**The Transcendence of the Ego** by Jean-Paul Sartre

Sartre starts out by stating his objective in this essay is to prove that the “Ego is neither formally nor materially in consciousness: it is outside, *in the world*; it is a being in the world, like the Ego of another.” (p.1)

(I) The *I* and the *Me*

*The Formal Presence of the* I

Sartre distinguishes between the *de facto* (in reality) and the *de jure* (perhaps the best translation here is ‘formal’) questions as concerns the “I think” (the Self). He refers to Kant regarding the latter and defines it as “merely the set of conditions necessary for the existence of an empirical consciousness” (p.3), but this doesn’t tell us anything about what the empirical consciousness *really* is. This is where Sartre’s *de facto* analysis comes in.

He identifies three questions that need answering:

1. Although it must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all our representations (the *de jure* resolution), does it accompany all of them *in fact*?
2. If “a certain representation A passes from a certain state in which the ‘I think’ does not accompany it to a state in which the ‘I think’ does accompany it; will this representation thereby undergo a modification of structure, or will it remain basically unchanged?” (p.3)
3. Is the ‘I’ “made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or is it the I that in fact unifies the representations among themselves?” (pp.3-4)

Sartre then advises that since phenomenology is a scientific study of consciousness which puts us in the presence of *the thing*, it deals with *de facto* problems and is therefore ideally suited to our task.

Sartre admits, along with Husserl, that the *epoche* (phenomenological reduction)[[1]](#footnote-1) reveals the existence of the psychical and psycho-physical *me* (or empirical ego) but questions Husserl’s additional postulation of a “transcendental *I*, as a structure of absolute consciousness” (p.5). By transcendental *I*, Sartre here means a kind of inner *self* Husserl postulated ‘over and above’ the natural world, empirical ego. He identifies four statements that follow if we refuse to allow the transcendental ‘I’:

1. The transcendental field becomes impersonal
2. The ‘I’ appears only on the level of humanity, as one (active) face
3. The ‘I think’ appears against the background of a pre-existing unity
4. We can ask whether personality is a necessary accompaniment to consciousness

Sartre notes that Husserl believed in a transcendental ‘I’ because he felt that it granted unity and individuality to consciousness but Sartre argues that phenomenology doesn’t need this because “the phenomenological conception of consciousness renders the unifying and individualising role of the *I* completely useless.” (p.7) “Through intentionality it [consciousness] transcends itself, it unifies itself by going outside itself” (p.6), that is, by directing itself at the external world. Consciousnessis empty of content, completely transparent; where we might expect to find a nugget of *something* all we find is an external (intended) object. It is here Sartre is claiming that unity can be found, in the (intended) objects which transcend consciousness. Furthermore, it is consciousness (as an intentional ‘focus’ on objects), which “renders the unity and personality of my *I* possible” (p.7) rather than the opposite claim we started with. [This answers his third question posed earlier – i.e. the ‘I’ is made possible by the synthetic unity of representations, not the other way around]

Next, Sartre introduces an important concept, that consciousness is “simply the consciousness of being consciousness of this object” (p.8). This he holds to be a fundamental law of its existence which means that this consciousness of consciousness is originally *not* *positional*, i.e. it does not posit itself as an object. Sartre calls this consciousness “first order” or “unreflective” consciousness. This consciousness is a consciousness completely ‘filled’ by an external object, that is, totally directed out (intentionally) towards the world, retaining only a *non-positional* consciousness of itself. Unreflective consciousness lacks the ‘I think’. With a poetic description, Sartre advises that consciousness is “nothing but lightness and translucency” (pp.8-9) but if we make the *I* a necessary structure of consciousness then we introduce a naturally opaque, heavy centre, hardening and crystallising it into a monad. [This answers his first question posed earlier – i.e. the ‘I think’ does not *necessarily* accompany all representations, *de facto* (in fact)]

*The Cogito*

In this section, Sartre investigates Descartes’ Cogito. He agrees that it is the starting point for an understanding of the Ego when he says that it is here we reach the *I* in its “purity”. Sartre reflects on the graspable *I* by recalling a landscape viewed from a train yesterday. We can bring back the memory of the landscape but we can also remember that *I* saw that landscape. And what’s more, *any* previous event we bring to mind will always have an *I* associated with it.

