

04. The Transcendence of the Ego

| THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE EGO |
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| <p>In his essay <i>The Transcendence of the Ego</i>, published seven years before <i>Being and Nothingness</i>, Sartre aimed to show that the ego or self:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * is not some kind of nonphysical entity behind consciousness or any kind of container of ideas. * but is rather a part of the world that we experience. <p>This essay is a critique of the work of Edmund Husserl on this matter, who argued that there are two aspects to the self:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the transcendent ego, which is the public aspect, and is understood by other people and studied by psychologists; * the transcendental ego, which underlies all experience and gives structure to the world as it is experienced. |
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| <p>Sartre's argument is that there is only the transcendent ego.</p> <p>His essay has two major sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in Part I, he argues against the transcendental ego; • in Part II, he outlines the nature of the transcendent ego. <p>We are concerned with the theory outlined in Part II. This underlies various key aspects of Sartrean existentialism, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the theory of the freedom of action and its relation to our projects. * the claim that we are commonly in bad faith about our existence, and distort the existence of other people through the look. <p>The relation between the theory in this early essay and the existentialism of <i>Being and Nothingness</i> is, however, complicated, as we shall see.</p> |
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| CONSTITUTION |
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| <p>Part II of the essay is entitled 'The Constitution of the Ego', and many commentators have understood it to argue that ...</p> <p>... we artificially construct this imaginary thing called the ego and mistakenly identify ourselves with it.</p> <p>Hazel Barnes talks about the 'fabrication' of the ego in 'Sartre's Ontology', for example, and Gregory McCulloch thinks that the imaginary nature of the ego is crucial to Sartre's theory of freedom, in <i>Using Sartre</i>.</p> <p>It is common to read that Sartre's theories of bad faith and the look hold that we mistakenly ascribe a real transcendent ego to ourselves and to others, respectively.</p> <p>But we need to be more careful here: Sartre's term 'constitution' is not the same as what is ordinarily meant by that word, and neither is it equivalent to imagination or creation.</p> |
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| THE CONSTITUTION OF THE WORLD |
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| <p>We have seen how Sartre thinks that the familiar world of experience is constructed from the interplay of consciousness and being in-itself.</p> <p>Sartre describes this activity of consciousness as 'constituting' the world.</p> <p>Consciousness constitutes the world because the following aspects of the world are dependent on the way we are aware of being in-itself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » the individuation of things as they appear to us; » the sense or meaning things have for us; » the 'little pools of non-being' in the world, like the absence of Pierre. <p>Does Sartre mean by this that the world is somehow artificial or fabricated? That being in-itself is really a mass of undifferentiated stuff and there are no discrete objects? Is he a transcendental idealist in this strong sense?</p> |
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| THE CONSTITUTION OF THE WORLD |
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| <p>There are good reasons not to think that Sartre means the 'constitution' of the world in this radical way:</p> <p>In the introduction to <i>Being and Nothingness</i>, he says that it is a preliminary characterisation of being in-itself that it is, it is in itself, and it is what it is: he does <u>not</u> say that this is the last word on the matter.</p> <p>If he thinks that being in-itself is undifferentiated, then his position is wildly implausible, because he is also committed to holding that some parts of this stuff can be the subject of consciousness (human bodies) whereas others cannot (e.g. rocks).</p> <p>The argument for the reality of being in-itself, in the introduction to <i>Being and Nothingness</i>, contains ideas that can equally be used to construct an argument for the reality of structure and differentiation in being in-itself: that resistance to my efforts implies a 'principle of being' independent of me.</p> |
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| THE CONSTITUTION OF THE EGO |
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| <p>So just because something is constituted by consciousness, in Sartre's philosophy, it does not follow that the thing is not real independent of our awareness of it ...</p> <p>... being <i>constituted</i> does not make it <i>imaginary</i> or <i>unreal</i>.</p> <p>But the theory is complicated by Sartre's analogy with a melody (TE: 29-30):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * a melody is something that we hear in a sequence of notes, and the ego is something we find in a person's set of actions, states, and qualities; * states are things like being hating Pierre, or liking Simone; qualities are larger-scale things like being a hateful or loving person, being an honest or dishonest person; * Sartre's point is not that only the sequence of notes exists and the melody we find there is unreal, but that the melody just is the sequence of notes and not something of which the notes are properties or effects. |
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04. The Transcendence of the Ego

