PART 5

Historical philosophical background
20 Radical Epokhè

On Sartre’s concept of “pure reflection”

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In 1934, during a stay in Berlin, Sartre wrote The Transcendence of the Ego. It was during this stay that Sartre discovered Husserl’s phenomenology, specifically Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology (1913/2014). This text radically informed Sartre’s own approach to phenomenology, sharpening and refining his conception of the relationship between the transcendental consciousness and the ego. We can read the work of Sartre not so much as a complete rejection of Husserl’s phenomenology, but as a radicalization of Husserl’s phenomenology of consciousness. For Husserl, indeed, the transcendental consciousness must be understood as fundamentally egological, as the consciousness of an ego, or, to say that otherwise, as inhabited by a transcendental subject, which is presented by Husserl as the source and principle of the unity of the intentional consciousness. Sartre, in contrast, thinks that the principle of intentionality, discovered by Husserl, must be radicalized—the ego is a worldly object constituted by the intentional consciousness when such a consciousness becomes reflexive. The ego, according to Sartre, can indeed claim, “It is a transcendent pole of synthetic unity, like the object-pole of the unreflected attitude. But this pole appears only in the world of reflection” (Sartre 2004, p. 21). On Husserl’s view, the field of the transcendental consciousness becomes reachable as a “new region of being” to the phenomenological investigation, after an act of suspension of our natural attitude toward the world. This natural attitude designates our natural and spontaneous belief in the existence of an external world. The suspension of this belief (or, to use Husserl’s Greek terminology, “thesis”) Husserl—taking a concept belonging originally to Ancient Skepticism—names “Epokhè.” Through the Epokhè, Husserl presents the philosopher as “parenthesizing” or “putting out of action” our main existential belief towards the world. The “Epokhè” is then supposed, in the Husserlian perspective, to make the field of transcendental consciousness reachable to the phenomenological investigation, as a “region of being” that is offered to the phenomenological reflection once our acts of “positing” the world are suspended.

One fundamental claim in the Transcendence of the Ego is that, contrary to Husserl’s approach, the suspension of our belief on the world is only complete
when consciousness is able to appear to itself as impersonal. Sartre, indeed, presents the ego as an object of the world. For that reason, in Sartre’s perspective, such an ego must be included into the suspensive brackets of the phenomenological reduction. The ego is understood by Sartre as an object of the world constituted by intentional consciousness and, because of this, Sartre thinks that there is no reason to exclude it, as Husserl does, from the brackets of the phenomenological reduction. For Sartre, the ego is nothing other than an object of the world—in the phenomenological terminology a “noematic unity”—that appears and is constituted when consciousness takes itself as its own object in reflection: “this pole appears only in the world of reflection” (Sartre 2004, p. 21).

Such a thesis seems to present a number of problems internal to Sartre’s own approach. For, if it is possible to radicalize Husserl’s *Epokhè*, as Sartre claims it is, such a radicalization would imply the possibility for consciousness to reflect itself as impersonal. But such a possibility is at the same time denied by Sartre as fully conceivable. Sartre explains in *The Transcendence of the Ego* that there is no reflection towards consciousness that does not imply the apparition of an ego within the field of the reflected consciousness. We will see that, even when he speaks about “pure reflection,” Sartre insists upon the fact that such a reflection, although “pure,” cannot avoid the apparition of an ego within the field of the reflected consciousness. This point has been perfectly emphasized by the French Sartrean scholar, Philippe Cabestan. On Sartre’s conception of reflection as unavoidably involved with the ego, Cabestan claims:

> Here we would like to perhaps recover something like an echo of what Husserl described as the impossibility of putting into brackets the pure ego as (a non-constituted) transcendency, within immanence, as if Husserl had never known how to interpret this persistence of the Self. 
> (Cabestan 2004, p. 304)

This means that, even if, against Husserl, Sartre claims that there is no ego within consciousness, such a claim seems to be phenomenologically impossible to experience, since there is no reductive or reflective act which does not imply the apparition of the ego within the field of the reflected consciousness. Any reduction necessarily reveals, because of the very structure of reflection as such, a personal consciousness (a consciousness in which an ego dwells).

The main goal of our article will be to demonstrate that the unavoidable apparition of the ego within the field of the reflected consciousness does not imply the impossibility of modifying Husserl’s *Epokhè* in a way that leads consciousness to face its own actual impersonality. We will defend, through Sartre’s texts and main hypothesis, the claim of a possible radicalization of the transcendental reduction without denying the unavoidable apparition of the ego within the field of consciousness once it is posited in an act of
reflection. Our question will be the following: how a reduction, if by its constitutive reflective nature implies necessarily the apparition of the ego within the field of the reflected consciousness can, at the same time, not prevent the possibility for consciousness to appear to itself as impersonal? Such a seeming paradox can be resolved only through analysis of what Sartre calls “pure reflection” both in its formal and existential meanings.

Position of the problem (I): Sartre’s radicalization of Husserl’s principle of intentionality

What Husserl calls the “transcendental reduction” entails the suspension of the psychological ego—as belonging to the transcendent world that is the object of the suspensive act of the reduction. At the same time, the Husserlian reduction leads to the discovery of another ego, no more psychological but transcendental, that appears within the field of transcendental consciousness as its structure. This second ego posited by Husserl became a necessary structure of consciousness only after the transcendental turn of phenomenology. Before such a turn, Sartre reminds us, Husserl remained skeptical of any idea that considers the presence of a transcendental ego within the field of consciousness necessary in order to unify and individualize it. In the Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre summarizes Husserl’s evolution toward the question of the ego the following way:

Having considered that the Me was a synthetic and transcendental production of consciousness (in the Logische Untersuchungen) he reverted, in the Ideas, to the classical thesis of a transcendental I that follows on, so to speak, behind each consciousness, as the necessary structure of these consciousnesses, whose rays (Ichstrahl) fall on to each phenomenon that presents itself to the field of attention. Thus transcendental consciousness becomes rigorously personal.