However, this *I* (the Cogito) is *always* apprehended by a reflective, or second-order, operation in which consciousness is directed towards consciousness, taking consciousness as its object. Curiously enough, this means that we are talking about two consciousnesses; one *reflecting* (from the present moment) and one *reflected* (a ‘remembered’ consciousness).

This constitutes Sartre’s main criticism of Descartes; that his Cogito isn’t actually consciousness grasping *itself*, “my reflecting consciousness does not take itself for object when I carry out the Cogito… the consciousness that says ‘I think’ [the ‘reflecting’ consciousness] is precisely not the consciousness that thinks [the ‘unreflective’ consciousness which is *non-positional*]. Or rather, it is not its *own* thought that it posits by this thetic act”[[2]](#footnote-2) (p.10). The central idea here is that the Cogito is a consciousness that isn’t conscious of *itself* (it doesn’t take itself as an object); rather it is (‘reflecting’) consciousness of (*positing*) a ‘reflected’ consciousness (perhaps the one sitting in the train yesterday), taking this earlier (‘reflected’) consciousness as its object.

This leaves us with two degrees of consciousness:

Non-thetic:

* The first-order act is Sartre’s *unreflected* consciousness where consciousness is non-positional

Thetic:

* The second-order act is that described by the Cogito, where a reflect*ing* consciousness directs itself toward a reflect*ed* consciousness, thereby positing this reflected consciousness as its object. (It is here that the *I* is created ‘spontaneously’ as it were; as will be explained in a moment)

So all reflecting (second-order) consciousness is in itself unreflected (first-order) and requires an additional ‘third-order act’ to posit it. However, there is no danger of an infinite regress here because a “consciousness has no need of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It merely does not posit itself to itself as its own object.” (p.11) Unreflected consciousness doesn’t *depend on* a reflecting consciousness.

Next, Sartre refers to concrete experience to investigate in more detail this *I* that suddenly appears through reflection (second-order consciousness). Again, he will reflect on a past experience, but this time he doesn’t want to posit the reflected consciousness directly (this would just result in a second-order act), rather he wants to posit the *objects* the reflect*ed* consciousness was focusing on at the time “*without losing sight of this* [reflected] *consciousness*” (p.11). So, taking for his past experience his memory of the circumstances of his prior reading, Sartre finds that while he was reading, “there was a consciousness *of* the book, *of* the heroes of the book, but the *I* did not inhabit this consciousness, it was merely consciousness of the object and non-positional consciousness of itself.” (p.12) The reason this act of reflection works to expose the true nature of the unreflected consciousness is because “all unreflected consciousness, being a non-thetic consciousness of itself, leaves behind it a non-thetic memory that can be consulted.” (p.11)

The preceding proves that *unreflected* consciousness doesn’t involve the ‘I think’; i.e. there is something in the *reflective* act itself which brings the *I* into being. It seems that unreflected thought does indeed change when it becomes reflected, and the way it changes is by bringing the *I* into being. [This answers Sartre’s second question posed earlier]

In looking more closely at the second-order act (where the ‘I think’ is grasped), Sartre asks whether this ‘I’ is a “full, concrete consciousness grasped in a real moment of concrete duration” (p.14) and concludes that it isn’t; “on the contrary, it affirms its permanence beyond that consciousness and all consciousnesses… its type of existence is much closer to that of eternal truths than to that of consciousness.” (p.14)

Consciousness, according to Sartre, is light, translucent, and able to be grasped in its totality in a moment. It is, to use a phenomenological, Husserlian term, *immanent*.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Ego, on the other hand, as revealed in the second-order act above, is *transcendent[[4]](#footnote-4)* in nature and should therefore be culled from our investigations after we conduct the *epoche*.

