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# **SUBJECTIVITY AS A PLURALITY**

## **PARTS AND WHOLES IN HUSSERL'S THEORY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

*Abstract:* In this paper, I claim that the structure of intersubjectivity as Husserl presents it in the *Cartesian Meditations* is articulated as being governed by a logic of parts and wholes rather than that of a phenomenology of empathy, and that the articulation of this logic demonstrates that the transcendental ego is intrinsically intersubjective. My main philosophical claim in this regard is that the way Husserl's account of transcendental empathy unfolds in the *Cartesian Meditations* implies a prior fundamental mereological structure, of which the individual transcendental ego is only a part. That is, the transcendental ego has an eidetic *a priori* intersubjective structure in the sense of being a moment of an intersubjectively structured transcendental whole. In this sense, rather than being a *singulare tantum*, it is more fitting to say that transcendental subjectivity is actually a *plurale tantum*.

*Keywords:* intersubjectivity, mereology, parts and wholes, *Cartesian Meditations*, monads.

It is well-known that in the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl puts forth a theory of intersubjectivity. Most commentators of Husserl have read his *Cartesian Meditations* as presenting a theory of intersubjectivity, the basis of which is empathy, in the form of a process of constituting the sense of "other" in one's own experience as the primary origin of the intersubjective layer of experience. In this paper, I claim that the structure of intersubjectivity as Husserl presents it in the *Cartesian Meditations* is articulated as being governed by a logic of parts and wholes rather than that of a phenomenology of empathy, and that the articulation of this logic demonstrates that the transcendental ego is intrinsically intersubjective. My main philosophical claim in this regard is that the way Husserl's account of transcendental empathy unfolds in the *Cartesian*

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## I.

90 Before we delve into the technical depths of our analysis, we would do well to clarify its basic philosophical background and motivations. What is at stake for us in this inquiry is Husserl's account of the way others, i.e., other subjects, other egos, appear in our experience of the world. For Husserl, other subjects are a necessary condition for the being of the world as common and objective in the first place, since the sense of objectivity as such is "being-for-everyone." Thus, explaining how the transcendental ego constitutes the sense of the "other subject" is a crucial and essential part of grounding objectivity. In this regard, the task of phenomenology is to explain how the transcendental ego constitutes the sense of "other subject" within its flux of individual experiences, in order to show how objectivity is possible.

In the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl does precisely just that: he puts forth a whole theory of intersubjectivity, in which he analyses acts of empathy, i.e., our attribution of intentional acts to other subjects. Among the many interpretations of his theory, however, we find contradictory approaches towards the status of the emergence of others through empathy in the experience of the transcendental ego. As I have mentioned, most commentators (e.g., Theunissen 1986 and Smith 2003) hold that the actual concrete experience of others constitutes the sense of the other ego and with it the intersubjective character of the world. Others (e.g., Zahavi 2001 and Taipale 2019) claim that the concrete experience of empathy, which Husserl describes in the fifth meditation, is only a *thematization*, a making-explicit of an *a priori* structure of an essentially intersubjective world, which already presupposes the sense of "other ego," and therefore empathy does not constitute it. It is easy to see that the former view regards the transcendental ego's relation to others as being a

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*posteriori* and presumptive, while the latter assumes that such a relation takes the form of an *a priori* and apodictically “open” intersubjectivity.

As the paper proceeds, my approach offers new support for the second view on the basis of a mereological analysis, but it then advances the proposition that the transcendental ego itself possesses an eidetic *a priori intersubjective* structure in the sense of being a moment of an intersubjectively structured transcendental whole. Not only is the concrete experience of the “other” a thematization of a prior possibility predelineated in the *a priori* nature of transcendental experience, but transcendental subjectivity from the very beginning must be considered as a community—what Husserl names the “community of monads.”

## II.

In the third of his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl presents what he takes to be the *a priori* eidetic structure of what it is to be an object, in general, in terms of mereology, i.e., the logic of parts and wholes: “Every object is either actually or possibly a part, i.e. there are actual or possible wholes that include it.” (*LI* III, § 1, 4.) Husserl distinguishes between two senses of being a part. On the one hand, complex wholes can be composed of “pieces” (*Stücke*). Each piece can exist, at least in principle, on its own, while still being put together with other pieces to form a whole. For example, as I gaze upon the table before me, I see that it is comprised of different parts, such as its legs and its top. These parts can be separated from the table as a whole either in practice or in thought, so as to be themselves individual and independent beings.

