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Memory and Subjectivity

Sartre in Dialogue with Husserl

BEATA STAWARSKA

When remembering the past, the past appears as my own. After all, I cannot properly speaking *recollect* any other past than the one that I have lived, even though I can remember events from the historical past and from personal histories recounted to me by others. Authentic recollection occurs necessarily in the first person, i.e. I remember *myself* in given situations, circumstances and places. Recollection is therefore a *cogito* experience *par excellence*, despite the fact that I may have become estranged from my past engagements, emotional attachments or culinary preferences. The difference between myself in the past and myself in the present does not put the underlying identity of *one life* into question. Memory affirms my personal identity, despite the temporal difference and in that difference, it appears therefore as a privileged context for inquiry into subjective life and possibly even as the ground for upholding the contested notion of “the subject.”¹ No wonder then that the way philosophers theorize memory is indicative of their conception of subjectivity as a whole. In what follows, I turn to Sartre and to Husserl with the aim of unveiling how their accounts of recollection resolve the question of identity and difference within the temporality of a subjective life. Tracing Sartre’s arguments against Husserl’s, as well as Husserl’s and Sartre’s own presentations of recollection, I inquire into the reasons that incited them to bring either the aspect of sameness or otherness at the heart of subjective life into view.

I.

Sartre’s early text *The Transcendence of the Ego*² puts forward the argument that the ego, assumed by Husserl to be the center of subjectivity, is in fact an element external to it. The agency of the *transcendentale Ich* is not necessary to grant unity to conscious life, since

the temporal synthesis does not require the intervention of an underlying ego-subject. Sartre observes that “it is characteristic that Husserl, who studied this subjective unification of consciousnesses in *Vorlesungen Zur Phänomenologie Des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, never had recourse to a synthetic power of the I. It is consciousness which unifies itself, concretely, by a play of ‘transversal’ intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses” (TE, 22; 39). As Husserl stated in the relevant passage of the lectures on the consciousness of internal time, “the flow of consciousness constitutes its own unity.”³ Sartre adopts this idea of auto-temporalizing consciousness when he refers to the “flux of consciousness constituting itself as the unity of itself” (TE, 44; 60).

In Sartre’s view, the presence of an ego within consciousness would in fact interrupt the unity of its temporal flow. The ego would prevent the subject from experiencing its life, whether in direct self-affection or in memory, in the manner of the *cogito*, i.e. “without intermediaries.”⁴ The transcendental ego *de facto* excludes the possibility of a *cogito* experience in that its presence would arrest or disrupt the stream of consciousness and make it ultimately impossible to grasp an event from my life in the first person or as *mine*. “If [the ego] existed it would tear consciousness from itself; it would divide consciousness; it would slide into every consciousness like an opaque blade. The transcendental I is the death of consciousness” (TE, 23; 40).

This is to say that self-consciousness can only be realized if there is no solid self, no identical subject of mental acts separable, if only theoretically, from the flow of consciousness itself, as was the case in Husserl’s *Ideas I*. Husserl distinguished there the pure ego from ‘its’ mental processes, even though he stressed their essential interrelatedness and argued that the ego cannot be taken apart from the particular acts of which it is the subject. “[T]he Ego living in mental processes [*das erlebende Ich*] is not something taken for itself and which can be made into an Object proper of an investigation. Aside from its ‘modes of relation’ or ‘modes of comportment’ the Ego is completely empty of essence-components, has no explicable content, is indescribable in and for itself: it is pure Ego and nothing more.” Still, the pure Ego must in principle be separable from its mental acts: “there are always distinguished—in spite of the necessary relatedness to one another—the mental process itself and the pure Ego pertaining to the mental living.”⁵

In Sartre’s perspective, on the other hand, there is no distinct subject which underlies or lies under (in the sense of the Greek

hypokeymenon) the totality of subjective life. The subject is to be identified with that totality and cannot be distinguished from it; it encompasses the self-constituting temporal unity of all the elapsed and forthcoming conscious acts. Its dynamic principle is that of an impersonal spontaneity “producing itself,” with no need of an external egological principle of unification. Interestingly enough, Sartre rejoins here the early Husserl who initially embraced an impersonal view of consciousness and considered the pure ego to be a mere fiction (*TE*, 78; 98). In *The Logical Investigations* Husserl wrote that he was unable to discover an egological center of reference uniting all contents of consciousness and did not find it necessary to posit the pure “ego” as the subject of consciousness.⁶ The superfluity of the pure ego was articulated with all the more strength in the 1907 text *Thing and Space*, where Husserl stressed that pure consciousness arrived at after the phenomenological reduction did not belong to *anybody*. Consciousness so defined seems akin, if not identical, to consciousness in Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*.⁷ Yet even though Husserl initially embraced a non-egological conception of consciousness, identical to the one subsequently adopted by Sartre, still, he moved away from this early conception to an egological one in *Ideas I*, and it is against that later conception that Sartre’s critique was directed. The view presented in *Ideas I* is that the transcendental ego is an irreducible element of conscious life: “no excluding can ... cancel out the ‘pure’ subject of the act”; every act of consciousness “necessarily includes in its essence this: that it is precisely a ray ‘emanating from the ego’” (§80). It is the notion of the so-called actional *cogito* which supports the postulate of the ego-subject. The actional cogito is the mode of all conscious acts and consists in dynamic intentional relating to an object. According to Husserl, all acts of consciousness have a focal point or an objective center towards which they tend. Albeit not all mental processes are explicitly actional, i.e. need not always be explicitly directed toward the intentional object, they are all without exception susceptible to being converted into actional *cogitationes* (*Id*, §35, §57). An experience of such actional *cogito* offers, in Husserl’s view, the best opportunity for realizing the necessary existence of the pure ego as its subject.⁸