Sartre concludes this section with four summarising statements:

1. The ‘I’ is an existent. It has a type of concrete, transcendental existence.
2. We can apprehend the ‘I’ through the medium of a reflected consciousness in a way that always yields inadequate knowledge.
3. The ‘I’ *only* appears in a reflective act.
4. The ‘I’, being *transcendent*, must come under the *epoche*, meaning that the sure and certain content of the Cogitoisn’t ‘*I* am conscious of this book’, but ‘*there is* consciousness of this book’.

*The Theory of the Material Presence of the* Me

This section is primarily directed at refuting the “theory of *armour-propre*… [which holds that] the love of self – and consequently the *me* – is hidden in all feelings, in a thousand different disguises.” (p.17) Under this theory, every act is performed with reference to, and because of, the self. Even when we think we are acting for someone else (Sartre’s example is feeling pity for Peter and helping him), in actuality there is a hidden selfish reason motivating us from the shadows.

The error here is in failing to recognise that there are two kinds of acts, reflective and unreflected, and thereby conflating them in subsequent analysis. When consciousness is observed in its reflected state (the second-order act) the ‘me’ arises and *appears* to be the motivating force but when consciousness is considered in its *un*reflected state (as we did earlier with the reading example) “a reflective structure is [incorrectly] superimposed on [it] – a structure that is thoughtlessly claimed to be unconscious.” (p.18)

In thinking about his pity for Peter, Sartre notes that for his “consciousness, one thing alone exists at that moment: Peter-having-to-be-aided.” (p.18) This is the *immanent*, and therefore certain, perception. We are unjustified in postulating any other entities, motivations, or causes. “At this level, desire is given to consciousness as centrifugal… and impersonal.” (p.18) We normally assign desire to the self, but in Sartre’s analysis, it is the quality “having-to-be-aided” (*which is in the object*), as the desirable, that motivates the desirer. It can’t be any other way because at this (unreflected) level, there is no self (remember the self only appears in a reflected, thetic (second-order) act). In Sartre’s words, “On the unreflected level I come to Peter’s aid because Peter is ‘needing-to-be-aided’. But if my state is suddenly transformed into a reflected state, then I am watching myself acting” (p.20) and it is here the self appears, in a derivative sense.

In addition to this, the proponents of *amour-propre* are guilty of making the absurd proposition that the self directs us from concealment in the unconscious. This becomes absurd when we realise that the self can only appear in a reflected consciousness, so the proposition becomes, “the *reflected* motivates from the *unconscious*”.

Yet another problem assails us when we realise that *amour-propre* grants to the reflected, ontological priority over the unreflected. This clearly cannot be true because the unreflected “does not need to be reflected in order to exist, and reflection presupposes the intervention of a second-order consciousness.” (p.19)

There are a couple of conclusions that can be made here:

1. Unreflected consciousness is autonomous and always given as complete (immanent), needing no *thing* or *act* to complete it.
2. Unreflected consciousness “transcends itself by grasping, in the object, the quality of desirability.” (p.19)

Here, Sartre leads into the next section, by asserting that the *I* and the *me* are merely two faces of the Ego. The former being the unity of the actions of a reflected consciousness, the latter being the unity of states and qualities.

(II) The Constitution of the Ego

*States*

States, for example hatred, are “*present* to the gaze of reflective consciousness” (p.21) but this doesn’t mean they are *immanent* or sure and certain. Everything reflection affirms about consciousness is certain and adequate, but other objects which appear ‘through’ this consciousness may not necessarily participate in these traits.

Consider a concrete example, Sartre’s hatred of Peter. When he sees Peter he experiences a “profound upheaval of revulsion and anger” (p.22) but this revulsion isn’t hatred. Although hatred “appears *through* this experience [of revulsion]… [It] is given precisely as not being limited to this experience… it goes beyond each of them as it affirms its permanence.” (p.22) Revulsion appears via an instantaneous consciousness (you can’t be in error when you say, “I feel revulsion towards Peter”) but hatred is a state that endures over time (thereby going ‘beyond’ each moment of felt revulsion and disgust).

