

Being Oneself: Self-Consciousness in Husserl and Henry

Steven DeLay

Taking up phenomenology's problem of intentionality in the wake of Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* says, «All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something [...] All consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing». Continuing down the page, Sartre notes in turn that intentionality itself is only possible insofar as it is aware of itself. Just as an unconscious intentionality is unthinkable, so too all consciousness is self-consciousness. As he thus explains, «the necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge of its object, is that it be consciousness of itself as being that knowledge». To pose Husserl's problem of intentionality, hence, is to pose with it the question of self-consciousness. Sartre asks: "What is this *consciousness* of consciousness?" Sartre's question—the question, in short, of what it is to be conscious of oneself—in what follows shall be ours as well.

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Taking up phenomenology's problem of intentionality in the wake of Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* says, «All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something [...] All consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing» (1998, 7). Continuing down the page, Sartre notes in turn that intentionality itself is only possible insofar as it is aware of itself. Just as an unconscious intentionality is unthinkable, so too all consciousness is self-consciousness. As he thus explains, «the necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge of its object, is that it be consciousness of itself as being that knowledge» (1998, 8). To pose Husserl's problem of intentionality, hence, is to pose with it the question of self-consciousness. Sartre asks: «What is this *consciousness* of consciousness?» (1998, 8) Sartre's question—the question, in short, of what it is to be conscious of oneself—in what follows shall be ours as well. What, we too shall ask, is self-consciousness? When somebody says “I,” to what does one refer? Or better still, what ultimately is it to be oneself?

To say self-consciousness is ubiquitous to experience is not to say that, in being acquainted with oneself, such self-acquaintance is a matter of conceptual, reflective, or indeed intuitive knowledge. On the contrary, here knowing oneself means instead being aware of oneself in a definitively pre-reflective way. ¹ Before taking myself as an object of thematic thought, I am already aware of myself, albeit tacitly. Contrast, for example, the experience one was having up to the moment of reading this sentence, and the experience one in turn now when asked to pause from one's reading and to think explicitly one's act of reading. Whereas before one was surely self-aware (one knew oneself to be reading), one had not yet taken oneself as a thematic object of focal attention. Indeed, as Sartre illustrates with his example of counting cigarettes, if there were no such implicit mode of self-acquaintance characterizing experience, and if rather we were aware of ourselves only by reflecting explicitly on ourselves, this would lead to an infinite regress of knowing consciousnesses. For, to any reflecting consciousness that has taken another conscious act as its object, we can always ask of it: «How is *it* conscious? By some further act of consciousness?» To say “no” would be to concede the precise mode of pre-reflective self-consciousness that reflective theories of self-consciousness deny. ² Were we to say “yes”, however, we may then put the same question to this additional reflective consciousness we had the first: how, again, is *it* conscious of itself? In this way, the questioning goes on without end. Hence, «If we wish to avoid an infinite regress», concludes Sartre, «there must be an immediate, non-cognitive, relation of the self to itself». (Sartre 1998, 9) What more are we to say about this mode of pre-reflective self-awareness?

For Husserl, we know, the question of this self-consciousness is not an item of mere curiosity. Elucidating it is foundational to the entire enterprise of accounting for how experience is possible. As Dan Zahavi concludes the matter in an essay to which we shall turn later,

¹This is the claim that Dan Zahavi attributes to all the classical phenomenologists, including not just Sartre, but also Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. For a paper challenging this thesis that all consciousness entails self-consciousness, see Schear (2009).

