

SARTRE'S NON-EGOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Heidegger reminds us that, in reality, human existence is, from the very outset, existence in the world (*Dasein*). But we have forgotten this unity and replaced it by a dualistic division between the isolated subject on the one hand, and the world on the other. While Heidegger identifies this tendency to introduce dualism into the primordial unity of Being-in-the world as Cartesian, it is Sartre who, spells out in exact detail the mechanisms by which Cartesian Dualism is instituted, and by which it may be overcome. Sartre shows that Descartes's 'Reflective *Cogito*' is an act of reflection by which consciousness affects to stand outside itself which replaces the primordial unity of Being-in-the world, with a reified consciousness, an ego dualistically divided from the world. The understanding of such an ego and its capacity to act freely upon this world is thus rendered problematic. But, Sartre points out that, in the absence of such reifying reflection the egological conception of consciousness is 'deconstructed' in favour of a non-egological conception of consciousness which is quite literally *No-thing* other than totality of cognitive, evaluative and active *capacities* or ways of being *related to*, the world. Therefore, the problems of relating to the world through knowledge and action are simply dissolved. One cannot fail to see the significance of such a fundamental change in our understanding of what it means to be a human subject, not only for philosophy of mind but for other disciplines too. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate Sartre's non-egological conception of consciousness and to find out if it can successfully account for the unity, continuity of identity of the consciousness.

I

Sartre accepts the thesis of intentionality whole-heartedly when he says:

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“All the consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no content”.¹

Though intentionality is taken to be the main characteristic of consciousness, the major theme is that consciousness is not a thing of some kind. Sartre's contribution is to provide an explanation of how it is possible to have consciousness and yet to think in terms of 'nothingness'. This he achieves first by reducing consciousness to its capacities such as those exercised in perceiving, remembering, imaging, judging and willing etc., and next, by showing that to explain the unity of consciousness one need not take recourse to an egological conception of it. Similarly, he claims, the continuity and identity of consciousness can also be explained by reference to the notion of consciousness as capacities.

In actual fact, Sartre reminds us, consciousness is never available to us independently of the exercise of its capacities. Thus, empirically we have no acquaintance with consciousness *per se*. Moreover, in each case exercise of these capacities is an intentional act which involves 'a pure and simple negation of the given'² in favour of what is not given. For example, in perception one sees a figure standing out against a *background* which the *figure is not*. Similarly, in evaluation, for example, to regard a person as good is to regard him as *not evil*, 'while more generally the capacity to evaluate a situation etc., presupposes the capacity to imagine it as other than it is, to post an alternative, which is to say conceptually to negate the actual, in the name of the possible which it is not'.³

However, when consciousness considers itself as 'object', there is yet another surpassing of consciousness by itself. This happens as soon as consciousness reflectively becomes aware of its own identity as a consciousness of. Thus, according to Sartre, consciousness is a double nihilation of the *being which it is* and the being in the midst of which it is.⁴ In this way consciousness comes to be aware of its own nothingness which is derived from both, its awareness of an object in the world and its awareness of itself as an 'object' when it reflectively posits itself. Sartrean view of consciousness can be summed up as follows in his own words:

“Consciousness is a pure and simple negation of the given, and it exists as the disengagement from a certain existing given and as an engagement

toward a certain not yet existing end".⁵

The above view can be confirmed from our ordinary experience. For example if you take the consciousness of the tree before you to exemplify the cognitive relation between a subject and an object and try to be aware of what Sartre calls reflected consciousness itself, the reflected consciousness as such simply eludes you. Intuitively we know that it is there but we cannot cognise it while it is there. Only by a separate mental act which Sartre calls 'reflective consciousness', can one know that one is aware of the tree. However, Sartre does recognise a 'pre-reflective consciousness' which is immediately and non-cognitively aware of unreflected consciousness without knowing it to be knowledge. Sartre describes this illusive feature of consciousness as a 'vacancy' or an 'emptiness' - an 'openness' to the world or a 'pure directedness' on to the objects external to itself.