Husserl consistently employs visual metaphors to substantiate the transcendental ego postulate. He speaks not only of “rays” but also of the radiating “regard” directed from the pure ego to the object in every conscious act, and he likens the ego to an eye which cannot see itself and yet has to be presupposed as the source of the gaze (§84). These metaphors have been critiqued for their heavy reliance on

vision in the description of subjective life, with the eye (or the “I”) providing a paradigm for the notion of the subject.⁹ Husserl’s motivations for postulating the transcendental ego are, however, more complex and follow also from his dynamic understanding of intentionality as performance (*Leistung*) and from the perspective of constitution, of which the ego is a necessary agent and of which the world is a result. In the perspective of transcendental constitution, each act of consciousness (or actional *cogito*) supposes an ego as the motor of the constitutive activity. The postulate of the existence of the ego in the perspective of transcendental constitution does not therefore have so much to do with the possibility of having a direct personal experience of the ego: the ego must simply be presupposed as “the one who constitutes the world.” As the subjective pole of constitution, the ego can be active without “me” being aware of it or recognizing its activity as mine.

Yet another motivation for postulating the transcendental ego—one that receives a critical reading in Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*—stems from the need to account for the unity of conscious life and for the possibility of identification of mental processes as belonging to *me*. This is the Kantian question of transcendental unity of apperception, where the “I think” must be able to accompany all perceptions,¹⁰ which might have led Husserl to posit the “I” or the existence of the ego as a necessary and irreducible subject of all conscious acts. Preoccupied with the question of the possibility of identification of mental acts as *my own* and distinguishing them from the mental acts of others, Husserl might have forced his analysis of the actional *cogito* so as to yield the pure “I”/ego as its necessary subject.¹¹ Consider the following passage from §57, *Ideas I*: “In every actional cogito the ego lives out its life in a special sense. But all mental processes in the background likewise belong to it; and it belongs to them. All of them, as belonging to the *one* stream of consciousness which is mine, *must* admit of being converted into actional cogitationes as immanent constituents. In Kant’s words, “‘The *I think*’ *must be capable of accompanying all my presentations.*” This passage clearly reveals Husserl’s transition from the Kantian requirement that it be *possible* to identify any act of consciousness as mine to the claim that the “I” or the ego is an *existent* subject of every *cogito*. Husserl moves here from a *de jure* claim of Kant (“I think” *must* be able to accompany all my presentations) to a *de facto* claim (“I think” *does* in fact accompany all my presentations), a move which Sartre explicitly challenged in *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Specifically, Sartre rejected the claim that the “I” or the ego invariably accompanies consciousness

even though he did not dispute the Kantian statement concerning the synthetic unity of apperception. Sartre argued that Kant made no claims concerning the actual existence of the “I” or the ego as a subject of conscious acts and stipulated only that “I can always regard my thought or perception as mine: nothing more” (TE, 14; 32). Sartre took Kant to say no more than that mental life has an uninterrupted unity insofar as the quality of *mineness* belongs to all conscious acts—a claim to which Sartre added his signature without hesitation, since he adopted this Cartesian (and Kantian) idea that consciousness can in principle identify all of its life as belonging to it. However, an actually existent transcendental ego, such as the one postulated by Husserl, would not facilitate this self-identification but rather, as noted above, render it impossible in Sartre’s view.

II.