(Sartre 2004, p. 5)

In The Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre seeks to radicalize the phenomenological approach of the transcendental consciousness in order to depersonalize it. For Sartre, the presence of an ego within the sphere of the reduced transcendental consciousness indicates the incompleteness of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. In order to substantiate this claim, Sartre examines Husserl’s account of the transcendental ego. In Ideas, Husserl suggests that the transcendental ego we discover after the transcendental reduction is not be understood as an immanent “moment” of consciousness, but rather as a permanent and identical structure defined by Husserl as “a transcendence of a peculiar kind—one which is not constituted” (Husserl 1913/2014, p. 105, modified).

Such a claim means that the transcendental ego, “a necessary structure of consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 5), is given to the phenomenological
reflection as a *transcendence* that dwells in pure consciousness. Husserl claims indeed that it is a transcendence that *must not* be thought of as a transcendence *constituted* by the transcendental consciousness (a worldly transcendence). Husserl presents the transcendence of the ego as a “transcendence of a peculiar kind” insofar as it mustn’t be understood as belonging to the sphere of the transcendent real (as the very field of what is aimed at and constituted by the transcendental consciousness). On account of its peculiar character, Husserl claims that it is not subject to the transcendental reduction. Insofar as it is, in an important sense, free from the transcendental reduction, the transcendence of the ego is for Husserl “a *transcendence in immanence*” (Husserl 1913/2014, p. 105; original emphasis).

It is this understanding of the ego as a transcendence which is exempt from the transcendental reduction Sartre takes to be disputable. That the transcendence of the ego is a “special transcendence which is not that of the object” (Sartre 2004, p. 14) signals a problematic understanding of the ego. For Sartre, there is no reason to recognize the ego as a transcendence that does not share in the same features of any other transcendence. In this sense, the type of transcendence of the ego must be recognized as a transcendence of the world amongst others: “The Ego is a noematic, and not a noetic, unity. A tree or a chair does not exist in any other way” (Sartre 2004, p. 39).

For Sartre, the essential inadequacy by which the ego is given to intuition (as “the object of neither an apodictic nor an adequate evidential certainty”) proves that it cannot be an immanent element of consciousness. It can be neither an origin nor a structure, but, as Sartre concludes, “every bit as much as the world, a relative existent, i.e. an object for consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 5). Sartre’s conclusion is that all transcendence must be considered as an object for the intentional consciousness, that is, all transcendence is *outside consciousness*. Through the fundamental discovery of intentionality, phenomenology must recognize that “everything is finally outside: everything, including ourselves” (Sartre 1970, p. 2).

Consciousness, by its radical ecstatic nature, has no inside. “If, impossible though it may be, you could enter ‘into’ a consciousness, you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside, in the thick of the dust, near the tree, for consciousness has no ‘inside’” (Sartre 1970, p. 2). For Sartre, then, the ego is *also* the object of an ecstatic act of intentional consciousness, when consciousness becomes reflective. The ego is indeed, “a transcendent pole of synthetic unity, like the object-pole of the unrelected attitude. But this pole appears only in the world of reflection” (Sartre 2004, p. 21). The ego experienced as a subjective pole of intentionality is then nothing other than a concealed objective pole of intentional consciousness, an object constituted by reflective consciousness, *but simultaneously given to the reflective consciousness as a non-constituted entity. It is given indeed as a subjective substratum, an “inhabitant” of consciousness, a “necessary structure of consciousness”* (Sartre 2004, p. 9). The radicalization
of the Principle of Intentionality proposed by Sartre leads necessarily to a radicalization of the phenomenological reduction insofar as the reduction must reach transcendental consciousness as an impersonal constituting field: “The sure and certain content of the pseudo-‘cogito’ is not ‘I am conscious of this chair’, but ‘there is consciousness of this chair’” (Sartre 2004, p. 16).

The transcendental field must be purified of the ego, since the ego itself is constituted by consciousness like all other objects in the world. There is thus no reason to exclude it from the sphere of the phenomenological reduction.

Position of the problem (II): Sartre’s radicalization of phenomenological reduction

For Husserl, the transcendental reduction cannot lead to an impersonal consciousness. For Sartre, on the contrary, the very idea of a “special” transcendence, a non-constituted yet constituting transcendence that belongs to the sphere of immanence, is, from a strictly phenomenological point of view, a contentious claim. For Sartre, the Husserlian notion of a non-constituted transcendence contains a conceptual contradiction. It identifies it as a dogmatic metaphysical position, which has no phenomenological justification: “How are we to explain this privileged treatment of the I if it is not by metaphysical or critical preoccupations that have nothing to do with phenomenology?” (Sartre 2004, p. 14).

Here, we see, once again, Sartre remaining faithful to some of Husserl’s intuitions coming from his earlier work. For example, in Logical Investigations (1900–1901), Husserl, in a move against Natorp, identified the transcendental ego as a suspicious entity possessing no phenomenologically intuitive evidence: “I must frankly confess, however, that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive, necessary center of relations” (Husserl, 1901, quoted by Sartre 2004, p. 56, note 12). Husserl subsequently modified his own position toward the ego; more and more, its phenomenology through its transcendental turn becomes explicitly egological. In the second edition of the Logical Investigations, published in 1913 (date of publication of Ideas), Husserl discusses his own position toward the ego: “I have since managed to find it, i.e. have learnt not to be led astray from a pure grasp of the given through corrupt forms of ego-metaphysic” (Husserl 1901, quoted by Sartre 2004, p. 56, note 12).