On the other hand, we can understand complexity in a different way, as an interpenetration of parts, such that one can neither be separated from some or all the other parts nor from the whole of which it is a part. Husserl calls these interpenetrating parts “moments” (*Momente*). For instance, as I gaze again at the very same table, I perceive its surface, its extension, its color, and its brightness. These different aspects of the table permeate each other in the sense that one cannot be given without the presence of the others. It is impossible to perceive brightness without it being the brightness of the table’s color. In similar fashion, the perception of color entails the perception of the colored surface.

And again, we can neither perceive nor imagine a surface without extension. The elimination or modification of at least one of these contents must modify or eliminate the others. Things that are moments cannot be presented without other moments upon which they *essentially* depend. It is precisely on this basis that Husserl coins the term of *foundation*. In Husserl's terms, when one moment necessarily requires the presence of another moment, we say that it is *founded* upon the latter, and that the latter is *founding*. According to Husserl:

If a law of essence means that an *A* cannot as such exist except in a more comprehensive unity which connects it with an *M*, we say that an *A* as such requires foundation by an *M* or also that an *A* as such needs to be supplemented by an *M*. (*LI* III, §14, 25.)

Furthermore, Husserl calls an object that can be regarded as a whole a *concretum*, while something that is only a moment is called an *abstractum*.

### 92 III.

In the fifth Cartesian meditation, the first step in clarifying the sense of *other* subjectivity involves a new *epoché* with respect to the supposition of others, followed by a reduction of transcendental experience to its "sphere of ownness" (*Eigenheitsphäre*; *CM*, 92). This narrower reduction means to preliminarily distinguish between the sense of "mine" and the sense of "other," by abstracting from experience only what is specifically peculiar to the ego, the *non-alien*, in contrast to all *alien* experiences. I regard the world, accordingly, only in its bare appearance as a harmoniously private flowing experience, corresponding only to my own individual subjectivity. This means that the reduction singles out, within my own whole complex of experiences, the private experiences, which I experience as strictly individually subjective, as strictly my own and only mine.

Though this move seems pretty straightforward at first, once one gets down to the details it is not clear what this sphere of ownness exactly is, because this new reduction leaves us within a sphere of an ambiguous sense (cf. Bernet, Kern, and Marbach 1995, 156). It initially demarcates a "primordial sphere,"

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which amounts to the totality of directly self-given experiences, i.e., *all* purely individual subjective experiences, but then restricts us to a “solipsistic sphere” that excludes any reference to others, even if these are privately and immediately given to the I. Due to limits of scope, I cannot discuss this ambiguity in depth here. For the purposes of my argument, it is enough to point out that after the methodical reduction to the sphere of ownness, Husserl’s point of departure in analyzing the constitution of the sense of “other” is the solipsistic sphere, i.e., the sphere of ownness in the strict sense. Thus, following this reduction, the entrance of another person to my perceptual field of the solipsistic sphere is considered only as the emerging presence of a material body (*Körper*). At the level of the pure experiential stratum of the solipsistic sphere, I see another physical body, among many others, which is transcendent only in the minimal sense pertaining to my own primordial and immanent stream of experiences.

*How can we now explain the ability to turn from regarding something as a physical body (Körper) to seeing it as an animate organism (Leib), as another ego? In other words, what constitutes the sense of another subjectivity?* One way of explaining this would be analogy. In analogical reasoning, I point out similarities between two things, and then on this basis I conclude that further similarities may be taken to exist. In the case of bodies, one can say that I perceive a similarity between my own body and other physical bodies, in terms of outward appearance and behavior, and therefore I conclude that these other bodies possess all that characterizes consciousness, since this is the case with my body. Husserl stresses, however, that *the apperception of others is by no means an inference from analogy*. Apperception is not an inference or act of thinking, but is a unitary apprehension, a grasp of something already given in the world as a *unity*.

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Even though my own animate organism is the only body that I indeed understand originally and immediately as animate, I do apprehend other animate bodies as such, since I apprehend their physical bodies merely as *moments* of a whole of which consciousness is another moment. Put differently, the person’s body and consciousness are intuited as *interpenetrating moments* of that person. What I perceive, or rather the intentionality of my perception of the other, is not just a body, but a unity of body and consciousness, i.e., a person. I apprehend the necessity of this part–whole structure alongside the basic perceptual experience.