Sartre’s critique of the transcendental ego is not limited to Husserl’s apparent move from a *de jure* to a *de facto* postulate regarding the transcendental ego. Sartre accuses Husserl (as well as Descartes) of misrepresenting the *cogito* as well, i.e. of turning conscious activity into a reflective and so objectifying operation of which the ego is a by-product. “All the writers who have described the *Cogito* [that is primarily Descartes and Husserl] have dealt with it as a reflective operation, that is to say, as an operation of the second degree” (TE, 28; 44). By a “second degree operation” Sartre means the following: “Such a *Cogito* is performed by a consciousness *directed upon consciousness*, a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object.” (Ibid.). Hence there are *two* acts of consciousness at work in the (second degree) operation of reflective *cogito*. Even though “there is an indissoluble unity of the reflecting consciousness and the reflected consciousness,” in the case of the objectifying reflective *cogito* “we are in the presence of a synthesis of two consciousnesses, one of which is consciousness *of* the other” (Ibid.). Once the split between consciousness—the subject of reflection—and consciousness—the object of reflection—has occurred, consciousness can no longer grasp *itself*. Once the objectifying “of” has been inserted into the life of consciousness, the *cogito* experience has been falsified and the possibility of experiencing one’s subjectivity, whether in the present or in the past, has been lost.¹²

Sartre claimed that the ego is a by-product of such a reflective stance adopted by Husserl in his study of consciousness. Specifically,

he argued that Husserl misrepresented the mechanics of memory and proposed an objectifying account of recollection of past experience, which obfuscates the purely subjective quality of consciousness and superimposes an object-ego upon conscious life. To prove this point Sartre employs an example of the recollection of a past event, following Husserl's lectures on the consciousness of internal time: "If ... I want to remember a certain landscape perceived yesterday from the train, it is possible for me to bring back the memory of that landscape as such. But I can also recollect that I was seeing that landscape.... In other words, I can always perform any recollection whatsoever in the personal mode, and at once the I appears.... Thus it seems that there is not one of my consciousnesses which I do not apprehend as provided with an I" (*TE*, 27; 43).

According to Sartre, Husserl distinguished between two ways in which a past event can be recalled. I *either* recall the past event by focusing on the object of the act of consciousness (landscape seen from the train) *or* I recall the past event by focusing on the act itself (perception of landscape). The former sort of recollection is of a *non-egological* or impersonal kind. It does not involve the ego as the subject who has perceived the object (the landscape) in the past and so it does not adulterate the true, i.e. impersonal, character of consciousness. The latter sort of recollection is of an *egological* kind. It takes the past act of consciousness as its object, treating it as if it were *an other*. Such a standpoint of an external observer by consciousness with regards to its own life is necessarily falsifying. It gives rise to the illusion that the act of consciousness occurring in the past was accompanied by the "I."

The crux of Sartre's argument is the following: the recollection of the past event which takes consciousness as its object—let us call it reflective memory—gives rise to a "new object," the "I" (*TE*, 37; 53). This "I" has not been present "in" consciousness at the moment at which perception took place, yet the objectifying recollection of the past makes one believe that the "I" has been there all along. According to Sartre, Husserl was duped by this illusory appearance of the "I" in past perception and posited the ego as a necessary subject of perception—and of all conscious acts—as a result. In his analysis of past *cogitationes*—the aforementioned elapsed perception of landscape from the train—Husserl assumed, mistakenly, in Sartre's view, that the "I" *was already in place* at the time of the perception (as the eye or the "I," the subject of the look), even though this "I" *is (or in principle can be) made apparent*, i.e. generated by reflective memory only. Husserl did not realize that

the reflective procedure attaches an egological subject to an elapsed perceptual act and believed, falsely, in Sartre's view, that the ego was already so attached. Sartre argues, however, that the ego, believed by Husserl to pre-exist recollection, is in fact a product of that recollection. Not a constituting subject but an "object" constituted by reflective memory; the ego is therefore transcendent.

Sartre implies that in the Husserlian perspective, when I remember the past act, I have to objectify it and thus give rise to the ego. There is no place in the Husserlian perspective for a non-egological memory of past acts of consciousness, i.e. for an authentic experience of elapsed moments of one's life in the manner of a *cogito*. The Husserlian subject is incapable of being affected by its life in a direct non-reflective fashion and is weighed down by products of reflection as soon as it returns to its own past. As a result of this (inescapable) process of (self-) reflection involved in memory, the ego is made to "slide" like an "opaque blade" into consciousness, objectivating an anterior subjective experience and estranging the subject from its own personal history. The intelligibility of the *transcendentale Ich* hypothesis is, following Sartre's reading, to be situated in the context of this (mis-) representation of recollection developed by Husserl.

Sartre's criticism of Husserl seems at first sight to follow closely Husserl's distinction between *memory*, termed by Husserl *secondary memory*, and *reflection*. Secondary memory focuses, as Sartre noted, on the intentional object of the past act of consciousness (e.g. landscape). However, it needs to be added—a point which Sartre does not make—that while representing the past object, secondary memory reproduces the past perceptual consciousness which apprehended the object as well. In fact it is only insofar as the present act evokes both the object and the elapsed consciousness of it that the temporal distance between the present and the past is possible. If consciousness were only to bring back to memory the past object and make it present to itself, it would be impossible to explain just how this object could ever retain its character of being past or belonging to the past.¹³ If the object recollected in the present does not cease to belong to the past, it is because in recollection consciousness encompasses two co-present yet non-identical acts: the present act of bringing the past back to memory and the anterior perceptual act, e.g. perception of the landscape. Careful examination of this split or *redoubling* of consciousness inherent in remembering enabled Husserl to account for the fact that the past remains separated *from* the present even though it is remembered *in* the present. The remembering consciousness appears as living both in the present

and in the past, without for that matter annihilating the difference between them.

