiences and the moral question about false consciousness. Transcendence of consciousness entails the constant possibility of a “lie to oneself”³¹ and of unauthentic mode of existence, as it widens the gap between me and my self (between my ego and my self-consciousness). Yet, while this moral consequence of the twofold structure of consciousness is not

³⁰ Sartre (2003, p. 69; 1960, p. 87).

³¹ See the distinction between lie and lie to oneself in Sartre (1976, pp. 83–84; 1993, pp. 48–49).

thematically investigated in *Transcendence of the Ego*, it plays a huge part in *Being and Nothingness*, where it meets up with the famous analysis of “bad faith.” One is said to be “in bad faith” when he no longer admits that his empirical ego corresponds to a false point of view on himself, and tries to identify with his particular function in the world. This is what happens for instance to the waiter, who pretends that he is nothing more than his empirical ego by “playing at being a waiter in a café.”³² Such a mode of being lacks of authenticity, since it consists in positing the ego as my self, and so it denies the irreducible difference between my ego and my self that results from the analysis of transcendence of consciousness in *Transcendence of the Ego*. Possibility of bad faith characterizes a being who is not identical to his empirical ego in the sense a mere thing can be said identical to itself: “the waiter in the café can not be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell is an inkwell.”³³

Therefore, bad faith is said to be “bad” because it consists in positing an ego we know to be “false”; it is a way to flee the fact that we are not merely what we are but “have the constant obligation to make ourselves what we are.”³⁴ Such a flight is nothing more than “an effort made by consciousness to escape from itself by projecting itself into the me and becoming absorbed there.”³⁵ It finds its origins in the conclusion of *Transcendence of the Ego*, where Sartre analyzes “fear of itself” as a kind of anguish “constitutive of pure consciousness”³⁶: “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.”³⁷

6 Finding and/or losing oneself

But why should we accept such a moral judgment about the falsehood of ego? Why should the ego be said “false”? When Sartre draws this conclusion from his description of intentional consciousness, he seems to be moving discreetly from a descriptive to a prescriptive or normative analysis of consciousness, emphasizing the gap between “absolute inwardness” and “ego.” The twofold structure of consciousness (reflected/pre-reflected) gives a moral significance to the ego, making it appear as the mean consciousness is using in order to “hypnotize” itself. “Ego,” then, is just another name for the loss of the self. However, such a conclusion constitutes a moral interpretation rather than a phenomenological description of the ego. The problem is that Sartre’s understanding of intentionality and consciousness is corrupted by his obsession with the subject-object duality: according to him,

³² Sartre (1976, p. 95; 1993, p. 59).

³³ Sartre (1976, p. 96; 1993, p. 59).

³⁴ Sartre (1976, p. 95; 1993, p. 59).

³⁵ Sartre (2003, p. 83; 1960, p. 103).

³⁶ Sartre (1960, p. 102).

³⁷ Sartre (2003, p. 82; 1960, p. 101).

either the self must be posited as an object by a reflexive act, either it must be given within a pre-reflective self-awareness.

But such an abstract way to oppose the subject and the object does not take into account the fact that the word “self” expresses fundamentally a *relation* to oneself (as John Perry used to notice it³⁸), an act one has to perform in order to realize this identity between himself as subject and object of the same experience. I am not convinced at all that it makes any sense to raise the question of the self by asking whether it should be given through a first- or a third-person perspective, and to widen the gap between two kinds of interiority, seen from the inside or the outside. This alternative constitutes the frame of what we could call the ‘disjunctivism of the self’ often implicitly admitted in contemporary philosophy of mind: either I am immediately given to myself within experiences lived in first-personal mode of givenness, either I can only reach myself as a “he” and indirectly, from a third-person viewpoint.

Yet, a more subtle apprehension of this specific question can be found in Husserl’s first *Logical Investigation*, where the first and the third-person perspectives on my self are closely linked and entwined. While Husserl emphasizes in the fifth *Logical Investigation* that reflection creates a distance between me and my own lived experiences, his theory of expression develops a more sophisticated and complex insight of this relation. Thus, the distinction between expression and utterance can be understood as a way to underline the gap between two different kinds of access to our lived experiences: an expression (*Ausdruck*) performed from a first-person perspective on the one hand, and a mere outward “utterance” (*Ausserung*) that raises a third-person perspective on our mental states on the other. According to Husserl, expression forms an “intimately fused unity”³⁹ with our lived experiences, while “utterances” have to refer in an indicative way to the experiences they make manifest. The tone of my voice may indicate to my interlocutor that I am calm or manifest my anger, but the meaning of my speech as such does not indicate strictly speaking my lived experiences at this precise moment: it expresses them.