In 1913, Husserl presented his own evolution as the very condition of possibility of reaching the transcendental consciousness. This is the reason why he posits a limit to the transcendental reduction in Ideas: “We cannot suspend transcendencies without limits; transcendental purification cannot mean suspension of all transcendencies, since otherwise there would remain, to be sure, a pure consciousness but no possibility for a science of pure consciousness” (Husserl 1913/2014, p. 107). For Husserl, the
transcendental reduction is coincident with the inhibition of what Husserl calls the “natural attitude,” which means an inhibition of our spontaneous activity of positing the existence of the world. Such an inhibition or phenomenological Epokhê aims at reaching transcendental consciousness as the origin of the transcendent reality. In The Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre does not defer to the Husserlian distinction of the natural attitude on the one hand and the phenomenological one on the other; he instead displaces radically its meaning in such a way so as to denounce Husserl’s transcendental reduction as still remaining trapped in the very natural attitude. Indeed, for Sartre, the Husserlian passage from the empirical ego to the transcendental one does not suspend entirely the natural attitude since natural attitude consists precisely in the identification of consciousness as a the product of an ego: “the ‘natural attitude’ appears in its entirety as an effort that consciousness makes to escape from itself by projecting itself into the me” (Sartre 2004, p. 49).

The Husserlian transcendental ego conceived not as a content but as the very form of the transcendental consciousness is interpreted by Sartre as a “contraction” of the empirical (worldly) ego:

Indeed, the I, with its personality, is—however formal and abstract one may suppose it to be . . . It bears to the concrete and psycho-physical me the same relation as does a point to three dimensions: it is an infinitely contracted me.

(Sartre 2004, p. 8)

“For Kant and for Husserl, the I is a formal structure of consciousness . . . an I is never purely formal, that it is always, even when conceived in the abstract, an infinite contraction of the material me” (Sartre 2004, pp. 16–17).

This means that, for Sartre, there are not two egos—the transcendental ego and the empirical/material one—but one and the same ego. The empirical ego is understood by Sartre as a formal modification of the transcendental one. Since, for Sartre, the Husserlian transcendental ego is a contraction of the psycho-physical ego, the egological form of Husserl’s transcendental consciousness contradicts necessarily the claims Husserl makes in the Cartesian Meditations.

Consequently for me, the meditating ego who, standing and remaining in the attitude of epoche, posits exclusively himself as the acceptance-basis of all Objective experiences and bases, there is no psychological Ego and there are no physical phenomena in the sense proper to psychology, i.e., as components of psychophysical men.

(Husserl 1999, quoted by Sartre 2004, p. 55, note 10, my emphasis)

If the Husserlian reduction coincides with the act of bracketing off the transcendent world to which the empirical/psychological ego belongs,
Sartre believes that it follows from this that the Husserlian version of the phenomenological reduction does not break entirely with the natural attitude. His version fails to detach itself fully from the natural attitude since it maintains an egological form of the transcendental consciousness even after the transcendental reduction. Because Sartre identifies the Husserlian transcendental ego with a formal modification of the empirical ego, the transcendental ego is, on Sartre’s view, a transcendence amongst others—an objective transcendence posited by intentional consciousness that Epokhe must suspend in order to open access to the only form of consciousness that can be the remainder of the suspension of the world: impersonal consciousness as such.

For this reason, The Transcendence of the Ego does not seem so much to depart from Husserl, but to aim at a radicalization of its very purpose in freeing transcendental consciousness from its metaphysical residuum embodied by the ego. There is then no such thing, for Sartre, as a “special transcendence”—all transcendences are constituted by consciousness, including the transcendental ego (since it is nothing but another version of the psycho-physical ego). It is for this reason that “all transcendence must fall under the scope of the Epokhe” (Sartre 2004, p. 4). A phenomenological project, according to Sartre, is insufficient if it does not achieve the transcendental reduction in suspending in totality the psychological ego, for the following reasons:

1. The transcendental ego is nothing other than a formal modification of the empirical ego.
2. As a transcendence that is maintained by Husserl despite the reduction, it implies the non-achievement of the suspension of the natural attitude.
3. As remaining a modified form of the natural attitude, the phenomenological attitude remains incomplete, impure and unsure.

If transcendental reduction must lead from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude, it must then necessarily bracket off the totality of the transcendent: “All the results of phenomenology are in danger of crumbling away if the I is not, every bit as much as the world, a relative existent, i.e. an object for consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 9). In other words, it must be constitutive of the transcendental reduction that it leads to the transcendental field of consciousness as an impersonal field in order to overcome fully the natural attitude and enter into the phenomenological one: “the transcendental field becomes impersonal, or, if you prefer, ‘pre-personal’, it is without an I” (Sartre 2004, p. 5; original emphasis). And to a similar end: “The transcendental field, purified of all egological structure, recovers its former limpidity” (Sartre 2004, p. 43).

The sure and certain content of the pseudo-“cogito” is not “I am conscious of the chair,” but “there is consciousness of this chair.” This
content is sufficient to constitute an infinite and absolute field for the investigations of phenomenology.

(Sartre 2004, p. 16)

Upon extending the scope of the transcendental reduction to include the ego thereby overcoming the natural attitude, other problems begin to emerge. One problem raised indirectly by Sartre in the *The Transcendence of the Ego* lies in the nature of reflection. That is, the ego seems to appear inexorably in the transcendental act of reflection not only for metaphysical reasons, but also in virtue of the very nature of *reflection as such*. On the one hand, it seems that the suspension of the transcendental ego would lead only to the complete achievement of the transcendental reduction—the access to transcendental consciousness as an impersonal field. On the other hand, such an achievement remains unreachable on account of the very *constitutive nature of reflection* as such. Sartre reminds us that, indeed, “reflection modifies spontaneous consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 13). Even when Sartre speaks about the possibility of a pure reflection, he reminds us that “But it may happen that consciousness suddenly produces itself on a pure reflective level. *Not perhaps without an ego*, but overflowing the ego on all sides” (Sartre 2004, p. 48, my emphasis).