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Nevertheless, at the same time, Husserl names the original concrete experience of another human being an “analogizing apprehension,” but not only that, he also states that the motivation for such analogizing apprehension is similarity! A similarity between my body and another body. How should we interpret this apparent contradiction in Husserl’s account?

#### IV.

94 The understanding of things in the world through apperception (of any kind) according to Husserl points back to an *Urstiftung*—“*primal instituting*” of sense (CM, 111)—, in which an object with a similar sense was constituted for the first time, and with this constitution an ideal sense was instantiated. The so-called “analogizing” involved in the apperception of the alter ego is another case of repeating an *ideal* sense of another ego. The actual concrete apperception of the other is the fulfilment of a prior intention, an anticipation of encountering another ego. According to Husserl, in the original institution of the sense of the other, prior to “analogizing” apperception, “ego and alter ego are always and necessarily given *in an original ‘pairing’*” (CM, 112). It is an occurrence in passive synthesis, in which the other is given as such only in relation to my own ego, i.e., only in respect of being part of a group of which I myself am also a part. Pairing is an association of at least two distinct data given in a unity of similarity. When we perceive two things as similar, they are associated for us as a pair. If there are more than two things, they form a group along the same principles of synthesis. It is crucial, however, to emphasize that this function is essentially neither conscious nor voluntary. When we actually come to perceive things united in similarity, then we merely become aware of an already existing unity. Pairing is *passive*, functioning at the general level of pre-reflective experience, that is, regardless of whether it actually enters awareness or not. The recognition of an alter ego, then, is not a contingent analogy, but rather a realization of a necessary, *a priori*, unity of sense.

Some commentators (Schütz 1970; Hutcheson 1982; Theunissen 1984) have understood Husserl’s analysis as claiming that the basis for the association of pairing is similarity. However, if we follow Husserl’s way of reasoning as early as the *Logical Investigations*, similarity as such cannot be the basis for the

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passive synthesis of pairing. That is not to say that similarity is not given in the pairing of subjects, but only that it is not the motivating factor which drives the association of pairing. Similarity as such cannot be the basis for this synthesis, because it itself presupposes at least two contents which are already given together as a unity. In other words, since similarity itself already presupposes unity, viewing it as a source of unity begs the question. While discussing the unity of species in the *LI*, Husserl says that

[...] we find in fact that wherever things are “alike,” an identity in the strict and true sense is also present. We cannot predicate exact likeness of two things, without stating the respect in which they are thus alike. Each exact likeness relates to a Species, under which the objects compared, are subsumed: this Species is not, and cannot be, merely “alike” in the two cases, if the worst of infinite regresses is not to become inevitable. (*LI* II §3, 242.)

The act of predicating similarity to two things depends on a prior existing aspect, with regard to which we can say they are alike. According to Husserl, the aspect, in virtue of which things are similar to each other, is their species. If we attempt to derive the species from similarity, we necessarily enter an infinite regress, since each determination of similarity requires a prior common ground. This means that the similarity, which Husserl cites as the basis for attributing subjectivity to a material body like me, is merely an indication of an already present unity, waiting to be concretized and thematized. It is not a motivating psychological factor for regarding other bodies similar to mine as human beings, but rather it is a characteristic of experience stemming from an *eidetic necessity*. Such eidetic necessity owes its intelligibility to the principles of founding and foundedness that dictate the essential relations between individuals and pluralities, between one and many.

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## V.

*How do the principles of foundation, then, govern the relations between “I” and “other”?* When I utter the words *alter ego*, an inseparable part of their meaning

is the sense of *ego*, whose sense itself is originally constituted for me within my own primordial sphere. Thus, the ego, or more precisely, the basic immediate sense of being an ego, is a part of the sense of being an *alter* ego. The ego as I is a *foundation* of the ego as other. The sense of I is a *moment* of the sense of other, since the other cannot be given without the presence of the I; initially, because an other is always given in cognition to an I, but more essentially because ego as I is a moment of the ideal sense of alter ego. The experience of someone else, then, is mediated by an immediate first-person experience, such that the latter is a moment of the constituted otherness.