When remembering the past, the present act of consciousness re-presents the past object and involves—or, to adopt Husserl's terminology, intentionally implicates—the past act of consciousness as well. Intentional implication of the past act of consciousness does not mean that the past act of consciousness is posited *as an object* of the present act of consciousness but that it is present together with the past object, without being directly focused on. The present act of consciousness is a *reproduction*, but not an objectification, of the past perception. *Reflection*, on the other hand, takes the past act of consciousness as its object. Reflection, just like recollection, is a consciousness *of* another consciousness, but the way in which it intends the past consciousness is different. The past consciousness is intended directly and my attention is focused on it; I scrutinize and examine an elapsed event from my life, i.e. take a distance from it. Reflection is an attitude of objectification of the past consciousness wherein the intimacy between the past and the present is compromised.¹⁴

It can be concluded that Husserl allowed both for reflective and non-reflective memory of the past subjective act. In fact, for Husserl, the past consciousness must necessarily be implicated in recollection if the object of the anterior perception is to retain the character of pastness. Memory in Husserl's perspective is both an auto- and a hetero-experience where both the intending subject and the intended object are brought into play. Sartre's criticism, which juxtaposes recollection of an object to a self-reflective act, seems therefore to have entirely ignored the subtlety of the Husserlian analysis of memory. Consider now Sartre's "alternative" to Husserl's account—an alternative that proves strikingly similar to the Husserlian picture of recollection.

Sartre states that "every unreflected consciousness, being non-thetic consciousness of itself, leaves a non-thetic memory that one can consult" (*TE*, 30; 46). In principle every past unreflected consciousness—or every past consciousness *tout court*, since consciousness does not require reflection in order to be conscious of itself and is always unreflectively conscious of itself—lends itself to a *cogito* experience.¹⁵ The question is how such a recollection of a past experience is put into practice. Sartre replies that "it suffices to try to reconstitute the complete moment in which this unreflected consciousness appeared" an act which "*by definition is always possible*" (*Ibid.*, emphasis added).

Consider Sartre's example of how such reconstitution of a past act of consciousness should be effectuated: "I was absorbed just now in my

reading. I am going to try to remember the circumstances of my reading, my attitude, the lines that I was reading. I am thus going to revive not only these external details but a certain depth of unreflected consciousness, since the objects could only have been perceived by that consciousness and since they remain relative to it" (TE, 30; 46). The experience that has just elapsed (and "by definition" any other past experience evoked by means of non-reflective memory) "must not be posited as object of a reflection." Instead, "I must direct my attention to the revived objects [like the book that I was reading or any other thing with which I was preoccupied in the past], but *without losing sight of the unreflected consciousness* [that is without turning it into a reflective memory like 'I was reading a book'], by joining in a sort of conspiracy with it and by drawing up an inventory of its content in a non-positional manner" (Ibid.).

The form of recollection proposed by Sartre involves the past perceptual consciousness as much as the object perceived yet does not turn past consciousness into an object to be investigated but espouses it, acts with it or as a reproduction of it. Does it "intentionally implicate" the past perceptual consciousness in the manner described by Husserl? The "intentional implication" and—what could be termed—the "conspiratorial implication" of past perception appear conspicuously similar, and it is questionable just how innovative Sartre's picture of memory is with respect to Husserl's. It seems that Sartre totally overlooked the non-objectivating or "conspiratorial" way in which secondary memory reproduces past *cogitationes*. If, in the Husserlian perspective, the memory of past perception does not need to be of a reflective and so egological kind, and if it is perfectly feasible and even necessary to evoke elapsed perception by means of intentional implication in order to retain the past character of the recollected event, then the novelty of Sartre's memory model is less obvious and the persuasive power of the argument against the *transcendentale Ich* based on the supposed misrepresentation of the mechanics of memory in Husserl is weakened. It appears that Husserl must have had other reasons than the objectifying recollection procedure for postulating the ego—such as the aforementioned perspective of transcendental constitution and the need to postulate the ego as its agent. This perspective of a *constituting* rather than an exclusively *constituted* ego was not, however, addressed in Sartre's critique.¹⁶

In fact, Sartre's critical argument might have been embraced by Husserl. Husserl might have sided with the claim that the ego arises in recollection as a "new object" which did not pre-exist the activity of remembering but is a product of it. Only his motivation to posit

such a non-original ego would have been different. Contrary to Sartre, Husserl does not view consciousness as a continuous non-interrupted flow. Husserl's investigation of memory led him to view consciousness as internally divided and alienated from its own past. The past is the stranger in the midst of consciousness—and the ego is required in order to unite and assemble the pieces of my life, which would otherwise appear foreign and impersonal. The internal subjective division, precedent rather than a product of a reflective objectifying stance, would motivate the production of the ego.¹⁷

III.