²Aims to explain self-consciousness by appeal to reflection are not new to the history of philosophy. Most recently, such attempts have become popular in the analytic philosophy of mind. On the one side, there are those like William Lycan who hold that a conscious state is so insofar as a higher-order state takes the former as its object of perception—the so-called “HOP” theories of self-consciousness. See, for instance, Lycan (2004). On the other side, there are those with Peter Carruthers who contend instead that it is not a higher-order perceptive state, but rather a higher-order thought, by which a first-order state is thereby made conscious. In any case, whether the relation between the first-order and higher-order

Husserl also very well knew that his analysis of intentionality would lack a proper foundation as long as the problem concerning the self-manifestation of consciousness remained unaccounted for. That is, without an elucidation of the unique givenness of subjectivity, it would be impossible to account convincingly for the appearance of objects, and ultimately phenomenology would be incapable of realizing its own proper task, to provide a clarification of the condition of possibility for manifestation (2003, 174).

state is said to be a matter of perception or thought, self-consciousness is explained by a reflective account that only generates an infinite regress, as Sartre had said. It is a great merit of the phenomenological tradition's notion of pre-reflective self-awareness that it undercuts such theories, avoiding the confusion to which they give rise. A notable exception to this trend in the philosophy of mind to account for self-consciousness with reflective theories is Uriah Kriegel, whose work recognizes the existence of pre-reflective awareness, though formulating it with an eye back to Franz Brentano rather than Husserl.

Many of Husserl's readers from the beginning have noted the core role the ethos of rigor plays in his phenomenology. For instance, in a famous study criticizing Husserl's transcendental idealism, Roman Ingarden was to note the extent to which Husserl's thought takes its bearings from a rational *telos*, one for Husserl entailing the need for both systematicity and intuitive clarity. Phenomenology for Husserl was to be the paragon of *scientific* inquiry. That means uncovering the foundations of what makes intentionality possible. As Ingarden comments, «The concept of philosophy as rigorous science has a postulatory and programmatic character: Husserl wanted to realize such a philosophy and was convinced that its realization was possible when and only when philosophy became eidetic knowledge about pure consciousness and its intentional correlates obtained in immanent eidetically attuned perception» (1975, 23). Philosophy as rigorous science is thus “first philosophy” by grounding (and thereby explicating) how transcendental subjectivity makes intentionality and hence experience possible. In so doing, it likewise lays the basis for understanding how others sciences (both natural and human) are themselves able to acquire the knowledge of the world that they do.

As Husserl says, phenomenology therefore

is *scientific* life-philosophy, i.e., a science that does not presuppose and is not based on the already existing sciences, but is rather a *radical* science, having as its fundamental scientific theme the concrete universal life and its life-world, the real concrete surrounding world (Staiti 2011, 168).

Yet there is nothing arid or abstract about this theoretical approach. For Husserl, in fact, phenomenology as radical science answers to life's own urge to comprehend itself. A scientific life-philosophy, so understood, satisfies the very desire to make sense of existence. He says,

Why do people turn to philosophy? First and foremost not, as is the case in all other disciplines, in order to be ‘productive’ and to finally become a professor. The urgency of life and the riddle of existence, which cause so much suffering to the *dóskolos*, lead to philosophy, and life demands an answer (Staiti 2011, 168). **3**

3 For a very informative exploration of how Husserl's transcendental phenomenology strikes a delicate balance between the extremes of Heinrich Rickert's and Paul Natorp's Neo-Kantian rationalism, on the one hand, and Wilhelm Dilthey's and Georg Simmel's historicist life-philosophy, on the other, see Staiti's study just cited.

But what is life? How is it given? Husserl was always to note consciousness does not in the first place give itself as ordinary intentional objects do. Though one always can (and sometimes does) reflect on oneself as the thematic object of one's experience, this subject-object relationship of reflection is not the most basic way in

which we experience ourselves. Intentionality, which gives an object, is not itself given intentionally to begin with. I am not primarily an intentional object for myself. To use again Sartre's own language, consciousness has a "non-thetic" awareness of itself, a tacit awareness of itself prior to reflection, prior even to any intentional relation whatsoever.

What, then, accordingly is self-consciousness? Husserl formulates the view we have seen Sartre himself adopt. Inner time-consciousness accounts for the consciousness of oneself:

Consciousness is necessarily *consciousness* in each of its phases. Just as the retentive phase is conscious of the preceding phase without making it into an object, so too the primal datum is already intended—specifically, in the original form of the "now"—without its being something objective (Zahavi 2003, 172).

