

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXCAVATION:  
SEARCHING FOR THE IRREDUCIBLE  
GROUND OF CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

BY

James Alan Tuedio

"It seemed to him (that) he was looking in through a lighted window at a life which he had always known, but which he could never make his own."

--Thomas Wolfe

Is suspension in non-reflective awareness non-personal consciousness? What accounts for the unity of non-positional consciousness? What is it at the heart of non-reflective, non-positional engagement in immediacy that makes the experience my experience? Can it even be said to be mine?

Take as an example the intense reading of a novel. When plunged into the consciousness of book-being-read, I am, in Sartre's words, "non-egologically engaged in situation." I project myself into the mental and physical activities of the various characters in the story. I do not reflect upon the fact that I am reading the book, nor upon the fact that I am sitting in this chair resting my elbows upon this table and supporting the weight of my head upon my palms. But I am "non-positionally" aware, which is to say that I would not, were I to break from my reading, be surprised to find myself in the position just described. I am "in touch" with my "self" as I read down the page. But I am not in touch with my ego.

Now clearly, I am here and the book is there. But there is no intentional space between us. Consciousness has "escaped itself" into the object of its intention. So, too, when I "lose" myself while standing before an

exquisite painting. There is no positing of the relation "me and mine." I am, rather, engaged in lived immediate experience, having somehow reduced from my awareness any and all consideration for the "existent" painting or my "place" in the museum. But it is still my experience in the sense that I live it. I am attending to the painting through an act of non-comparative appreciation, which is to say, I take the painting as the object of my intention and nothing else, as the painting that absorbs my attention. There is no attending to the physical as physical, no attending to the painting as better than or inferior to another. I have "removed" myself from the world of everyday experience and now stand in the clutches of non-reflective consciousness descriptively penetrating the intentional objectivity whose smile has taken firm hold of my heart's fancy. But clearly I am still "oriented" in the sense that I am locked into fascination; and although there appears to be no "distinction" between the fascinating and the fascination, between the object of the intention and the actual living intention, each is certainly not the other; rather, each is in pure relation with the other, so there is no concern for, no attending to, the distinction. But does this mean that I am without a personality? Does my personality vanish, as Sartre would have us believe, when I step into a non-reflective "unconcernful" attitude? Or is there, as Husserl has so clearly suggested, something more intimately and indubitably "own" to me than the ego I manufacture in reflective acts? Am I a "grammatical 'I'" or a "transcendental I"?

If we believe Sartre, then the irreducible foundational structure of conscious experience is non-egological, "prepersonal" consciousness. But if we accept the Husserlian concept of the "transcendental I," we find at the "core" of conscious experience a transcendental subject "directing" consciousness towards the world. This "subject" stands "in" consciousness and is that which engages immediate experience. For Sartre, consciousness alone is sufficient to engage immediate experience. In virtue of its own spontaneous upheaval, consciousness needs no "directing." It is directionality; or to use the Husserlian term, consciousness is intentionality.

We must try first to see what Husserl has in mind, before passing on to a critique of Sartre's position.

Husserl defines the activity of consciousness in terms of intentionality. "To be conscious," he writes, "is to be conscious of . . . something which then stands to the activity of consciousness as the meaning of its performance."<sup>1</sup> This "something" is not an "existent" object, but an "intentional objectivity."<sup>2</sup> Such "objec-

tivities" are meaning-entities "constituted" by consciousness, and insofar as these entities are "intended," they appear and are grasped as objects precisely and only as they appear.

Such activity of consciousness is an on-going process which would lack systematic unification were it not for the transcendental ego. If we reserve the term "evidence" to express the immediate grasping of its object by consciousness, then we can gain some critical insight from the following passage taken from the Cartesian Meditations:

The ego is himself existent for himself in continuous evidence; thus, in himself, he is continuously constituting himself as existing. The ego grasps himself not only as a flowing life but also as I, who live this and that subjective process, who live through this and that cogito, as the same I.<sup>3</sup>

The subjective process to which Husserl refers is what we may now summarily describe as the constitution of intentional objectivities which appear as correlates to the directional gaze of consciousness.

