THE TRANSCENDENT EGO AND THE EMPTINESS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Michael Gordy

One of Jean-Paul Sartre's first philosophical endeavors was a long article published in *Recherches Philosophiques* in 1936. Entitled *La Transcendance de l'Ego*, it served notice to philosophers from Descartes to Husserl that the time had come to throw over all belief in egological structures residing within consciousness, structures whose opacity and "heaviness" make consciousness into a "thing." Likewise, it laid the foundation for the theory of consciousness he later worked out in *L'Être et le Neant*.

My purpose in this essay is to give a narrative account of what Sartre says in *La Transcendance de l'Ego*, provide limited criticism along the way, and state a serious objection at the end. Accordingly, I will not stray very far from the issues raised in his article even though such digressions must be made eventually. Therefore this essay will be an examination of the cornerstone of Sartre's theory and is not to be considered an account of that theory in full.

Sartre makes his major claim at the outset: "We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially within consciousness: it is outside, in the world. It is a being in the world, like the ego of another."1 In other words, he will try

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1Vrin 14; TE 31.

Vrin: Vrin edition of French text of *La Transcendance de l'Ego*.
TE: English translation of *The Transcendence of the Ego*.
S: *Being and Nothingness*, Barnes translation.
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to show that the ego is an object before consciousness, not an essential feature in it nor a metaphysical presupposition of it. It could just as well be the object of another consciousness; it is a public object.

Clearly, each of us believes in a "me" if only as something that unifies our perceptions under one self-consciousness. This belief allows me to say that a certain body of perceptions are mine. The unity of perceptions here is purely formal and according to Sartre it is derived from the Kantian position. He claims, however, that this derivation is illegitimate and proceeds to state why.

The unity of perceptions, described traditionally, implies that the 'I' effects the unification of perceptions. But Sartre says that Kant meant only that the "I think" must be able to accompany those perceptions. In other words, the mind must be able to grasp or believe in a unity of perceptions; it need not always do so in fact. Consciousness can lay claim to a certain body of perceptions simply by being in a certain spatio-temporal locus even though this ownership may never in fact be true. "The preoccupation of Kant was never with the way empirical consciousness is in fact constituted. . . . Consequently, to make into a reality the transcendental 'I', to make of it the inseparable companion of each of our 'consciousnesses,' is to pass on fact, not on validity, and to take a point of view radically different from that of Kant."

Now this is a serious misinterpretation of Kant. Kant's starting point was experience, and he was concerned to find the conditions necessary to the possibility of that experience. A brief glance at the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding in the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason informs us not that all experience is capable of being accompanied by an "I think" whether or not it is always so accompanied, but rather that the unity of perceptions under one self-consciousness is necessary in order for there to be any experience

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2Although this locution seems superficially at least to beg the question, since self-consciousness presupposes the existence of a self of which to be conscious. The existence of a self, however, is what is in question here.
3Vrin 15; TE 33.