Furthermore, hatred draws “a distinction between *being* and *seeming*, since it is given as continuing *to be* even when I am absorbed in other occupations and when no consciousness reveals it.” (p.22) Since hatred exists without consciousness, it certainly can’t be a form of consciousness and therefore can’t partake in any of the traits of consciousness. Hatred is not given in its totality via an instantaneous consciousness which means that each moment of hatred is merely one *adumbration* (or ‘aspect’) of the entire state which extends beyond the moment into the past and the future. The final point here is that hatred is revealed as a transcendent object. Having established that hatred is outside of consciousness and transcendent, we can now confidently assert, according to Sartre, that “the very nature of its existence implies its ‘dubitability’” (p.23).

Here, Sartre introduces more terminology; *pure* and *impure reflection*. The former is “purely descriptive” (p.24) and therefore preserves the instantaneous character of unreflected consciousness, not making any claims about the future. The latter is the opposite, which “carries out an infinitization of the field” (p.23) constituting hatred as its transcendent object. “These two reflections have apprehended the same, certain data but the one reflection has affirmed more than it knew and has aimed itself through reflected consciousness at an object situated outside consciousness.” (p.24)

Sartre next outlines two errors that occur when we merge the transcendent and immanent senses of experience. First, in noticing that we are often mistaken in our feelings (states), we conclude that our introspection is inaccurate and so, divorcing the state from the way it appears, turn instead to a symbolic interpretation of the appearance in order to determine the nature of the feeling. We then attribute a causal relation between the feeling and the appearance which ultimately brings us back to the unconscious. The second error takes a different tack, holding our introspection to be accurate, we simply transfer the certainty we have of the consciousness of revulsion (we have introspected) to the feeling (hatred) conferring upon it the certainty of an “instantaneous consciousness.”

Sartre maintains that states (like hatred) are concretely *real*, i.e. they aren’t imaginary, but they are *passive* (only appearing as the constitution of a (reflected) consciousness) and *inert* (they *appear* that way to consciousness, unable to effect any change in the latter).

On the other hand, states do exert a causal influence on the body: ‘Why did you act like that?” “Because I hate him.”

Sartre closes this section by looking again at the way *impure* reflection reveals the consciousness of revulsion as the spontaneous *emanation* of hatred, the latter incorrectly assumed to be the source of the former. The word, *emanation*, is the way Sartre describes the connection between “inert psychical states… [and] the spontaneities of consciousness” (p.26), specifically the way the enduring state appears to ‘produce’ the instantaneous consciousness via what Sartre calls a, “magical link” (p.26).

*Actions*

This is a short section in which Sartre merely affirms for actions what he has already affirmed thus far in the essay. An “action requires time in which to be carried out. It has individual sections and moments. To these moments there correspond active, concrete consciousnesses, and the reflection that is aimed at the consciousnesses apprehends the total action in an intuition which displays it as the transcendent unity of active consciousness.” (pp.26-27)

The only additional point of interest is the criticism he levels at Descartes when he identifies Descartes’ methodical doubt as not being a moment of spontaneous consciousness, but rather as the *act* of doubting, i.e. a transcendent object constituted by a reflecting consciousness, therefore inherently uncertain.

*Qualities*

Sartre sees qualities as some kind of “intermediary between the Ego on the one hand and states and actions on the other” (p.27). Quality is related to state or action by *actualisation*. “The quality is given as a potentiality, a virtuality which… may pass over into actuality.” (pp.27-28) This actuality is the state or action. Examples of qualities include virtues, tastes, talents, etc. Although they sound like possibilities, Sartre makes it clear that they really exist, just in the “mode” of potentiality.