Having read Sartre's argument about memory as a real and possible dialogue with the Husserlian account of ego-subject, I inquire into its relevance to the specifically Sartrean picture of subjectivity. The subject as conceived by Sartre is not a stranger to itself. Its power to surf from the present moment back to any point in the past, professed by the statement that consciousness can "reconstitute the complete moment" of any past event in the present, provides sufficient proof for that claim (*TE*, 30; 46, quoted above). It supposes that consciousness never becomes alienated from its life and that the uninterrupted unity and total transparency of consciousness to itself is taken for granted. Consciousness is open to view as a totality since "[w]hoever says 'a consciousness' says 'the whole of consciousness'" (*Qui dit la conscience dit toute la conscience*) (*TE*, 22; 39).

The model of a "conspirational" recollection provides a concrete exemplification of how such unhindered recollection is operated. Recall the example: "I was absorbed just now in my reading. I am going to try to remember the circumstances of my reading, my attitude, the lines that I was reading. I am thus going to revive not only these external details but a certain depth of unreflected consciousness, since the objects could only have been perceived by that consciousness and since they remain relative to it" (*TE*, 30; 46).

It is striking that this *paradigmatic* case, which should in principle or "by definition" apply to any form of recollection, such as that of the *remote* past, presents a special and privileged sort of memory, i.e. memory of the *immediate* past. The recollection of the immediate past has an advantage over the recollection of a more distant past in that the perceptual impressions of the recollected event are still retained by the subject; they still linger and resonate in their mind and can therefore be used as material for recollection—material

which is *not* available in the case of memory of the distant past. It is far more feasible to “reconstitute the complete moment” of the past event which has happened “just now” (“I was absorbed *just now* in my reading”), than to do so with regards to a past event which took place “some time ago” (as in, “I read this novel several years ago”)—a case which Sartre does not include in his account of “conspirational recollection.” Now, in this latter case, there simply is no readily available stock of persistent perceptual impressions to be consulted; recollection is no longer under the impact of the event to be recalled.

Reformulated in terms of Husserl, one needs to make a distinction between memory pure and simple, i.e. *secondary* memory, and memory which can support itself on evanescent impressions of the object that has been perceived “just now,” i.e. on *primary* memory.¹⁸ Primary memory belongs to or is part of the overall perception of an object and can best be exemplified by listening to a melody.

A melody is a temporally extended object. To hear it as extending in time, perception cannot merely follow a succession of particular tones that are apprehended at the moment they are played—a sequence of discrete musical instants does not yet yield a piece of music. Perception is not restricted to what is immediately present; it grasps the tones as they fade away into the immediate past. Husserl calls this apprehension of elapsed tones retention or primary memory. Primary memory does not stand for what one usually takes to be memory, i.e. recollection of a past event, classified by Husserl under the heading of secondary memory. Primary memory belongs to the temporal structure of the perceptual act itself; it involves an apprehension of the perceptual object as it extends into the past. Hence primary memory is still in touch, so to say, with the immediate, original or “primary” past, serving as a base for all subsequent recollection.

Secondary memory, or recollection that re-presents the past (*Vergegenwärtigung* and not *Gegenwärtigung*), is not of the perceptual or presentative sort. It is no longer in presence of the object but brings its object back *from* the past. Whereas primary memory is an aspect of perception, secondary memory is a return to a previous perceptual experience. Following Husserl, secondary memory is freer than primary memory could ever be. Unlike perceptual memory, secondary memory can reproduce the past object as it pleases, it can replay favorite fragments of a melody as many times as it desires and “skip” others. Yet the price secondary memory has to pay for that “privilege” is loss of vivacity and distinctness of perceptual presentation. Its object is given “as if through a veil”;¹⁹ it is not present but “quasi-present,”²⁰ deprived of richness and clarity of the original perception.

Albeit free to re-present its object in a variety of ways, re-presentation can never enjoy the original revelation of the object. Re-presentation is by no means a simple repetition of the past presentation, and to re-present does not mean to present again but to “present” in a new way. Secondary memory attains its object in a way that is *different* from the way in which primary “memory” does. Whereas the latter attains its object in its corporeal being, the former does not. The latter—albeit freer and more creative than the former—suffers from the deprivation of the sensual, tangible, immediate presence of the thing which it cannot but make present in a *quasi* way.