Does this not mean that any reduction, because of its reflective nature, is condemned to imply the apparition of an ego within the field of the reflected? Might there be no reflection upon consciousness that would not lead to grasping consciousness as egological? The affirmative answer to this question would imply the impossibility of overcoming the natural attitude. If there is no such thing as a pure transcendental reduction, Sartre would then necessarily have to submit to Husserl’s point of view of reduction as leading necessarily to an egological consciousness.¹

Such an apparent pitfall gains further ground in the fact that Sartre reaches impersonal consciousness in using precisely *non-reflexive* means—which Sartre calls “non-thetic memory” (Sartre 2004, p. 11) of a past spontaneous consciousness. The methodology adopted by Sartre in this passage of the *The Transcendence of the Ego* in order to reach consciousness in its originary impersonality is fundamentally focused on how to *avoid the contamination of the non-reflexive memory by the reflection*. In other words, how to remember a consciousness *without* reflecting on it, without imposing the egological surplus implied by the reflective attitude: “This consciousness is not to be posited as an object of my reflection,” which is only possible if “I . . . maintain a sort of complicity with it, and draw up an inventory of its content in a non-positional way” (Sartre 2004, p. 11). Sartre speaks of a “non-reflexive grasp of a consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 11): “while I was reading, there was a consciousness *of* the book, *of* the heroes . . . but the I did not inhabit this consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 12). It seems here that Sartre abandons reflection as a method to reach consciousness in its impersonality. What remains to be shown is how Sartre’s conception of “pure
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reflection” is possible if it implies, insofar as it is a reflection, the apparition of an ego, that non-reflective memory prevents from appearing.

**Pure reflection: beyond Husserl’s phenomenology**

In contrast to impure reflection, pure reflection is not of the kind that frees consciousness totally from the ego. It is rather a reflection in which consciousness no more appears to itself as an emanation of an ego. Sartre claims then that “pure reflection” must be distinguished from the (impure) phenomenological reflection: “the pure reflection . . . is . . . not necessarily phenomenological reflection” (Sartre 2004, p. 23).

The Sartrean alternative to the Husserlian reflection on consciousness consists in what Sartre calls “pure reflection.” In order to elaborate upon the various degrees of reflection, it is necessary to distinguish between pure and impure reflection as according to Sartre. We will begin with his definition of impure reflection, which has two main dimensions that must be explored: transgression and inversion.

**Impure reflection: transgression and inversion**

Impure reflection is determined by the tendency to posit too much, that is, to constitute transcendent objects through an act of transgressing what is actually and really given to reflection. To transgress, in this sense, is to distort what is really given through an act of projection. In the example given by Sartre in which an I looks upon a man Peter, it is in seeing Peter that a consciousness of revulsion occurs: “I see Peter, I feel a kind of profound upheaval of revulsion and anger on seeing him (I am already on the reflective level); this upheaval is consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 22).

In this example, what is actually given to reflection, as an absolute and certain content, is the consciousness of revulsion. Sartre follows Husserl’s conception of immanent perception as originary, absolute, and apodictic; it is given in totality and adequately. (See Husserl 1913/2014, § 38.) This is not, for Sartre, the case—the state of hatred for Peter that “appears to me at the same time as my experience of revulsion” (Sartre 2004, p. 22) is not an immanent content of consciousness but a transcendent object constituted by an impure act of transgressing all that is actually and indubitably given to reflection: a revulsion.

This act of misjudging, of distorting what is actually given, can be explained in the following way: insofar as a consciousness of revulsion, once reflected, appears as an “adumbration” (Abschattung) of hatred, it becomes tempting to posit beyond what is just an adumbration of a hatred (revulsion actual given), the state of hatred itself. Such a positional shift coincides with the act of constitution of a state, as a way to posit more than what is actually given. By positing a transcendent object where there is only an adumbration of a transcendent object, the positing subject tacks more
on to reality than is actually there. It’s the kind of thing occurring, for example, when, instead of perceiving what is actually given in perception, few adumbrations (Abschattungen) of an inkwell, I perceive/posit an inkwell as such: “So, to say ‘I hate’ or ‘I love’ on the occasion of a singular consciousness of attraction or revulsion is to perform a veritable infinitization, somewhat analogous to the one we carry out when we perceive an inkwell or the blue of the blotter” (Sartre 2004, p. 23). This overstepping of the bounds of what is given, this sort of procedure of projection, is how Sartre understands transgression.

Such a transgressive disposition is nevertheless constitutive of our natural way of perceiving. As a matter of fact, we take ourselves not to be perceiving aspects of things, but things themselves, although what we are actually perceiving are aspects of things. The passage from perception of aspects (or adumbrations) of things to the perception of transcendent things is considered by Sartre an act of the constitution of transcendent objects through a transgression of the limits of what is actually and really given: an adumbration of a transcendent object, not the transcendent object as such—which indeed coincides with hatred—“Hatred is a letter of credit for an infinity of angry or revulsed consciousnesses, in the past and the future” (Sartre 2004, p. 23).

Sartre calls such a transgression an “infinitization.” When impure reflection posits the existence of a state of hatred instead of remaining faithful to what is actually and really given (an intuition of an adumbration of hate, a revulsion, not hate as such), it goes beyond the given in order and constitutes a state from which the consciousness of revulsion is supposed to emanate. This emanation constitutes the second dimension of impure reflection, which Sartre names inversion.

This inauthentic tendency constitutive of impure reflection must be defined as follows: a way to affirm more than what is immanently and instantaneously given (first dimension: transgression) in order to reflect consciousness as a manifestation of a state produced by an ego (second dimension: inversion). In impure reflection, consciousness sees its own revulsion as a manifestation of hatred, which means as conditioned by the prior existence of a state of hatred. Impure reflection coincides then with the very constitution of the state through a transgression—what Sartre names “infinitization”—of the actually given. At the same time, however, it implies a radical inversion of the real order of constitution of the state: “The order is reversed by a consciousness that imprisons itself in the World in order to flee from itself” (Sartre 2004, 34).

It is a virtual locus of unity, and consciousness constitutes it as going in completely the reverse direction from that followed by real production; what is really first is consciousnesses, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego.