96 At the same time, however, since the unity of I and other does not conflate them into one, there must be an aspect of difference which makes plurality possible. That is to say, although I grasp myself and the other as *one* unity in virtue of sameness, at the same time there is an unbridgeable *difference* which constitutes the two of us as a *plurality*. I can never experience the immediate stream of consciousness of the other. Since it is essentially absent and beyond my grasp, we are different from each other. “If it were, if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.” (CM, 109). Recognizing the essentiality of this gap reveals that not only is the *alter* ego founded on the ego, but that also the ego as I is founded on the other. The sense of my own ego, i.e., an ego with a sphere of ownness, “gets this character of being ‘my’ self by virtue of the contrastive pairing that necessarily takes place” (CM, 115). In other words, I can understand the meaning of “my own” only in contrast to something which is not mine; something which is essentially beyond my immediate experiential grasp. Through the realization that I cannot experience the immanent stream of experience of an alien ego, I become aware of the individuality, in the form of direct immanent experience, of my own ego. In this respect, the experience of my own private self has sense only through the mediation of the other. The I cannot be given as such without a founding moment of otherness. Therefore, the alter ego is a moment of the ego in relations of reciprocal founding. The I is merely a moment of a whole, and ultimately not a *concretum*, i.e., not an independent whole, but rather an *abstractum*, because her being in the world cannot be fully conceived without other moments, i.e., other egos.

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In virtue of this dependence between egos as abstract parts, our experience of the world has an objective sense. The recognition of another body as an alter ego also makes possible the sense of things in the world as *one and the same from different perspectives*. “We,” the alter ego and I, experience one and the same world, from different viewpoints, which converge into one unity. In addition to being dependent on each other, ego and alter ego permeate each other as moments of the objective world as a whole. But this “we” is not restricted only to me and one other ego. It is not only I and thou, but an open we. Not only is it impossible to understand an ego without the (at least) implicit presence of another ego and vice versa, but we also cannot conceive of a world without a plurality of egos perceiving and living in it. Therefore, the world as such is necessarily and *a priori* an intersubjective world, which is to say, a world given to a communion of egos. It is this community that constitutes world space, world time, and reality in general. An objective world correlates to a transcendental intersubjectivity, i.e., a community of egos that always transcends any particular point of view.

Every ego necessarily takes part in this “we,” “the community of monads,” (97 *Monadengemeinschaft*), a collective conscious act, either potential or actual, constituted by the unity of diverse simultaneous perceptions of the same objects. The “we” is in this way the index around which the objective world is oriented. In effect, it is a plurality of different points of view, which undergo constant mediation in relation to each other. It is important to emphasize that it is precisely not a “view from nowhere,” but rather an endless community of views, of monads, each relating to a common world in virtue of the existence of other views. It is a community of egos mutually existing for each other, harmoniously constituting one identical world, the “harmony of the monads” (*Harmonie der Monaden*). By virtue of this harmonious communalization of intentionalities, the community of monads,

[...] the transcendental intersubjectivity has an *intersubjective* sphere of ownness, in which it constitutes the Objective world; and thus, as the transcendental “We,” it is a subjectivity for this world and also for the world of human beings, which is the form in which it has made itself Objectively actual. (CM, 107.)

**VI.**

Now, it is crucial to understand in what sense there are *many* egos, in order to clarify the sense, in which the transcendental ego, as a moment of a communal whole, is absolute and singular. In the passages above, I have demonstrated that the ego necessarily presupposes alter egos, as a moment of a community of monads. This claim, however, seems to contradict Husserl's view that the transcendental ego is "the one and only absolute ego" (CM, 69), and that therefore the phenomenology of "*self-constitution* coincides with *phenomenology as a whole*" (CM, 68). To answer this challenge, it is telling to discuss an objection made by Alfred Schütz to Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity. In fact, Schütz raised two major objections to the theory, which have to do with the problematic relations between plurality and singularity in the transcendental sphere. First, he asks:

98           But is it conceivable and meaningful to speak of a plurality of transcendental egos? Is not the concept of the transcendental ego conceivable only in the singular? Can it also be "declined" in the plural, or is it, as the Latin grammarians call it, a *singulare tantum*? (Schütz 1970, 77.)