Such loss of immediacy is part and parcel of recollection—unless recollection takes place “right after” the event, where the event I recollect is still resonating in my mind or is still retained in primary memory. Recollection “right after” the event benefits from perceptual impressions even though it is no longer perceptual *per se*. The subject has interrupted the passive relation to the object by actively re-presenting it together with the just elapsed perceptual consciousness. Husserl acknowledged the possibility of effectuating such a shift since he “will often say that one can recall in secondary memory what one still retains in primary memory, in which case there would be no temporal differentiation between their respective objects.”²¹

Insofar as secondary memory recalls what is still retained by primary memory, it represents a particular act situated at the crossroads of presentation and re-presentation, perception and memory. An act which both retains and recollects is a hybrid being in that it both takes distance from the object and is directly “impressed” by it. It appears therefore that Sartre’s “paradigmatic example” of unhindered recuperation of the past proposed in the critique of Husserl invokes a unique rather than a universally applicable case, which combines the flesh and blood presentation and the re-presentation of an object, at the risk of neglecting structural differences between these two acts and reducing memory to a variant of sensual perception. Is it justified to use such a “borderline” case as paradigm for memory as a whole? It seems not, especially as this procedure tends to gloss over the fact that it is essentially impossible to “reconstitute the complete moment” of all past events from one’s personal history. The claim that the “recollection of what is still retained” provides a paradigm for reminiscence as a whole overshadows the fact that the unity of subjective life is based not only on “fresh” retention of the just elapsed events but also on indirect and fragmentary reconstitution of remote past and on inferences from the multitude of third-person representations of self. First-person recollection cannot

therefore provide the exclusive building block of one's personal history, and even though it is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for unity of one's life. The stretch of one's personal history most resistant to reconstitutive attempts is typically the time of early childhood, which cannot be even schematically reproduced in a first-person experience and which needs to be inferred from the observation of other children and constructed on the basis of narratives and images of self provided by others.²² Sartre does not consider this and other impediments to complete reconstitution of subjective life by the *cogito* in his analysis of memory. The explanatory potential of his memory model is therefore weakened by its exclusive reliance on the particular procedure of "just-now" recollection. Due to its limited validity, Sartre's memory model cannot lend support to his Cartesian-style theory of seamless subjectivity either.

Needless to say, Sartre's theory of subjectivity is not grounded exclusively in his optimistic view of the boundless potential deployed by memory, and so it is not simply discredited by the oversight in Sartre's critique of Husserl which I discussed above. In conclusion, let me then briefly inquire into other motives for postulating an ego-less consciousness and a transcendent ego in Sartre's early philosophical project. In contrast to the reflective *cogito* operation employed by Husserl, Sartre proposed there the model of non-reflective *cogito* and exemplified it by means of anxiety attacks, fixation and insomnia. Sartre interprets the anguished state as a sudden upsurge of uncontrollable impersonal spontaneity, threatening to resurface in an ever possible "accident of our daily life" (*TE*, 84; 103). The anguished state lays therefore a "royal road" to pure consciousness, and it provides direct access to the transcendental field; it exhibits also consciousness' radical independence in regard to the ego and its agency of will. Sartre interprets the relation between the spontaneity of consciousness and the will of the ego in terms of a veritable antagonism, with consciousness occasionally staging a rebellion against the precepts of the will: in insomnia, it is because *I* want to sleep that *I* remain vigilant, in fixation on some idea; it is because *I* want to not think about it that *I* cannot stop thinking.²³ Anxiety, fixation or insomnia in Sartre's philosophical system have therefore a double function. On the one hand it performs an *epoche* by exposing consciousness in its purity and as such it provides "a permanent motive for carrying out the phenomenological reduction," which Sartre believed was missing in the enterprise of Husserl.²⁴ On the other hand, it demonstrates the unbridgeable transcendence and radical impotence of the agency of the ego with regard to pure

consciousness. The ego appears here as a semblance of personal identity assumed by the subject in a vain effort to gain control over this flow of impersonal life. By means of the ego, the subject temporarily covers up the fact that she lacks a fixed predetermined nature or that in her life “existence precedes essence,” as phrased in the famous existentialist motto.