Sartrean notion of consciousness is essentially non-egological. It means that there is no consciousness of an ego prior to reflection. The reflective consciousness has the same, as in case of ordinary pre-reflective experience, two dimensional structure as the consciousness of an object and a non-positional consciousness of the act of reflecting.⁶ Thus the ego is not *in* consciousness, it is an *object* of consciousness. If the ego were to exist *in* consciousness, Sartre contends, "it would tear consciousness from itself; it would divide consciousness, it would slide into every consciousness like an opaque blade."⁷ In all egological conceptions of consciousness, the ego is imagined at the centre, as the source or the cause of all conscious activities, together constituting an independently existing thing or substance. But, as Sartre has shown, neither do we have an experience of consciousness as a reified object nor do we need any reference to the ego to account for conscious acts since consciousness is reducible to those capacities which are exercised in the acts of consciousness, such as in perceiving, remembering, evaluating, etc. Yet Sartre acknowledges that there is an ego encountered in reflection,⁸ but this ego is a transcendent object of reflective consciousness, not the transcendental ego which Husserl and Descartes believed was the experienced subject of human consciousness. Further, Sartre claims that the ego is an ideal synthetic object, comparable to a melody, whose unity is that of a continuing pattern of acts, states and utterances. He calls ego 'transcendent' in three senses of the term, First, Sartre notes that since consciousness has the power to transcend what is factually given in imagining

and pursuing a future goal, the pattern discovered in reflection is unified in relation to individuals fundamental project. Second, the ego is transcendent in the sense of not being immanent in consciousness, it is an object for my consciousness, as well as an object that others can experience. Third, the ego discovered in reflection is transcendent in the sense of not being limited to the moment of discovery; it is given as a pattern which has been recurring and which will probably continue.⁹

Thus, empirically speaking, we do not need any reference to the ego to account for conscious acts. Sartre goes further to argue that the unity and continuity of consciousness in an individual can also be accounted for without any reference to a psychic entity the 'I' or 'me'. The unity and continuity of consciousness is realized in apprehending the unity and continuity of a transcendent object. Sartre's argument is that if on the basis of otherwise distinct cognitive acts, a unified and continuous object can be recognized as such, then there must be a synthetic unity of those acts themselves. He says, "Consciousness must be a perpetual synthesis of past consciousness and present consciousness".¹⁰ But the question is how this synthetic unity is achieved? Sartre's answer is: "It is consciousness which unifies itself, concretely, by a play of "transversal" intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousness".¹¹ It is better to understand this explanation by an example.

Let us consider that you are in the middle of counting and someone asks, 'What are you doing'? You reply, 'I am counting'. The reply suggests that consciousness can instantly reflect upon what it is currently doing and become aware of it. But since counting as a whole is a serial activity, it is not given in the instant which you become reflectively aware of. So the reply also suggests that you see your instantaneous reflective awareness of what you are currently doing as a part of a series of acts amounting to the activity of counting. And this in turn implies that the whole series has been retained in the consciousness somehow. Further, though only what you were currently doing was reflected upon, your immediate reply suggests that the retention of the whole is reflected in the reply. This means that the retention in question was implicitly present in the current conscious doings which was instantaneously reflected upon, even before it was reflected upon. This fact of retention suggests that consciousness was immediately present to itself in a synthetic unity. Here Sartre explains, "it is the nonthetic consciousness of counting which is the very condition of my

act of adding. If it were otherwise, how could the addition be a unifying theme of my consciousness? In order that this theme should preside over a whole series of synthesis of unifications and recognitions it must be present to itself, not as a thing but as an operative intentionality which can exist only as the revealing-revealed, to use an expression of Heidegger's'.¹² What Sartre intends to say is that consciousness, apart from being simultaneously, pre-reflectively aware of itself, leaves a 'non-thetic memory' of itself. The intentional act which aims at the answer to the question above, apart from reflecting upon the current doings, invokes the pathetic memory of previous acts - thus unifying them all. Indeed that unity is already present, since at each stage of counting the current consciousness is 'transversally aware of itself as counting, though not explicitly but only pre-reflectively. Each act of consciousness has an immediate non-cognitive awareness not only of itself but also of another. Thus the unity and continuity of the consciousness is explicable from within, and therefore renders the ego redundant'.