Again, if the I is indeed the pole of all world validities, then a plurality of such egos seems like an obvious contradiction. In this regard, Zahavi has made a helpful distinction between *indexical* uniqueness and *substantial* uniqueness (Zahavi 2001, 82). The indeclinability of the I does not indicate that there is only one I, but rather that it is only I who experience myself as such. There is only one I for me, and this I is absolutely unique and individual, but only in this indexical sense. Exactly as there is only one "here" with respect to my immanent consciousness, but many points which are "here" for others, there is only one I for me, but many egos which are an I for others. Many commentators have made the mistake of identifying this indexical uniqueness with a substantial one. But not only does this uniqueness not imply a solipsistic viewpoint, its indexical nature necessarily implies others, because "I" and "here" have sense only with respect to "other" and "there."

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Even if we consider this to settle the problem, however, Schütz's second objection introduces another, more difficult, obstacle:

And what sense would it make to speak of intersubjectivity with reference to the one and unitary Eidos "transcendental ego at large," that is, to speak of transcendental, not mundane, intersubjectivity? (Schütz 1970, 79.)

Given that after eidetic variation the factual transcendental ego is disclosed to be only a possibility, an example of one eidos ego, it seems that intersubjectivity merely has a derivative sense, as many factual transcendental egos. In this sense, it is not transcendental. If there is only one general eidos of the transcendental ego, then transcendental intersubjectivity seems to be merely a co-presence of many *factual* transcendental egos. Though Schütz does not develop this point any further, but merely raises it as an open question, he seems to imply that the plurality of transcendental egos must be factual, taking for granted the model of one eidos and many instantiations as definitive in this case. That is, he understands the multiplicity of transcendental egos as many instantiations of one and the same eidos ego. Under this conception, the plurality of egos is made up of numerically singular egos, a fact that undermines the possible transcendental character of intersubjectivity.

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In response to this objection, on the basis of my mereological analysis, I claim that transcendental intersubjectivity does not follow the traditional pattern of a species and its different instantiations. It is not as though there is a species of one unique individual "ego" which all numerically distinct factual egos manifest. Rather, the plurality of transcendental intersubjectivity instead appears as a unified whole of *moments*, each inseparable from the complex unity of which it is a part. Thus, a transcendental ego is a moment of a complex plurality, which is not simply a collection of numerically distinct manifestations of one and the same ideal sense. Schütz's problem derives from a misconception of the singularity of the transcendental ego as well as of the plurality which characterizes transcendental intersubjectivity.

We have already seen numerous times that the difference between "I" and "other," the basic source of alterity within the ego's experience, has constitutive

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significance. In other words, there is no conceivable ego outside of a relation with others. Accordingly, understanding an ego merely as an instantiation of an idea glosses over this integral element of constitution, since it views plurality merely as a product of a prior undifferentiated sense. But again, differentiation is precisely what makes subjectivity as an individual intentional structure possible. Thus, it is mistaken to conceive of the plurality of transcendental intersubjectivity simply in terms of sharing a property in common, which each ego holds individually regardless of the others. The others are precisely an inseparable part of the communality, in virtue of which the transcendental ego is as it is. The ideal sense of ego consists in constitutive relations of sameness and otherness which depend on and presuppose a plurality. The *a priori* structure of this ideal sense consists in mutual relations of foundedness between different and distinct egos. There is no sense to an I with a sphere of ownness without a contrary other which is not its own, and there is no *alter* ego without the denial of access to its own primordial sphere. One cannot conceive of one moment without the other, and vice versa; their senses truly permeate each other to form one whole. *This whole, which is the true eidos of subjectivity, can accordingly never be an eidos of one individual ego, but rather an eidos of a plurality of egos, an eidetic structure of community.*

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To sum up this analysis, we can determine that the unity of the community of monads is an eidetic structure of plurality, composed of interdependent and interpenetrating moments, each in itself unique, holding within itself an interplay of sameness and otherness, identity and alterity, presence and absence. *A transcendental ego is uniquely singular, but only in virtue of an alter ego, thus unique only as a moment of a whole.* Rather than being a *singulare tantum*, it is more fitting to say that transcendental subjectivity in its fullest sense is actually a *plurale tantum*, since all transcendental activity presupposes a multitude of transcendental egos. The relations between egos, then, are constitutive of all being: “The intrinsically first being, the being that precedes and bears every worldly Objectivity, is transcendental intersubjectivity: the universe of monads, which effects its communion in various forms.” (CM, 156.) Any concrete experience, either of another ego or of something else in the world, always presupposes an *a priori* open intersubjectivity, the community of monads, which is structured as an infinite whole of interpenetrating moments.

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As I have demonstrated, these moments by necessity follow a logic of moments and wholes in mutual relations of foundedness.

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