How am I to experience this? What process must I subject myself to in order that I might feel confident that I have as my irreducible foundation of conscious experience a transcendental or "pure" ego?

I must first place out of consideration any and all concern for my place in the "natural attitude" by bracketing from awareness the "taken-for-grantedness" which characterizes my involvement in this attitude. I must confront the situation engaging me in terms of the meaning it has for me in virtue of the specifics of the engagement. Secondly, I must perform another reduction, upon that which has been constituted and thereby opened up for descriptive penetration, namely the world as-it-is-for-me, the "meaning-entity" world.<sup>4</sup> This latter reduction reduces beyond the world of private meaning to what Husserl terms in his later period "living intentionality."<sup>5</sup> In the performance of phenomenological reduction, everything "falls away" from consideration save the "transcendental I." This "I," as we have already noted, is engaged in "self-constitution"; it is an "egological life" composed solely of intentional activity. Gaston Berger remarks in his study of the Husserlian cogito that after having put aside everything that has a sense, "we remain in the presence of that by which everything receives a sense: pure consciousness, the 'I.'<sup>6</sup> Husserl adds, in the Crisis, that

"having arrived at the ego, one becomes aware of standing within a sphere of self-evidence of such a nature that any attempt to inquire behind it would be absurd."<sup>7</sup>

And yet this sphere of self-evidence does not present itself as something "apart" from me, as something which I can descriptively penetrate: it is a relation with myself, a relation of "ownness" and "identity" fused into a single crestation of lived experience which, in reflection, I will undoubtedly choose to call my own, but which, at this moment, stands as a relation of self-constitution in its most irreducible form. It is a directed "ray" of intentionality so intense that no act of reflection can intercede. One has landed in the lap of his transcendental ego:

(This) "being directed towards," the "being busied with," "adopting an attitude," "undergoing or suffering from," has this of necessity wrapped in its very essence: that it is just something "from the Ego," or in the reverse direction "to the Ego"; and this is the pure Ego, and no reduction can get any grip on it.<sup>8</sup>

This pure ego is not something that can stand over and against itself as an intentional objectivity: "It is in and for itself indescribable: pure ego and nothing further."<sup>9</sup>

The transcendental ego, then, is in no significant way comparable to the psychological ego which Sartre would have us place "out in the world." The psychological ego is given to itself through reflection as an "I," whereas the transcendental subject is given to itself in immediate experience as "living intentionality," as an "I" which has successfully bracketed from its awareness all attending to that which distinguishes it from the object of its intention.<sup>10</sup> It is, to be sure, an "I" without individuality. Writes Husserl in the Crisis:

The "I" that I attain in the epoche . . . is actually called "I" only by equivocation--though it is an essential equivocation since, when I name it in reflection, I can say nothing other than: it is I who practice the epoche, I who interrogate, as phenomenon, the world which is now valid for me according to its being and being-such, with all its human beings, of whom I am so fully conscious; it is I who . . . am the ego-pole of this transcendental life, in which, at first, the world has meaning for me purely as world; it is I who, taken in full concreteness, encompass all that.<sup>11</sup>

When conscious activity is reduced to the level of pure egohood, there is not consciousness of I-ness as there would be in the positing of the psychological ego. There is, in its place, reception-of-essence-as-meaningful.<sup>12</sup> We may suggest, then, that although it is not an "I" in the traditional sense, it is still clearly a "center of vision"<sup>13</sup> directing intentional "rays" that constitute the very object of its fascination. It is, in this engagement of immediacy, pure fascination.<sup>14</sup> Only when disengaged from this lived immediacy may the pure ego reflect on its having been fascinated by that which it found fascinating.<sup>15</sup> But I never reflect on the precise engagement as-it-was-lived. I reflect on myself as an ego, but this ego is not the continuous ego which is the precondition for my reflecting. The continuous ego is pure potential insofar as it is at all times non-apparent to consciousness as an ego, yet is nonetheless there-to-be-reflected-on (if only because it is there to engage lived experience).