Finally, to complete Sartre's non-egological account of consciousness, we must describe how he explains personal identity from within the resources of consciousness. The question is how one set of continually uniting acts of consciousness constituting one 'identity' is distinguished from another identity without involving reference to individual egos. In actual fact, as we have already seen, consciousness is indistinguishable from its manifestations into acts of consciousness. So far as an individual is identical with his consciousness, he is, at any given moment, quite literally identical with the consciousness he is engaged with. Thus, the 'I' refers to a changing identity, from one act to another. Yet a sense of enduring personal identity running through the individual identities cannot be denied. From where do we get this sense of enduring identity? Sartre derives his reply from his contention that all these separate acts of consciousness are in fact attempts at the realization of a 'Fundamental Project' and therefore share a common end. Just as a number of conscious acts get united to each other, and distinguished from other unities, because they are all directed towards the same transcendent object, so a number of sub-projects get united into a hierarchically related manifestations of a Fundamental Project by which one individuates a single identity, distinguished from other identities. Thus, Sartre accounts for the identity of consciousness without recourse to the notion of an ego conceived as a mental unity. This further strengthens his major contention

that consciousness is a kind of nothingness; it is empirically indistinguishable from its capacities. In the next section, we shall deal with some of those critics who claim that Sartre's non-egological conception of consciousness cannot sufficiently account for the unity, continuity and identity of the consciousness.

II

Some scholars like Alfred Schutz, Wilfred Desan and John Scanlon have claimed that Sartre actually presupposes or discovers a transcendental ego without acknowledging it. Others like Peer Caws, have criticized Sartre for denying that there is any subject of consciousness.

Peter Caws claims that Sartre's description of consciousness leaves us with 'nobody to carry on the enquiry'.¹³ It rests on Sartre's early declaration that prereflective consciousness is 'impersonal' which has been interpreted as a denial that there is any subject of consciousness. But this is not the correct interpretation. There may be differences between individuality - concepts of *TE* and *BN*, but Sartre never denies a subject of experience. Consciousness in *TE* is characterized as impersonal but at the same time as individual, while in *BN* the pre-reflective consciousness is provided with a personal structure. According to him, body is that continuing subject. The conscious body lives most of its pre-reflective experience focussing on the objects with which it is engaged, rather than on its own activities. It is like to be some one engrossed in the objects his or her concern, but cannot be denied that there is some one who is concerned. Similarly, Sartre says, "The consciousness that I have of you is never a consciousness of a consciousness. It is a consciousness, of a being that is animated with a consciousness, that possesses a consciousness that is a consciousness and at the same time a body. Consciousness of a consciousness however, only exists in the form of reflexivity".¹⁴

Another related criticism is that Sartre's account of the transcendent ego fails to explain the unity of consciousness. In addition to synthesising activity of consciousness and that provided by the continuing objects of consciousness, as discussed in the previous section, Sartre's descriptions of lived body show that it is the subject of experience; it is the spatial centre of all action and its strict continuity through time enables it to fulfil the traditional role of the subject. Another way of accounting for the unity of consciousness, we have seen, is the

fundamental project. Interesting to note, it can also account for certain forms of discontinuity. In case of 'radical conversion', Sartre argues that a choice of a totally new fundamental project may result in time a totally new transcendent ego.¹⁵ The conscious body of the person, in such case, would remain the same throughout his life time but he would be a new person in a real and important sense. Such changes, though rare, are explained more readily by Sartrean account than if a continuing transcendental ego were supposed to be in charge. Thus, if Sartre's discussion of the role of conscious human body and of the fundamental project are taken into consideration along with remarks about object unity and the synthesising activity of consciousness, he can successfully answer the criticism that his conception does not account for the unity of the consciousness.

The strong objection by Desan¹⁶ and others, against Sartre's view of Egoless consciousness that it incorporates a transcendental ego either by presupposing it or by discovering it but misinterpreting the experience, needs to be considered in some detail. The following reasons have been given in support of the above contention.

(a) The ego is unavoidably present in authentic reflection which means reflection or reflective level. This is so because it implies that I consider myself as knowing an object. Even the pre-reflective cogito is known only because there is a reflective cogito which is characterized by the presence of the ego. Thus, Sartre is always confronted with the ego while trying to eliminate it from consciousness.

(b) Sartre's use of intentionality of consciousness as a proof against the existence of a personal 'I', in fact establishes that it is 'I' who know, desire choose and negate the world.

(c) The sharp opposition between the for-itself and the other, posited by Sartre, reinforces the individuality and personality of 'I'. The concrete existence of the other gives me a strange and growing self-consciousness.¹⁷

(d) The description of For-itself as nothingness and definition of bad faith as self deception indicate that there is an ego who effects the nothingness and indulges in bad faith.

Desan's criticism of Sartre seems to be based on the assumption that consciousness is a quality which necessarily needs a personal 'I' as its support.