For Husserl, it is in virtue of the structure of internal time-consciousness that an intentional act is conscious of itself. If, then, intentionality is that by which we reach an object, we contact that object only because we have first been in touch with ourselves. Before I cognize or otherwise relate to an object intentionally, I am in contact with myself. Here, it is question of a realm of *passivity*, a level of consciousness operating well before any actively constitutive act of the *ego*. Says Husserl,

Within subjectivity [*Geistigkeit*] we have two levels. They are indivisible because they are essentially related to one another: the lower level—that of the mere psychic [*seelisch*] and the higher level, that of subjectivity [*Geistigkeit*] in an eminent sense. The lower level is that of pure passivity... (Staiti 2011, 184) ⁴

Here, we may return to the Zahavi essay mentioned earlier. In it, Zahavi formulates so as to answer a longstanding objection—one formulated by Manfred Frank and Ernst Tugendhat among others—according to which Husserl never recognized the problem of self-consciousness properly. Husserl, so the argument goes, remained insensitive to the problem, because, enthralled to the problem of intentionality, he remained beholden to a subject-object model of self-awareness. As Zahavi explains the charge,

Husserl was too occupied with the problem of intentionality to ever pay real attention to the issue of self-awareness. Due to his interest in intentionality Husserl took object-consciousness as the paradigm of every kind of awareness and therefore settled with a model of self-awareness based upon the subject-object dichotomy, with its entailed difference between the intending and the intended (Zahavi 2003, 157).

More importantly, perhaps, it is Michel Henry whose phenomenology of life that has most famously criticized the Husserlian account of pre-reflective self-consciousness in terms of inner time-consciousness. In keeping with a fundamental distinction Henry draws between the appearing of consciousness and the appearing of the world, he says self-manifestation (what he calls "life") takes place as a self-affection: «*Life reveals itself*. Life is self-revelation» (2019, 59).

Reminiscent of Kierkegaard for whom life is interiority, Henry in all of his

⁴ It is important not to confuse passive synthesis—acts of which include association and motivation, for example—with pre-reflective self-consciousness itself as such. Though it must be emphasized that passive synthesis and inner time-consciousness are distinct, this is not to deny they are importantly related. For an account of the relation between them that also weighs in on the debate over how exactly to understand the relation between inner time-consciousness, on the one hand, and intentional acts and their objects, on the other, see DeRoo (2011).

works insists that self-manifestation is a mode of affectivity, of a pure immanence in which one experiences oneself as crushed against oneself without intentional rupture, temporal delay, or structural difference:

If the Self relates to itself by experiencing itself in the absolute immanence of life and in it alone, phenomenology still asks: what does the phenomenological reality of this originary Affectivity that precedes every sentiment by making it possible—the originary phenomenological tonalities of this Affectivity are the suffering and joy in which the experiencing itself of life occurs, and thus every possible Self. Life is a pathos. *Every me is an immanent pathos-filled relation to itself* (2019, 62).

From this perspective that sees consciousness as a radical immanence, it could appear Husserl's own philosophy of consciousness, which explains self-giveness in terms of inner time-consciousness, fails to uncover the deepest level of self-experience. This is precisely what Henry contends,

Let's examine anew this Self, this me that I am. "Me," wrote Husserl in a manuscript from the 1930s, "I am myself [*Ich bin Ich*]." We cannot confine ourselves to such a statement, as important as it may be. It is advisable to push the analysis further. Me, I am myself, but it isn't me who has given me to myself. My life experiences itself, but it is not the one that has brought it into this condition of experiencing itself; such a condition depends neither on its power nor its will (2019, 63). ⁵

⁵ Henry's most sustained criticism of Husserl along these lines is to be found in Henry (2008). In the work, it must be noted Henry relies just on Husserl's 1907 lectures.