*Constitution of the Ego as a pole of actions, states, and qualities*

As we have seen, Sartre distinguishes between the psychical (actions and states) and consciousness. The former is “the transcendent object of the reflective consciousness” (p.28) and is the subject of psychology. “The Ego appears to reflection as a transcendent object realising the permanent synthesis of the psychical.” (p.28)

Sartre rejects the idea that the Ego is “a sort of X pole acting as the support for psychical phenomena… [Instead] the Ego is nothing other than the concrete totality of states and actions that it supports.” (p.30) Sartre’s point here is that the Ego is not some*thing* with an independent existence over and above the actions and states that comprise it. It is undoubtedly transcendent to all the states that are unified under it, but not as an abstract X existing separately. By way of analogy, Sartre offers this; “in my view we should think rather of the *World*, conceived as the infinite synthetic totality of all things… The ego is to psychical objects what the World is to things.” (p.30) Another example is a melody, which is not “some X which acts as a support for the different notes” (p.30).

Because the Ego is transcendent (which, in phenomenology, means not immanent, i.e. unable to be grasped as an immediate totality) it is by necessity uncertain. This accounts for the way we can sometimes be mistaken about ourselves. For example, I might think I am patient but this might turn out to be wrong (a romantic relationship will quickly throw light on this hypothesis), in other words, “I may be wrong in thinking that I have *a me of that sort*.” (p.31) However, we ought to remember that just because it is *dubious* doesn’t mean it is *hypothetical*. While we can be mistaken about the nature of our Ego (unity of states and actions), we can’t be mistaken about whether or not we have an Ego in the first place.

We have seen that consciousness is related to the psychical by *emanation*, qualities are related to states by *actualisation*, and now Sartre names the relation between the Ego and its qualities, states, and actions, one of “poetic production… or… creation” (p.32), since via our intuition we “can observe that the Ego is given as producing its states.” (p.32) He goes on to say this “mode of creation is indeed a creation *ex nihilo*, in the sense that the state is not given as having previously been within the Ego” (p.32), although he reaffirms that the Ego has no existence over and above the psychical objects that comprise it. So Sartre is saying that the Ego is nothing more than states and actions, but at the same time it *creates* those states and actions. I think the way to understand this apparent contradiction is that although the Ego is nothing more than the aggregate of psychical objects, when we reflect on our consciousness (through a second-order act) we “observe that the Ego is given as producing its states… [and what Sartre is doing is] undertaking a description of this transcendent Ego **as it is revealed to intuition**.” (boldface added, p.32) Sartre follows this up by saying, “spontaneity [in creation] must not be confused with that of consciousness. The Ego, after all, being an object, is *passive*. So what we have here is a pseudo-spontaneity” (p.33).

So, going back to the beginning where we acknowledged that it is consciousness that is calling the shots here, we realise that consciousness has represented this entire production “as going in *completely the reverse direction* from that followed by real production; what is *really* first is consciousness, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego. But as the order is reversed by a consciousness… consciousnesses are given as emanating from states, and states as produced by the Ego.” (pp.34-35)

This leads Sartre to quip that we are surrounded by “magical objects”, namely Egos which appear as spontaneities capable of producing states but are actually passive objects, and since it is our own consciousnesses which have created these magical objects he concludes, “man is always a sorcerer for man” (p.35).

Another point Sartre raises is that the Ego can be affected by the states and actions that it seems it produces; “Every new state produced by the Ego colours and nuances the Ego in the moment the Ego produces it” (p.35). He also points out that the Ego can *only* be affected by the states or actions it ‘produces’. One might think that external events can affect our *selves*, but Sartre denies this, essentially because the Ego is constituted in its entirety by a reflecting consciousness. As such, the Ego is “radically cut off from the World” (p.36) and can be affected by it only indirectly, “insofar as they [external events] are for it the occasion of states or actions.” (p.36)

Sartre also analyses the Ego as being an “irrational synthesis of inwardness and transcendence.” (p.36). The Ego is “in the most exact sense the inwardness of reflected consciousness, as contemplated by reflective consciousness” (p.36); where by ‘inwardness’, Sartre means that “for consciousness, to be and to know oneself are one and the same thing” (p.36). Another way he formulates this is that “consciousness is a being whose essence implies existence” (p.36). He concludes from this that inwardness is *lived*, i.e. we *exist* inward, which is another way of saying that something which is ‘inward’ can’t be contemplated from the outside, it can only be known ‘from the inside’. Clearly consciousness is an example of inwardness. Interestingly, Sartre claims that the fact that inwardness is “closed back on itself and exhibit[s] to us merely its external aspects” (p.37) is the *only* reason why we cannot grasp the consciousness of other people (i.e. not because bodies separate us).