Summarily, we suggest that the transcendental ego solves a number of important problems for Husserl. It is, above all, the source of intentionality, being that which "directs" consciousness. Secondly, as the ground of intentional activity, it is the "unifier" of conscious experience. Thirdly, it is the phenomenon which accounts for why "non-reflective engagements in immediacy" are my experiences at the time of engagement. In turning now to a statement of Sartre's criticism, I ask that you bear in mind these three points, for they are the main tenets he attacks in his essay on "The Transcendence of the Ego."

What Sartre wants most clearly to rule out is the unifying transcendental subject "inhabiting" consciousness.<sup>16</sup> There is nothing "behind" each consciousness serving as the necessary structure of conscious activity simply because there is no content whatsoever "in" consciousness. Indeed, putting something in consciousness with the power to unify makes consciousness thoroughly personal,<sup>17</sup> when in fact consciousness is, as exhibited in non-reflective activity, absolutely impersonal consciousness. If there is no consciousness of me chasing after a slow-moving streetcar, then there is only impersonal consciousness of the-streetcar-needing-to-be-caught. Hence, for, Sartre, the experience which is engagement in immediacy is really only "mine" in reflection, and is, when lived, merely lived engagement of consciousness unifying itself in the object it has escaped into.

Hence, instead of the "transcendental I" serving as the a priori condition for there being intentional objec-

tivities, it is Sartre's claim that consciousness as intentionality "makes possible the unity and the personality of my I."<sup>18</sup>

From this, it follows that when the individual is engaged in immediacy, he is "plunged into the world of objects." He is not, however, staring in fascination at himself as his own intentional objectivity. The intentional objectivity is by necessity outside of consciousness, and for this reason alone, consciousness is able to both posit and grasp the object in the same act.<sup>19</sup> And simply because there is no "I" present in the engagement, it is unequivocally impersonal awareness most correctly interpreted not as "my consciousness of" but as "consciousness-of." It is only made my own experience when I reflect on having been lost in the object.

Before offering a critique of this position, let's consider the following passage from Wolfe's Of Time and the River:

He moved on ceaselessly across a naked and accursed landscape and beneath a naked and accursed sky, an exile in the centre of a planetary vacancy that, like his guilt and shame, had neither place among things living nor among things dead, in which there was neither vengeance of lightning, nor mercy of burial, in which there was neither shade nor shelter, curve nor bend, nor hill, nor tree, nor hollow, in which--earth, air, sky, and limitless horizon--there was only one vast naked eye, inscrutable and accusing, from which there was no escape, and which bathed its naked soul in its fathomless depths of shame.

And then the vision faded, and suddenly, with the bridgeless immediacy of a dream, he found himself within the narrow canyon of a street, pacing interminable along on endless pavements where there was neither face nor footfall save his own, nor eye, nor window, nor any door that he might enter.<sup>20</sup>

I want to show in my critique that such an example of non-reflective engagement in immediacy is "my" experience in the sense that "I" constitute myself not as the object of reflection, but as something I live.<sup>21</sup> In the passage from Wolfe there is evidence of the very curious relation of non-egological consciousness as directed awareness. There is, specifically, "lived shame"--my shame in its

essential structure--and not merely "my" shame, but the shame which is, at this particular instant, me. True, I am, while engaged in "lived shame," not reflecting, and hence no "I" is presented to consciousness. But the "I" is only non-apparent: it is still there to be reflected on. As awareness momentarily without benefit of an "I," it is still awareness of that which is essentially own to me at this precise moment, even if, at this moment of engagement, I am unable to posit any distinction between onness and identity.<sup>22</sup> The relation still has its two necessary components. There is still a distinction between the perceiver and the perceived. It's just that I do not consciously posit the distinction.