(Sartre 2004, p. 34)
“To flee from itself” means for consciousness to flee not so much from its spontaneity but its impersonal spontaneity. Reflection, when it becomes pure, should attempt to grasp consciousness as a “non-personal spontaneity.” That is to say that impure reflection does not conceal so much the spontaneity of consciousness than the impersonality of such a spontaneity. As a matter of fact, as Sartre says: “There is no case in which reflection can be mistaken about the spontaneity of reflexive consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 14). This is why, in its activity of constituting the state in an inverted way, impure reflection has to deal at the same time with two seemingly contradictory requirements:

The relation between hatred and the instantaneous consciousness of disgust is constructed in such a way as to cope simultaneously with the demands of hatred (the demand to be first, to be the origin) and the sure and certain data of reflection (spontaneity).

(Sartre 2004, p. 25)

In impure reflection, consciousness perceives itself as an emanation of a state, which originates from the ego, instead of reflecting itself as an impersonal consciousness, which is actually prior to the state. This latter view would lead consciousness to see itself as independent of any psychological determinism—as being revealed by reflection as “creation ex nihilo” (Sartre 2004, p. 46), which is precisely what our natural impure attitude attempts to thwart. On account of its impersonal spontaneity, consciousness “is what it produces” (Sartre 2004, p. 33). If consciousness is conceived by reflection as coming first, consciousness can then no longer see itself as having an origin, a foundation, outside itself in the state of an ego that Sartre presents as what impure reflection considers “to be first” and as the “origin” (Sartre 2004, p. 25). The idea here is that the state is constituted and posited by reflective consciousness as prior to consciousness, as the “origin” whence consciousness is supposed to come from: “hatred appears through it as that from which it emanates” (Sartre 2004, p. 26). Further, because the ego is constituted as “the unity of states and actions” (Sartre 2004, p. 21), every state lived by consciousness is seen as the state of one and the same ego. The (inauthentic) inversion produced by reflective consciousness implies indeed the constitution of the ego given to consciousness as “the producer of conscious spontaneity” (Sartre 2004, p. 42), as an inhabitant of consciousness. In other words, as sharing the very nature of consciousness, as an element of consciousness—a source, a structure, an origin. An authentic reflection would, on the contrary, see the ego as something that is not “a relative existent, i.e. an object for consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 9). Sartre here, again, remains faithful to Husserl’s distinction between the absolute and unsubstantial being of consciousness demonstrated by the fact that consciousness does not depend on the existence of the world to be and also by the fact that the relative and substantial being of the world
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requires consciousness in order to be. (See Husserl 1913/2014, § 49.) In the impure reflection, the irreducibility of consciousness toward the world is lost: consciousness contains worldly elements that are not recognized as such, since consciousness tries to conceal its own impersonal spontaneity in perceiving its spontaneity as having its origin in a (supposedly) prior psychological state. Against such a “natural attitude” that Husserl’s transcendental reduction does not dissolve, Sartre reminds us that the ego cannot “be part of the internal structure of Erlebnisse” (Sartre 2004, p. 13). For this reason, Sartre claims that the only way to remain faithful to Husserl’s fundamental idea (following which, the being of pure consciousness has nothing in common with the being of the world, since the former is “absolute” and the latter “relative”) is to achieve Husserl’s phenomenological reduction in excluding outside consciousness of the ego. This is because, as a worldly element not belonging to the immanency of consciousness, it implies a substantialization and a naturalization of consciousness that contradict directly the Husserlian discovery of the non-substantial absoluteness of the transcendental consciousness. This gives Sartre the ground on which to make the claim, “All the results of phenomenology are in danger of crumbling away if the I is not, every but as much as the world, a relative existent, i.e. an object for consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 9).

Pure reflection: from methodological inhibition to anguish

There are two different accounts of pure reflection in The Transcendence of the Ego: a minimal, more formal version, which is described at the very beginning of the second part of the book, and a second, more developed version, which is to be found in the conclusion.

We will describe first of all the minimal and formal version that the second description will serve to enrich. In both cases, pure reflection (or pure Epokhe) is defined by Sartre as doing exactly what impure reflection does not do. In the first description of pure reflection, it is characterized by Sartre as an attitude that contrasts with the spontaneous natural tendency of reflection to constitute a state beyond the given immediate consciousness (revulsion).

Pure reflection is primarily described by Sartre as a non-positing attitude. It limits itself to what is currently given to it; it recognizes its revulsion as an “adumbration” of the hatred, not as hatred. Hatred, indeed, belongs to the field of the dubitable transcendence, since only one adumbration of it is given to me—my very repulsion—and never “the transcendent unity” of “an infinity of angry or revulsed consciousnesses, in the past and the future.” To quote Sylvie Le Bon—“Every object, as an object for consciousness, whether it be my hatred or this table, will also remain dubious, since no intuition will ever be able to deliver it to me once and for all in its totality” (Sartre 2004, pp. 62–63).

Insofar as revulsion is an adumbration of hatred, “my hatred appears to me at the same time as my experience of revulsion” (Sartre 2004, p. 22),
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but precisely as a transcendent limit of my own experience, not as the actual content of it. In this sense, contrary to what happens in impure reflection, where I posit from the only fact that I have an immanent intuition of one adumbration of hatred (and never an intuition of the totality of them) that “I hate Peter,” pure reflection “stays with the given without making any claims about the future” (Sartre 2004, p. 23). Pure reflection does not claim or posit anything beyond the current given: “I have a revulsion against Peter in this moment.” It does not, through the current living revulsion, constitute a permanent state, an existing feeling that is supposed to recur after my current experience of revulsion in a new revulsion or in a feeling of disgust when I see Peter again. Pure reflection does not assert more than what it knows with certainty, which is simply what consciousness is currently living (a revulsion, not a state): “Reflection has de facto and de jure limits. It is a consciousness that posits a consciousness. Everything that it affirms about this consciousness is certain and adequate” (Sartre 2004, pp. 21–22). In pure reflection, consciousness does not look for an origin of its own spontaneity outside itself, in a transcendent object (improperly) constituted as a psychological origin of its current living experience: “Phenomenology has taught us that states are objects, that a feeling as such (of love or hatred) is a transcendent object” (Sartre 2004, p. 44). Insofar as, in impure reflection, these objects are constituted in “the reverse direction from that followed by the real production,” a state is given to the reflective consciousness as a psychological origin of a current (reflected) consciousness. So, instead of perceiving its own being as coming first and never being preceded by anything else (itself as a “creation ex nihilo”), in impure reflection, consciousness flees from its originary impersonality by conceiving itself as an emanation of a state produced by an ego:

It is thus exactly as if consciousnesses constituted the Ego as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself before this Ego which it has constituted, became absorbed in it, as if it made the Ego its safeguard and its law.