Returning to the Ego, Sartre identifies two further structures that make up inwardness; *intimacy* and *indistinctness*. “In relation to consciousness, the Ego is given as intimate. It is just as if the Ego were *part of consciousness*, with the sole and essential difference that it is opaque to consciousness. And this opacity is grasped as *lack of distinctness*.” (p.37)

The very fact that the Ego is so intimate is why it is difficult to know clearly. As an object, the Ego can only be known through observation, approximation, waiting, and experience, but these methods are suitable only for *non-intimate*, transcendent objects. The Ego is just too close to our consciousness for us to grasp it with any certainty. The only way we can know ourselves is to “look at oneself from the point of view of someone else” (p.39).

Sartre also gives another reason we can’t know ourselves with certainty; one which “radically prevents one from acquiring any real knowledge of the Ego [and that] is the quite special way in which it is given to reflective consciousness. In fact, the Ego never appears except when we are not looking at it” (p.39). Recall the second-order reflection that yields the Cogito. It is not a reflecting on the Ego itself, rather it is a reflecting on an earlier consciousness (that is, a previous lived experience or, *Erlebnis*, in phenomenological parlance). The Ego is spontaneously created out of this process of reflection but if one attempts to access the Ego “without going via the *Erlebnis* and the state, it vanishes.” (p.40) Sartre claims the reason for this is that in trying to posit the Ego as the object for my consciousness directly, “I fall back onto the unreflected level and the Ego disappears with the reflective act.” (p.40)

In one apparent exception to this, Sartre acknowledges that the *I* doesappear on the unreflected level, as in when we reply to the question, “What are you doing?” by saying “I am writing”, without also engaging in an act of reflection. The problem is that the *I* which reveals itself here is an empty concept; it is an “*I-concept*”. The *I-concept* has lost its *intimacy*, and so while it does make an appearance, it lacks the essential content of the reflected *I*.

*The I and consciousness in the Cogito*

In this section Sartre considers one last objection against his claim that the *I* appears in the Cogito (second-order reflection). He asks “why the *I* appears on the occasion of the Cogito since the Cogito, it if is performed correctly, is the apprehension of a pure consciousness, without the constitution of a state or an action” (pp.41-42). Recall that consciousness gives rise to states which give rise to the Ego, and since Sartre is proceeding according to phenomenological principles, he is implementing the *epoche* (phenomenological reduction) which brackets out all transcendent objects, including psychical objects and the Ego.

Sartre’s answer is that the phenomenological reduction is never perfect. Whenever we effect the *epoche*, we are always doing so in ways linked to actions and states simply by virtue of our human condition. “In a word, the Cogito is impure, it is a spontaneous consciousness, no doubt, but one that remains synthetically linked to consciousnesses of states and actions.” (p.42)

Conclusion

Sartre makes three remarks in his conclusion:

1. He claims that he has “purified of all egological structure” the transcendental field, returning it to its “former limpidity.” (p.43) He has returned to consciousness what he feels it is, a *nothing*. “But this nothing is *everything* because it is the *consciousness of* all… objects.” (p.43) Moreover, he has pushed our Egos (feelings, states, etc.) out into the public arena. According to previous philosophical understanding, we enjoyed privileged access to our own states; no one else could grasp them, they could only “envisage an equivalent, create empty concepts which attempted vainly to reach a reality that in essence was unavailable to intuition.” (p.44) Sartre has shown that states are transcendent objects and as such, they cannot participate in the true inwardness of consciousness. So now, when two people talk about one’s feelings, although they are grasping them via different procedures, we can be sure they are both speaking of the same thing and moreover, neither can be more certain than the other, even the person whose feelings they are.