Husserl's account of inner time-consciousness is another instance of a philosophy that attempts to think self-manifestation according to the world's appearing—according to *transcendence*—rather than according to the *pathos* of life's immanence. As Henry continues, «Thus, for Husserl, phenomenality is traditionally understood to start from consciousness, but consciousness is in essence intentional; it is nothing other than the movement by which it projects itself outside, so that phenomenality arises from this coming into the outside and is due to it» (2019, 58). ⁶ But as Zahavi notes, Henry's criticism of Husserl according to which self-consciousness mistakenly is explained in terms of retentional modifications rather than an immediate impressional consciousness, misconstrues the latter's position:

Husserl's analysis is not meant to imply that consciousness only becomes aware of itself through the retention. On the contrary, Husserl explicitly insists that the *retentional* modification presupposes an *impressional* (primary, original, and immediate) self-manifestation, not only because consciousness is as such self-given, but also because a retention of an unconscious content is impossible (Zahavi 2003, 172).

⁶ Notice Henry's criticism is *not* that Husserl distorts the character of self-manifestation by reducing it to a subject-object model (Frank's and Tugendhat's objection). His view, instead, is that despite his characterizing inner time-consciousness as pre-intentional, Husserl nevertheless succumbs to the prejudice of "ontological monism": portraying consciousness in terms of temporality as he does, subjectivity's own appearing is reduced to the world's mode of appearing, that is to say the mode of exteriority or transcendence. That Henry is identifying a problem concerning a more fundamental level of experience than mere object intentionality becomes clear when, in the very next line after the one just criticizing Husserl, Henry writes, «It is with Heidegger that the world's appearing finds its highest degree of elaboration. As early as §7 of *Sein und Zeit*, the phenomenon is explained according to the Greek—*phainomenon*—starting

Husserl and Henry agree that all consciousness is self-consciousness. Furthermore, they agree such self-consciousness is not intentional. And, according to Zahavi, they both also understand the deepest level of non-intentional self-consciousness to be an immediate,

affective, radical passivity. Does this mean, thus, there is no disagreement at all, that contrary to Henry's insistence, Husserl sees the passive realm of self-affection as he does?

At least one reason comes to mind for thinking the rapprochement is not complete. The disagreement concerns the very origin of life's self-affection. As Henry concurs with Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, if I am unable to be anyone but myself, that is, if being myself means being this singular individual I am, it is because I am unable to escape from myself. Being oneself is not a matter of existing outside oneself with others in the world. Nor, however, is it to be enclosed alone in a solipsistic interiority. The real disagreement, then, if there is one, between Husserl and Henry does not consist so much in how this structure of self-awareness should be characterized, but rather over its origin. What, if anything, brings it into being? Nobody, says Henry, has brought oneself into the condition of living, a fact Husserl's analyses of passive synthesis and internal time-consciousness never faced squarely. In the passive synthesis lectures, for instance, Husserl says this:

the transcendental ego cannot be born; [...] The ego as transcendental ego was eternal; I am now, and belonging to this Now is a horizon of the past that can be unraveled into infinity. And this means precisely, the ego was eternal (Husserl 2001, 469).

Contrary to what Husserl argues here, one is not eternal, says Henry. Just as one has not given life to oneself, so the pure passivity in which one experiences oneself accordingly signals a power beyond oneself. In a twist sure to surprise anyone who has never bothered to read Henry closely for thinking Henry's was simply an oversimplistic philosophy of immanence, there in fact is, according to Henry himself, an Other lying at the depths of one's inmost self. Always already brought into the condition of living, but never by oneself, being oneself is to be born.

from the root *pha, phos*, meaning 'light,' such that appearing signifies coming into the light, clarity, or 'that wherein something can become something manifest, visible in itself' [*d.h. das, worin etewas offenbar, an ihm selbst sichtbar werden kann*]. 'The world [...] is a question of exteriority, of the 'outside of itself' as such, as the second part of *Sein und Zeit* explicitly states» (58-59). For a development of Henry's criticism against the residue of ontological monism in Husserl and Heidegger, see DeLay (2016).

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