Now, when I am phenomenologically describing my own lived-experiences, I am simultaneously referring to them in an indicative mode, and expressing them. In this peculiar case, expressions manifest what they are at once referring to, so that what is expressed and what is made manifest can coincide (at least partially). Husserl puts forward this aspect of expressions in the 25th paragraph of the 1st *Logical Investigation*, and his analyses at this point are strikingly close to the account Austin provided on the “explicit performatives”:

³⁸ “Self,” as Perry writes, is “not even quite a word”: it is primarily nothing more than an additional linguistic symbol that turns an object pronoun into a reflexive one (her in herself, him in himself, it in itself); see Perry (1995, p. 1). Normally, the “self” is not supposed to refer to some particular thing we could find somewhere in the world, but it is used to describe the situations in which the object of an action or an attitude is also *its* object: if I look at myself in a mirror, I am at the same time the subject and the object of this experience. This linguistic feature indicates that the self is to be understood as a reflexive relation to oneself, more than a peculiar property attached to persons and related to the fact that they are (or are not) genuine subjects as such.

³⁹ Husserl (1984a, p. 282).

By means of these explicit performative verbs and some other devices, then, we make explicit what precise act it is that we are performing when we issue our utterance. We must distinguish between the function of making explicit what act it is we are performing, and the quite different matter of *stating* what act it is we are performing. In issuing an explicit performative utterance, we are not stating what act it is, we are showing or making explicit what act it is.⁴⁰

Like Austin, Husserl distinguishes a broad and a narrow sense of manifestation in the: in the broader sense, one who expresses his lived experiences make them also manifest, and it is possible to conceive some coincidence between expression and manifestation. However, in the narrow sense, our experiences are not genuinely made manifest as such, but only a reflexive judgment about these experiences: experiences are then nothing more than “the objects judged about”.⁴¹ In this latter case, expression is to be considered in the way Austin used to call a *statement*, that is to say a declarative statement considering our experience as its object, and it can no longer be taken for a performative statement that would be supposed to manifest the very same experience it expresses. If we now come back to Husserl, we should understand this paragraph as follows: when I am *expressing* my experience, I neither make a statement nor a declaration about it, and I do nothing more than *show* its act-structure as such (following the Wittgensteinian opposition between saying and showing). However, the very experience that is displayed through its expression can also in principle be taken as the object of a declarative statement. Then, I am no longer making my experience manifest, I am no longer showing it, but I am positively describing it. Consequently, we can say that the expression of my own experiences are not yet a description strictly speaking, and it is only once I use this expression as a declarative statement, taking this experience as its object, that I am able to describe it in a phenomenological sense.

Therefore, even if I have a first-person access to my own life of consciousness when I express it, such an expression is as well a manifestation of my lived experiences, so that it can also be considered as the object of the description I am making. It is an intrinsic feature of consciousness that first-person *expression* of my experiences can be counted as well as a third-person *description* of my conscious life. In other words, the third-person access I can have to myself through description is already involved and logically entailed within the possibility of a first-personal expression of myself. Here is the self we were looking for, in this play between two different viewpoints on the same experience: the reason why I am not only a transcendental I nor an empirical ego but a self, genuinely given in my experiences, is precisely that I always have to realize the identity of this self necessarily given in two different modes, in a first as well as in a third personal mode of givenness. The self is neither the object nor the subject, but is each time *both of them*, and is disclosed as such in the effort to identify one with another. A phenomenological analysis of the self has to describe it as the mirror in which my “I” is reflected as a “he,” while conversely my empirical ego is reflected as a “I.”

⁴⁰ Austin (1961, p. 232).

⁴¹ Husserl (1984a, p. 313).

This is the reason why I cannot follow Sartre when he writes that the empirical ego is nothing more than a “false representation” of itself produced by consciousness,⁴² nor when he analyzes bad faith as an “unauthentic mode of being.” The point is that I have no other way, in order to disclose my self, than to experience myself as an empirical ego, and to go through what I became within the world among other egos. Such a third-person access to my ego is definitely not a way to miss myself, for it is on the contrary a both logical and existential condition of the first-person access I can have to myself through self-expression. Rather than saying that being an ego jeopardizes my access to myself, we should say that absorbing and thus *losing* myself in my empirical ego is the only way I have to access to myself and to *find* myself. The self is neither given as an object nor as a subject for the very simple reason that it is not given *at all*: it is a quest, and the different roles I have to play within my existence are different stages on this path towards myself. Even when the café waiter obviously *plays* at being a waiter, we could not find any moral criterion to qualify his behavior as unauthentic, since such a playing somehow participates to the logic of this quest. We have to lose ourselves in such roles or pretences in order to ever find ourselves.

In the conclusion of *Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre mentions Rimbaud’s famous sentence: “*Je est un autre*” “*I is an other*.”⁴³ However, such a sentence seems to emphasize that the “I” is always already lost among the others egos, so that “I” must be conjugated at the third-person. On the contrary, my conclusion is that being an other is not something that *happens* to me, like an event that would affect the “I” from the outside, but it is the fundamental law of the self. So I would not say that “I is an other,” but rather that “*I am an other*.”

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⁴² Sartre (2003, p. 82; 1960, p. 101).

⁴³ Sartre (2003, p. 78; 1960, p. 97).

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