However, Sartre claims that original consciousness does not require another consciousness or an ego to be conscious of itself. For instance, pleasure cannot be distinguished from the consciousness of pleasure. The very existence of pleasure implies the consciousness of pleasure. There is no pleasure first and consciousness of pleasure afterwards.¹⁸ Thus by granting consciousness a mode of existence which is at the same time consciousness of its existence, Sartre has tried to eliminate the ego from the field of consciousness. Consciousness does not require an ego in order to remain self-identical, as we discussed in the previous section. Therefore, Desan's claim that Sartre presupposes a transcendental ego is not correct in Husserlian sense. But Sartre seems to speak in Kantian terms when he accepts that a transcendental and non-positional consciousness is a condition for all experience; consciousness must be conscious (of) itself in a non-positional manner in order to make possible a positional consciousness.¹⁹

III

Observers like Sabhajit Mishra²⁰ have drawn attention to some striking similarity between Sartrean conception of consciousness as nothingness and the Upanisadic characterization of consciousness (Atman) as not - this, not this (neti-neti). This Upanisadic nothingness is an expression of the essentially free character of the consciousness as is the case with Sartre's egoless consciousness. M. M. Agrawal²¹ has also pointed out the common features of the notions of consciousness held by Sartre and Krishnamurti, Sāṅkhya concept of subjectivity also shows striking resemblance to Sartre. But, both Mishra and Agrawal have criticized Sartre for the implications he draws for human freedom from his egoless conception of consciousness. For them, by freeing itself of its ego-character alone can consciousness regain its pristine purity, which is subjectivity itself and which is synonym of human freedom. Human subjectivity, to both Sāṅkhya and Advait Vedānta is a positive principle, negation is only one aspect of it. By negating the objective it realizes that there is a positive being which is freedom. Sartre fails to realize that there is a positive dimension behind the nihilating dimension of consciousness. Nothing has to be removed or appropriated in order to return to the repose of self-identity; only one's wrong attitude to and unreal relation with the other or the it-self have got to be removed. Other is either ultimately unreal or the relation with it is unreal. Either of the

two attitudes suggested by Advaita Vedānta and Sāṃkhya respectively can help obviate the sufferings and frustrations of the struggling individual of Sartre.

The above criticism, in my opinion, rests upon some misunderstanding of Sartre's pre-reflective consciousness which is not the Upaniṣadic or Advaitic *turiya* consciousness. Neither is it dissociated subjectivity of Sāṃkhya. According to him the object, which the consciousness confronts in its activities, is a real object. Pre-reflective consciousness is of a psychophysical subject. It is not an immaterial substance. Sartre is a materialist though he cannot exactly account for consciousness in a materialistic theory. But it is still a material problem for him.²² Pre-reflective consciousness should not be conceived as revealing selfidentity, and therefore, there seems no reason to glorify it.

NOTES

1. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Hereinafter *BN*) translated by Hazel E Barnes, Methuen & Co. London 1986 p. XXVII.
2. *B.N.* p. 478
3. Simon Gelyn, *Sartre*, Avebury, England, 1987, p. XXIX.
4. *B.N.* p. 486.
5. *Ibid*, p. 478.
6. Jean Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego* (Hereinafter *TE*) translated and introduced by F. Wims and R. Kirkpatrick, Farrar, Strans and Geiroux, N. York, pp. 44-45.
7. *Ibid*, p. 40.
8. *Ibid*, p. 88.
9. See, Phyllis Morris, (*Sartre on the Transcendence of the Ego*) in Simon Glyn, *op. cit.* p. 15.
10. *T.E.*, p. 39.
11. *Ibid*, p. 39.
12. *B.N.*, XXIX
13. Peter Caws, *Sartre*, Routledge & Kegen Paul, London, 1979 p. 56.

14. Leo Fretz, *An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre* in Jean Paul Sartre: Contemporary Approaches to His Philosophy, Ed. by H. J. Silverman & F. A. Elliston, Duguesne University Press Pittsburgh, p. 226.
15. *B. N.*, 573.
16. Wilfred Desan, *The Tragic Finale: An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Harpur & Row, New York, 1960, pp. 149-53.
17. *Ibid*, pp. 155-156.
18. *B. N.*, LIV.
19. Leo Fretz, *op. cit*, p. 228.
20. Sabhajit Mishra, *The Anguished Freedom*, G. D. K. Publications, Delhi 1979 p. 65
21. M. M. Agrawal, 'Nothingness and Freedom: Sartre and Krishnamurti', *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. IX, No. 1, Sept. Dec. 1991, pp 45-58.
22. Leo Fretz, *op. cit*, p. 235.