(Sartre 2004, p. 48)

This is, for Sartre, what explains the radical irrationality of the notion of the ego as a derived instance appearing to the reflective consciousness as a principle. As a matter of fact, “what is really first is consciousness” (Sartre 2004, p. 34). On the contrary, we can say that, in pure reflection, revulsion does not appear any more as coming from a source that would not coincide with consciousness as such—as a self-determining spontaneity: “transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity. It determines itself to exist at every instant, without us being able to conceive of anything before it” (Sartre 2004, p. 46). In pure reflection, the inversion of the real process of constitution is suspended since no egological state is constituted: the ego then still appears but it no more appears as the precise origin of consciousness:
The reflexive attitude is expressed correctly by the celebrated phrase by Rimbaud (in the letter of the seer), “I is the other.” The context proves that he merely meant that the spontaneity of consciousness cannot emanate from the I, it goes toward the I, it meets it. (Sartre 2004, p. 46)

What this quotation demonstrates is that pure reflection is not absolutely freed from the ego—it is not absolutely non-egological. It does indeed imply the apparition of the ego. Nevertheless, in the pure reflection, the ego is no longer improperly given as an origin, but as a transcendent horizon drawn by the current reflected consciousness: “The Ego doubtless appears, but on the horizon of spontaneity. The reflective attitude is expressed correctly. It allows to be glimpsed under its limpid thickness but it is given above all as an individuated and impersonal spontaneity” (Sartre 2004, p. 46).

In pure reflection, the current consciousness perceived, “meeting the I,” is nothing other than an adumbration of the ego: one adumbration of what appears as its very horizon, a distant totality of consciousness, which coincides with the ego itself.

Consciousness cannot be identified with the ego that appears (“I is the other” (“Je est un autre”)) in reflection, whereas the ego only appears through consciousness, as a secondary and implicit apparition occasioned by the explicit apparition of consciousness. The ego appears then as the horizon toward which consciousness is directed. Insofar as it functions as a horizon, it appears in pure reflection as remaining other—it no more appears as an inhabitant of consciousness nor as an a priori source of consciousness. The ego appears through the current consciousness perceived as a transcendent object standing beyond consciousness and that consciousness only joins—which means that it appears through consciousness as a horizon — (“it allows to be glimpsed under its limpid thickness but it is given above all as an individuated and impersonal spontaneity”).

The only difference between the pure and the impure reflective act is thus: the impure reflection posits and constitutes the appearing ego as the very origin of consciousness. Pure reflection, on the other hand, lets the ego draw itself as a distant horizon, which reflected consciousness only “joins.” To this extent, we can see how much the ego finds its condition of possibility in the reflection, since it appears as a horizon, a potential object that can be constituted, but that pure reflection refrains itself from constituting. In this sense, we could say that the condition of possibility of the ego depends upon reflection, because it is only in reflection that it appears. At the same time, however, what differentiates pure and impure reflections is the way in which they relate to the ego: impure reflection posits the ego as a permanent object from which consciousness comes, whereas pure reflection maintains the appearing ego as a pure and absolute potentiality that it refrains from positing. Pure reflection would be then defined by this restraint, remaining faithful to the pure and absolute given without constituting what appears
through it, in other words, without succumbing to the temptation of converting a horizon into an origin. In remaining a pure and distant horizon of consciousness, instead of an origin, the ego is maintained by this way in its very transcendent alterity (“I is the other”).

In order to understand his concept of “pure reflection,” we must follow carefully Sartre’s explanation of it. As a matter of fact, in what we called the formal presentation of pure reflection, Sartre presents the pure reflection as a kind of ascetic restraint, an attitude based on self-inhibition: “Pure reflection stays with the given without making any claims about the future” (Sartre 2004, p. 23, my emphasis). Pure reflection lies in “this refusal to implicate the future” (Sartre 2004, p. 22, my emphasis). By contrast, impure reflection is presented as an attitude, which does not observe such a seemingly methodological prudence: “These two reflections have apprehended the same, certain data but the one reflection has affirmed more than it knew” (Sartre 2004, p. 24, my emphasis). Later, Sartre speaks about impure reflection this way:

The unifying act of reflection links each new state in a very special way to the concrete totality me. It is not limited to grasping it as joining that totality, as melting into it; it intends a relation that crosses time backwards and gives me the source of the state.

(Sartre 2004, p. 32, my emphasis)

These two formal presentations of the two kinds of reflections might lead the reader to suppose that pure reflection is defined as a deliberate, prudent attitude of non-positing transcendent objects that appear through it: states and ego. This dimension is formally accurate, but only formally. Such a preliminary presentation of the pure reflection remains, at this stage of Sartre’s text, entirely formal and theoretical, since pure reflection never occurs in our life as a deliberate act, faithful to a methodological prudence. It occurs rather as an accident, a non-desired and unpleasant event that unhinges our natural beliefs. In fact, our natural and spontaneous attitude remains mostly inauthentic, “impure and complicitious” (Sartre 2004, p. 23). It does not seem possible to exercise any kind of self-restraint within the realm of our concrete experience. We are rather, it seems, in spite of ourselves, radically constrained by our experience insofar as it is necessary to endure “pure reflection” which occurs, in its true concrete form, with anguish:

It may happen that consciousness suddenly produces itself on the pure reflective level. Not perhaps without an ego, but overflowing the ego on all sides, dominating it and supporting it outside itself by a continuous creation. On this level, there is not distinction between the possible and the real, because the appearance is absolute. There are no more barriers, no more limits, nothing that can disguise consciousness from
Consciousness discovering its impersonal spontaneity is then never an experience that can be decided. It happens rather as an accident of our natural experience, which suspends our natural attitude. Such an *Epokhè* of our natural attitude occurs precisely at the moment when consciousness appears to itself as *overflowing the ego*. In other words, when it manifests itself as realizing an existence that *cannot any more* find its origin and determinate source in the ego: “There is something that provokes anxiety for each of us in thus grasping, as it occurs, this tireless creation of existence of which *we are not the creators*” (Sartre 2004, p. 46; original emphasis). In pure reflection concretely experienced as anxiety the ego still appears, but because *of the form that is taken by the reflected consciousness*, such an ego *can no longer be posited* as its producer. The I as embodying the principle of consciousness is *suspended*. The ego is no more constituted as the source of consciousness, which means that it is no more constituted at all. In the experience that consciousness makes of itself in anxiety, the thesis inherent to the natural attitude is entirely suspended.

In fact, in pure reflection as anxiety, consciousness appears in its *impersonal* dimension, which means, appears as something occurring *independently of the nature of one’s personality*: “On this level, man has the impression of eluding himself ceaselessly, overflowing himself, surprising himself by a richness that is always unexpected” (Sartre 2004, pp. 46–47).

Sartre thinks that such a non-controllable self-creativity of consciousness—the fact that *I* don’t play any actual role in the production of our “conscious lives” (Sartre 2004, p. 47) and that *I* cannot do anything against such a creation since *I* am overflowed by it—gives to the reflected consciousness what Sartre calls a “monstrous” dimension (Sartre 2004, p. 47). This, as the name suggests, refers to the inhuman aspect of pure consciousness since, indeed, “The I appears only on the level of humanity” (Sartre 2004, p. 5). Such a monstrous dimension is presented by Sartre as the cause of anxiety and as the origin of psychasthenia discovered by Janet and (mostly) psychoanalysis. Sartre refers to the example of Janet:

A young bride suffered from a terror that, when her husband left her alone, she would go over to the window and hail the passers-by as prostitutes do. Nothing in her upbringing, in her past, or in her character can serve as an explanation for such a fear. In my view, it is simply that a circumstance of no importance (reading, conversation, etc.) had caused in her what might be called a vertigo of possibility. She found herself monstrously free and this vertiginous liberty appeared to her *on the occasion* when she was free to make this gesture that she was afraid of making. But this vertigo can be understood only if the consciousness
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suddenly appears to itself as infinitely overflowing its possibilities the I that ordinarily acts as its unity.

(Sartre 2004, p. 47)

What Sartre calls here the “vertigo of possibility” (Sartre 2004, p. 47) coincides with the following existential event: after a contingent and meaningless happening (“lecture,” “conversation,” etc.) the young bride found herself overflowing with all the possibilities offered by its radical freedom. In her case, there were some behaviors, for example, acting like a prostitute, that she would be unlikely to pursue because she took them to be incompatible with the sort of person she is. Those types of actions appear to her now, after a pure and meaningless contingent event, as behaviors that nothing can prevent her from adopting. She discovers, it seems, her own freedom in a “vertigo” because “consciousness suddenly appears to itself as infinitely overflowing in its possibilities the I that ordinarily acts as its unity” (Sartre 2004, p. 47). In the case of the young bride, the “vertigo” of the discovery of her absolute freedom—the pure and positive discovery of the fact that she can adopt behaviors radically incompatible with her personal identity—becomes manifest to her “on the occasion when she was free to make this gesture that she was afraid of making” (Sartre 2004, p. 47). In other words, in pure reflection, the individual exhibits a behavior that cannot be the behavior of her ego. Her ego cannot prevent her from performing actions that fall outside the scope of actions her ego would be able to create. What this woman becomes aware of is the fact that, despite the fact that she does not have the personality of someone who could make these kinds of gestures (“go over to the window and hail the passers-by”), her personality, the nature of her ego, cannot prevent her from making them, because of the impersonal self-production of consciousness that she discovers in anguish. Such a situation can be explained only if her ego is not the actual source of her behavior. Indeed, “If the I of the ‘I think’ is the primary source of consciousness, this anguish is impossible” (Sartre 2004, p. 49).

The modification of the phenomenological Epokhé

The transcendental reduction Sartre describes as “a pure reflective act, which would present itself to itself as a non-personal spontaneity” (Sartre 2004, p. 42). Such an act differs in its Sartrean version from the original Husserlian version in four fundamental ways. First, as we have seen, Sartre’s reduction shares one aspect with Husserl’s—in both cases, an ego is appearing in the field of the reflected. Contrary to Husserl’s views, however, in the version presented by Sartre of the phenomenological Epokhé, the ego is given not as the principle of the unity of consciousness, but as what is overflowed by consciousness: “It may happen that consciousness suddenly produces itself on the pure reflective level. Not perhaps without an Ego, but overflowing the Ego on all sides, dominating it and supporting it outside
its continuous creation” (Sartre 2004, p. 48). In Husserl, the reduction was presented as an act of freedom, an unmotivated act, an act accomplished with no prior motives or reasons: “As you will know, in his Kant-studien article, confesses not without melancholy that, so long as one remains in the ‘natural’ attitude, there is no reason, no ‘motive’, for performing the Epokhè” (Sartre 2004, p. 49).

Insofar as the phenomenological reduction becomes an accident of ordinary life for Sartre, it cannot be identified as an act that the subject would deliberately and freely perform. On Sartre’s account, we are, sometimes and by accident, exposed and condemned to the reduction. The purification of the field of consciousness from any egological character is then obtained in the experience of anguish, which coincides with Epokhè in its concrete and existential mode: “It is this absolute and irremediable anguish, this fear of oneself, that in my view is constitutive of pure consciousness” (Sartre 2004, pp. 48–49).