My own position begins to take shape. I want to suggest that there is not a "personality" "behind" the irreducible foundation of consciousness insofar as I am unable, when engaged in immediate experience, to posit my relation to the intentional objectivity engaging my fascination. Yet there is still a fundamental "I-ness" which keeps me in relation with the object of my awareness while yet not positing (through reflection) a relation of "me and mine" or of extended supplantation in the world engaged by or engaging my awareness.

Consider again the example which finds me stunned by the sheer beauty of a particular painting at a museum. I am standing, say, twenty paces from the canvas, but there is no intentional space separating us.<sup>23</sup> I recognize no conception of "otherness," and, likewise, no conception of "I-ness." I am staring with all the intensity I can muster, holding open the shutter of my mental camera. And I might hold it open forever, if I did not somehow realize that I must "develop" the picture.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, consciousness is very much like a camera, insofar as it must "have its shutter closed" before it can (in reflection) constitute or "develop" the picture for future references. The interesting point to recognize here is that something compels consciousness to close the shutter, something that is non-reflectively aware of the entire situation in its unfolding. It is a something which recognizes that if it does not withdraw from this engagement in immediacy there will be nothing from it to call its own; there will be no picture to share with friends, nothing to prove that it was there! This something is a transcendental subject in the sense in which we have interpreted Husserl. It is the psychological ego in its non-apparent, purely potential, state of being. It is, above all, the irreducible ground of conscious experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier, 1962), Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> Husserl hints at this terminology in The Idea of Phenomenology, trans. Alston and Nakhnikian (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960), Section 31.

<sup>4</sup> It is this "meaning entity" world which Heidegger terms the "Worldhood of the World," and specifically because this "world" is Dasein's primordial "orientation" it is foolish to attempt Husserl's phenomenological reduction, for any success would necessitate Dasein's "reducing" itself right out of orientation. Dasein would no longer "be itself." Being and Time, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), Section 14-24.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, Formal and Transcendental Logic, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), p. 235.

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Berger, The Cogito in Husserl's Philosophy, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Husserl, Ideas, Section 80.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The distinction, however, is not "lost," but must become the guiding theme of phenomenological inquiry (which is itself made possible through the "opening up" of the transcendental field for the experiencing of the transcendental subject).

<sup>11</sup> Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, p. 184.



<sup>12</sup> Heidegger might suggest the following: there is not consciousness of I-ness solely because Dasein is "losing" itself in readiness-to-hand. Dasein is disclosing itself there for its here, but has not yet "acknowledged" its place "here" because it has not yet interpreted its concerned Being-towards in terms of what is (there) de-severantly ready-to-hand. Being and Time, Section 23.

<sup>13</sup> Berger uses this terminology.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, pure fascination engaged by non-comparative appreciation.

<sup>15</sup> It is only when I reflect on my having been fascinated that I may make judgements of comparative appreciation.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday, 1957), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Wolfe, Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth (New York: Scribners, 1935), p. 885. (Compare with this "Sartrean" passage from Emerson's essay on "Nature": "Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing [though] I see all.")

<sup>21</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the ground of perception and can never be an "object" for my "self" since I can never get "outside" it (not even when standing before a mirror). Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith, rev. Forrest Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), particularly Chapter 3.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger seems to escape this problem through his characterization of "readiness-to-hand" and "presence-at-hand." Yet he does not seem to sufficiently account for the "passage" from grasping something as ready-to-hand to the grasping of it as present-at-hand. What "prompts" this movement?

<sup>23</sup> There is no intentional space, and yet I certainly recognize, with Merleau-Ponty, an expressive space between

myself and the painting. (This concept of space can also be derived from Heidegger's theory of "oriented" space.)

<sup>24</sup>"Developing" the picture is commensurate to Heidegger's "second-order consciousness" and could be characterized in terms of the movement from readiness-to-hand to presence-at-hand if there were included an analysis (akin to ours here) detailing the phenomenon instigating the transition from non-reflective to reflective awareness. Heidegger does make the comment that if the construction foreman never stopped studying the plans for a house, the house would never be built. But what prompts the foreman to grasp as present-at-hand that which he previously grasped as ready-to-hand?