Not transcendental but transcendent, the ego is not, however, a mere illusion and invention of philosophers. Sartre stressed that the ego is necessary rather than hypothetical, i.e. that one cannot choose to have it or not (*TE*, 59; 76). What then are the motivations for postulating an irreducible—albeit transcendent—ego in Sartre’s philosophical system? So far I have examined how the ego is generated in reflective memory which objectifies anterior conscious acts and equips them with a solidified self. This faulty process of operating the *cogito*, which Sartre corrects by means of non-objectivating self-revelation, can hardly provide a sufficient motive for postulating an inescapable necessity of ego’s existence. Another motive is found in Sartre’s ambition to ultimately resolve the problem of solipsism haunting Husserlian phenomenology. The transcendent ego argument presents, according to Sartre, the only means of combating the theory of the “I” as a *solus ipse*: “solipsism becomes unthinkable from the moment that the “I” no longer has a privileged status” (*Ibid.*). Not a solitary *transcendentale Ich* which, according to Husserl, “survives the annihilation of the world,” the ego is an element of the world and so “falls like other existences at the stroke of the *epoché*” (*TE*, 85; 104). This conception of a mundane ego which stands and falls together with the world enables interaction between self and other: as mundane egos accessible from outside and not only conscious subjects locked in the interiority of *cogito* experience, the self and the other can engage in inter-subjective relations. The field of transcendental consciousness remains, however, a private domain which I cannot share with others, since “the absolute interiority [of consciousness] can be conceived only by itself, and that is why we cannot apprehend the consciousnesses of others” (*TE*, 67; 84). The idea of another subjective interiority is thus defined as a contradictory concept, because, as soon as I try to think it, I turn it into an object: “I cannot conceive it because I would have to think of it as pure interiority and as transcendence at the same time, which is impossible” (*Ibid.*). The ego, on the other hand, is not an “exclusive property” of consciousness but an element of the public world which facilitates public relations between conscious subjects (*TE*, 75; 94). As Sartre puts it, “there is no longer anything “impenetrable”

about the other, nor is there anything “impenetrable” about the self theorized as transcendent egos (*TE*, 77; 96): both are elements of the perceptible world, their ontological status is no different than that of “a tree or a chair” (*TE*, 70; 88). Henceforth, by both safeguarding a notion of transcendental consciousness attained exclusively through the *cogito* and expelling the ego from the transcendental field into the transcendent world, Sartre hoped—and it needs to be added, failed—to ultimately free phenomenology from the danger of the subject being equated with a *solus ipse*.²⁵ Be it as it may, the intelligibility and merit of Sartre’s critique of the *transcendentale Ich* in Husserl and the postulate of the transcendent ego and ego-less consciousness, which occupied us throughout this essay and inspired a reflection on the relation between memory and subjectivity, need to be situated in the context of a larger project to address the problematic of inter-subjectivity within phenomenology.

Notes

1. R. Bernet notes that “le souvenir est le lieu privilégié de la constitution du moi.” *La vie du sujet. Recherches sur l’interprétation de Husserl dans la phénoménologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, p. 237.
2. *La transcendance de l’ego*. Paris: Vrin, 1992. *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Translated by F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick. New York: Octagon Books, 1972. Hereafter *TE* (the page number in the French text is followed by the page number in the English translation).
3. *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. Translated by J. B. Brough. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, §39.
4. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Translated by P. Mairet. Methuen, 1984, p. 57.
5. *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book*. Translated by F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982, §80.
6. Husserl notes: “I must frankly confess [...] that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive, necessary centre of relations.” *Logical Investigations*. Translated by J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press, 2 volumes, 1970, Volume 2, Investigation V, §8.
7. Bernet observes that “Puisque [la] réduction [phénoménologique] consiste à purifier la conscience de toute apperception empirique et donc de tout lien avec le Je empirique, [Husserl] conclura très logiquement que la conscience pure n’appartient à ‘personne (niemand)’.” And he adds: “Sartre ne dit pas autre chose quand il considère la conscience comme étant un ‘Champ transcendantal’ (74),

- une 'spontanéité individuée et impersonnelle' (78)". *La vie du sujet. Recherches sur l'interprétation de Husserl dans la phénoménologie*. PUF, 1994, p. 302.
8. "The isolated experience of a single, simple cogito" instructs us of the existence of the pure "I." Ideas II, 104, quoted in Bernet, Rudolf, Kern, Iso and Marbach, Eduard. *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 211.
 9. Especially by R. Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
 10. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Rutland: Everyman's Library, 1991. Book I of Transcendental Analytic, §12.
 11. Marbach points to apparent confusion or ambiguity in the enterprise of Husserl between the analysis of the "actional cogito" arrived at after the reduction *and* the question of how to delimit one stream of consciousness from another one. There is a "deep-seated ambiguity in the concept of the pure 'I'" resulting from the fact that Husserl "drew the contents of this concept" from two diverse domains: "On the one hand, he considered the 'I' as the principle of unity delimiting one stream of consciousness over against another stream of consciousness. On the other hand, he brought the 'I' into consideration in order to define the pregnant concept of the cogito as an act of the 'I.' Having pointed to the two sources of the ego, Marbach concludes: "Numerous difficulties emerge along with this concept of the 'I' defined as the universal form of consciousness." *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Op. Cit.), p. 206.
 12. Sartre emphasized this internal split in consciousness by the italicisation of the "of." Note also that in order to stress that consciousness grasps itself in an immediate and non-objectifying way, Sartre put the "of" in the phrase "consciousness of oneself" in brackets in *Being and Nothingness*. He thus wrote consciousness (of) oneself (conscience (de) soi), so as to indicate that it "merely satisfies a grammatical requirement" (pour indiquer que le "de" ne répond qu'à une contrainte grammaticale). *L'être et le néant*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956. Hereafter EN (the page number in the French text is followed by the page number in the English translation). EN, 20; liv.
 13. If the past appeared as no more than the image of the past apprehended in the present, it would be impossible to explain how this image retains the character of pastness. That difficulty led Husserl to rework his theory of remembering and to move from the account of image consciousness to re-presentative consciousness, implicating the past act without turning it into a (present) object. On that subject see R. Bernet's "L'analyse husserlienne de l'imagination comme fondement du concept freudien d'inconscient." ALTER: *Espace et imagination*. N° 4, 1996.
 14. Husserl terms reflection an act of "attentive heeding" to a perception; a non-reflective act has the mode of "mere apprehension" of a perception of an object. *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, (Op. Cit.), B. No. 8. "Representation of an Object and Representation of the Perception of the Object."
 15. Sartre accepts the definition of consciousness as inclusive of the totality of psychic acts *and* perception or consciousness of these acts. The latter, habitually called internal consciousness, does not take the form of an internal reflection: "consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object" (*TE*, 29; 45).