The only thing left “impenetrable” is a person’s consciousness itself, which is radically so. The reason for this is that “I cannot *conceive* Peter’s consciousness without turning it into an object… [in which case I have already failed to grasp it] since it would need to be conceived as pure inwardness and transcendence *at one and the same time*, which is impossible.” (p.45)

This leaves “a sphere accessible to psychology… and a pure transcendental sphere accessible to phenomenology alone.” (p.45)

Here, Sartre also suggests a function for the Ego. He theorises that in the face of its absolute spontaneity, consciousness may suddenly become filled with “absolute and irremediable anguish” (p.48). To avoid this, consciousness creates an “Ego as a false representation of itself… [so] that a distinction can be drawn between the possible and the real, between appearance and being, between what is willed and what is yielded to.” (p.49)

In addition, this situation gives us a reason for effecting the phenomenological reduction (which Husserl lacked according to Sartre). If the “natural attitude” is perfectly coherent and accurately describes our experience, we have no need to investigate any further and the *epoche* becomes redundant, appearing in “Husserl’s phenomenology like a miracle.” (p.49)

1. Sartre claims that his conception of the Ego is the only way to refute solipsism (he recanted on this later though). He thought this was true because as long as the Ego is a part of a consciousness which is essentially *inward* and therefore only accessible to the person whose consciousness it is, we can never have access to any other Egos and it will always be possible to imagine that there are, in fact, none out there.
2. Finally, Sartre addresses those who criticise phenomenology for being an “idealism, and drowning reality in the flood of ideas… [thereby making it a philosophy] in which suffering, hunger, and war are diluted into a slow process of unification of ideas” (p.50). Rather, he says separating the Ego from absolute consciousness and forcing it into the public arena is almost literally thrusting humans back into the world. If the Ego has the same ontological status as the world (a transcendental object) then the subject/object (Ego/world) duality disappears completely. “The World did not create the *me*, the *me* did not create the World, they are two objects for the absolute, impersonal consciousness… Nothing further is needed to enable us to establish philosophically an absolutely positive ethics and politics.” (pp.50-51)
1. The *epoche* was a technique devised by Husserl to allow one to ‘purely’ probe the structures of consciousness, without distractions, as it were, yielding certain, or *apodictic*, knowledge. It essentially involves suspending judgement about the actual existence of things in the external (or natural) world so we can focus on conscious experience. Sartre uses the *epoche* here to bracket out all *transcendent* objects so that what is left will be *immanent* and therefore certain. (More on *transcendent* and *immanent* later) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Sartre the term, *thetic*, carries the same meaning as *positional*, that is to say, focused on directly or brought to awareness through being made an object for a viewing subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To understand this requires a brief foray into phenomenology. A central feature of phenomenology is the idea that no object is perceived as a totality all at once, rather we grasp individual ‘aspects’ of an object and build up a more complete picture over time. For example, when looking at this book on my desk, only the front cover is revealed to me at the moment. If I turn it over I will see the back cover and if I turn it on its side I will see the spine and so on, each time seeing more and more ‘aspects’ and gathering more and more information about the book. There are an infinite number of these different ‘aspects’ to any object.

In this way, phenomenology doesn’t equate our perceptions of an object with some complete ‘thing-in-itself’ grounded in a substance; rather it holds that the object is simply the sum of all of these different actual and possible ‘aspects’. Husserl calls the ‘aspects’ that we are aware of, *adumbrations* (*abschattung* in German), and the remaining possible but currently unactualised ‘aspects’ *horizons*.

Now an *immanent* object is one which can be grasped in its entirety immediately (like consciousness which, because it has no ‘solid’ core, is nothing more than what it is focusing on, or ‘intending’) and this is opposed to a *transcendent* object which cannot be grasped at once; i.e. the object always has aspects which exceed – transcend – a perception of it (like every external object and the Ego). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Don’t confuse *transcendental* with *transcendent*. The *transcendental I* is a postulate of Husserl supposed to provide unity to our experiences and an entity that Sartre rejects. *Transcendent* refers to an object which can’t be grasped all at once and is therefore inherently uncertain (i.e. the Ego). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)