Third, the Sartrean reduction coincides with the experience of the anxiety as such. It is therefore not, as it is in Husserl’s phenomenology, “an intellectual method, a skilled procedure” (Sartre 2004, p. 49). Contrary to Husserl’s reduction, it is an ordeal that is universally experienced and existentially rooted; it is no more a philosophical act, but an existential ordeal. In this sense, we could say that Sartre was the first to interpret the phenomenological experience of anxiety, as it has been described by Heidegger in Being and Time (1962, § 40), as the very name for the phenomenological reduction as such. Epokhè “is no longer an intellectual method, a skilled procedure. It is an anxiety that imposes itself on us and that we cannot avoid” (Sartre 2004, p. 49).

Fourth, Sartre introduces a radical modification in the phenomenological concept of Epokhè when he claims that Epokhè is a motivated act. In Husserl’s phenomenology, the reduction is accompanied by a philosophical conversion, that is, a change of attitude, from the natural attitude where we posit the world as being-there, to the phenomenological attitude where the presence of the world as being-there is suspended. What defines such a modification of attitude is the fact that it is entirely non-motivated, that there is no reason to perform the suspension of the world or to change our attitude toward it (Husserl qualifies in the § 31 of Ideas as a “radical alteration of the natural Thesis”: Husserl 1913/2014, p. 52). In other words, there is no reason to leave the natural attitude, to suspend its fundamental thesis. It is for this reason that Sartre presents Husserl’s Epokhè as a “miracle.” In the alternative concept of the phenomenological Epokhè that Sartre proposes, it is no more a miracle, insofar as “we possess a permanent reason for effecting the phenomenological reduction” (Sartre 2004, p. 49). Indeed, insofar as the ego is not really at the principle of consciousness, nothing can prevent consciousness from appearing under a non-egological form. In other words, anxiety remains a constant possibility of our experience. Unlike Husserl’s account, Sartre’s account gives a reason for Epokhè.
Since *Epokhè* is a way to break with the natural attitude and since such a break is always for Sartre “an accident that is always possible in our daily lives” (Sartre 2004, p. 49).

Husserl claims that, if there is no reason to move from our natural attitude to the phenomenological one, it is because “this natural attitude is perfectly coherent and one can find in it none of those contradictions which, according to Plato, led the philosopher to carry out a philosophical conversion” (Sartre 2004, p. 49). For Sartre, *contra* Husserl, the natural attitude is precisely an *incoherent* attitude. It attaches to “an effort that consciousness makes to escape from itself by projecting itself into the me and absorbing itself in it” (Sartre 2004, p. 49). In order to remain in the natural attitude, consciousness has to constitute the ego “in completely the reverse direction than that followed by real production” (Sartre 2004, p. 34). This is to say that it constitutes the ego in a way *that does not unite* with the real order of its production. Such a reversion of the real, constitutive of our natural attitude, is sometimes compared by Sartre to an artificial construction, a fake montage (for example, when Sartre says that “the relation between hatred and the instantaneous consciousness of disgust is *constructed* in such a way as to cope simultaneously with the demands of hatred and the sure certain data of reflection”: Sartre 2004, p. 25). This is why Sartre defines the relation between the states and the consciousness as an *illogical* and *magical* relation: “We readily acknowledge that the relation of hatred to the particular *Erlebnis* of repulsion is not logical. It is, to be sure, a magical link” (Sartre 2004, p. 26).

What this means is that the relation between the state and the consciousness, because of the reversal implied by the impure reflection, *has no logical coherency*. It, indeed, makes the *passive* object (the ego) appear erroneously as a source of *spontaneity*:

The link between the Ego and its states thus remains an unintelligible spontaneity. It is this spontaneity that was described by Bergson in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, it is this spontaneity that he takes for freedom, without realizing that he is describing an object and not a consciousness and that the link he is positing is perfectly irrational because the producer is passive vis-à-vis the thing created. However irrational it may be, this link is nonetheless the one that we observe in the intuition of the ego. And we grasp its meaning: the ego is an object apprehended but is also constituted by reflective knowledge. It is a virtual locus of unity, and consciousness constitutes it as going in completely the reverse direction from that followed by real production; what is really first is consciousnesses, through which are constituted states, then, through these, the Ego. But, as the order is reversed by a consciousness that imprisons itself in the World in order to flee from itself, consciousnesses are given as emanating from states, and states as produced by the Ego. As a consequence, consciousness
projects its own spontaneity into the object Ego so as to confer on it the creative power that is absolutely necessary to it. However, this spontaneity, represented and hypostatized in an object, becomes a bastard, degenerate spontaneity, which magically preserves its creative potentiality while becoming passive.

(Sartre 2004, pp. 34–35)

For Sartre, our natural attitude is an illogical attitude based on relations of magic. It is an attitude internally inconsistent and therefore impossible for us to maintain. The move from one attitude to another—from our natural attitude to anxiety—as the very phenomenological name for the transcendental reduction, is unavoidable. We are necessarily exposed, in spite of our efforts, to accidental moments of anxiety in which we are condemned to the suspension of our natural attitude. Sartre defines the natural attitude as a constant effort to avoid the truth of our being, and he specifies that such an effort is “never completely rewarded” (Sartre 2004, p. 49). Our natural impulse to flee from our own freedom is evident from the constitution of illogical relations between consciousness and the ego. The internal incoherence of the natural attitude exposes the fundamental impossibility of remaining always in such an attitude; it brings to light the impossibility of non-being sometimes exposed to the radical suspension of the natural attitude in anxiety.²

Notes

1 This point has been well demonstrated by Philippe Cabestan (see Cabestan 2004, pp. 304–305).

2 I would like to thank all the participants of the “seminar “Radical Immanence,” held at the University of Chicago during the Fall of 2014, especially my colleague David Finkelstein.

Bibliography