16. In the *Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre does overtly proclaim himself an adherent of the perspective of transcendental constitution. Hence the *credo*: “we readily acknowledge the existence of a constituting consciousness” and the *laudatio*: “[w]e find admirable of Husserl’s descriptions in which he shows transcendental consciousness constituting the world by imprisoning itself in empirical consciousness” (*TE*, 18; 36). These lines express, on the one hand, allegiance to Husserl and the perspective of transcendental constitution and, on the other, a rather ambiguous statement concerning the “imprisonment of consciousness in the empirical consciousness” in the process. In Husserl’s perspective, however, no such imprisonment is a necessary condition of constitution, as constitution is manifest on the transcendental plane in the active intentional relating of conscious acts to objectivities. Sartre, on the other hand, denies pure consciousness such potential to constitute an objective intended object: in his view, intentionality is realized only in the actual relation to preexistent mundane objects, whereas pure consciousness revealed in the phenomenological reduction is no more than impersonal spontaneity perpetuating itself.
17. “[I]l est ... vrai que le rôle unificateur d’un Je pur reste requis même dans le cas du re-resouvenir et cela justement parce que mon passé m’est devenu étranger, que l’unité de mon flux de conscience est compromise et ne peut plus être assurée par une simple association spontanée entre des vécus contigus.” R. Bernet, *La vie du sujet* (Op. Cit.), p. 304.
18. The distinction between primary and secondary memory is discussed by Husserl mainly in the Second Section “Analysis of the consciousness of Time, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*.”
19. *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Op. Cit.), p. 50. Quoted in the translator’s Introduction, p. XLI.
20. Op. Cit., p. 301.
21. Op. Cit. p. XLI.
22. As Jeanette Winterson playfully puts it: “Did my childhood happen? I must believe it did, but I don’t have any proof. My mother says it did, but she is a fantasist, a liar and a murderer...” *Sexing the Cherry*. London: Vintage, 1989, p. 92.
23. “La volonté [...] ne se retourne jamais sur la conscience. On s’en rend bien compte dans les quelques cas où l’on essaye de vouloir une conscience (je veux m’endormir, je ne veux plus penser à cela, etc.). Dans ces différents cas il est nécessaire par essence que la volonté soit maintenue et conservée par la conscience radicalement opposée à celle qu’elle voulait faire naître (si je veux m’endormir, je reste éveillé,—si je ne veux pas penser à tel ou tel événement, j’y pense précisément pour cela).” (*TE*, 79; 99).
24. According to Sartre, the “epoche appears in the phenomenology of Husserl as a miracle” since no sufficient reasons are given as to why one should operate the reduction; also, the “reduction seems capable of being performed only at the end of lengthy study” which means that it “appears [...] as a *knowledgeable* operation (une opération *savante*), which confers on it a sort of gratuitousness.” (*TE*, 83; 103).
25. The refutation of solipsism based on the concept of transcendent ego and egoless transcendental field was not, as Sartre himself admitted in later works, satisfactory, since it did not prove that “behind” the transcendent ego there is another transcendental subject. “Formerly [i.e. in *The Transcendence of the Ego*] I believed that I could escape solipsism by refuting Husserl’s concept of the existence of the Transcendental ‘Ego.’ At that time I thought that since I had emp-

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... tied my consciousness of its subject, nothing remained there which was privileged as compared to the Other. But actually although I am still persuaded that the hypothesis of a transcendental subject is useless and disastrous, abandoning it does not help one bit to solve the question of the existence of Others. Even if outside the empirical Ego there is *nothing other* than the consciousness of that Ego—that is, a transcendental field without a subject—the fact remains that my affirmation of the Other demands and requires the existence beyond the world of a similar transcendental field. Consequently the only way to escape solipsism would be here again to prove that my transcendental consciousness is in its very being, affected by the extra-mundane existence of other consciousness of the same type.” (EN, 274; 235).