| THE CONSTITUTION OF ACTIONS AND STATES |
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| <p>Sartre considers actions to also be transcendent and constituted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * many actions are made sequences of smaller actions, like the action of playing a tune on the piano: since you can be aware of only one small action at a time, the larger action transcends your awareness; * this is true not just of physical actions but of mental ones also, such as adding up the cost of your shopping list; * such actions are therefore 'constituted' like melodies (see TE: 26-7). <p>Sartre gives a similar account of states:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * if I genuinely hate Pierre, then this state of hatred is manifested in various actions or emotional responses at various times; * the hatred is constituted for me by my awareness of this pattern in my behaviour and emotions. |
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| THE CONSTITUTION OF QUALITIES |
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| <p>Sartre does <u>not</u> hold the absurd theory that actions and states are unreal.</p> <p>This is evident from his contrast between these and qualities, which he describes as 'optional unities of states' (TE: 27):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * we often think of sets of states as manifesting larger-scale qualities, in the same way that actions can manifest states; * so if we have noticed that Jean hates Pierre and hates Simone, then we might think of Jean as a hateful person; * this hatefulness is then understood as a property of Jean that explains why he has those attitudes towards Pierre and Simone. <p>What makes these qualities 'optional' is that we do not <u>need</u> to think in terms of them, since 'states and actions can find directly in the Ego the unity that they require' (TE: 28).</p> |
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| THE CONSTITUTION OF THE EGO |
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| <p>The description of qualities as 'optional' might suggest that Sartre thinks that it doesn't matter how we constitute the ego, with qualities or without them.</p> <p>And this might suggest that Sartre thinks of the ego as unreal or imaginary.</p> <p>But this doesn't sit well with his claim that psychologists study egos and his concern with describing the methods appropriate to this branch of psychology and those inappropriate to it.</p> <p>A better reading is to say that the ego is real but does not include qualities.</p> <p>This would mean that the ego and its states and actions are all parts of being in-itself and help to form genuine explanations of events in the world ...</p> <p>... so, for example, Jean left the room when Pierre arrived <i>because</i> Jean hates Pierre ...</p> <p>... but we cannot give genuine explanations in terms of qualities, so it is not true that Jean hates Pierre because Jean is a hateful person.</p> |
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| CHARACTER AND QUALITIES |
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| <p>The theory of <i>The Transcendence of the Ego</i>, therefore, holds that there are no such character traits as being generally hateful, rancorous, honest, dishonest, courageous, cowardly, kind, unkind, compassionate, etc.</p> <p>On this view, the language of character does not pick out real aspects of people that explains their behaviour ...</p> <p>... it simply summarises patterns in their past behaviour ...</p> <p>... so to say that Simone is a courageous person is <i>only</i> to say that she has acted courageously many times in the past.</p> <p>This fits well with Sartre's claim that we cannot excuse our behaviour by referring to a genetic inheritance for which we are not responsible.</p> <p>But it makes the patterns summarised in our character language look like the result of sheer chance, which would be implausible.</p> |
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| CHARACTER AND QUALITIES |
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| <p>Perhaps it was the realisation of this problem that leads him to present a subtly different position in <i>Being and Nothingness</i>.</p> <p>He presents this position in a passage that refers approvingly back to <i>The Transcendence of the Ego</i>, and does not explicitly point out that his position has changed (B&N: 184-90, esp. 186-7).</p> <p>In this passage, he gives his account of the relation between the ego and its actions, states, and qualities ...</p> <p>... and does not describe qualities as merely 'optional' or dispensable, but instead treats them as on an ontological par with actions and states.</p> |
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| CHARACTER AND QUALITIES |
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| <p>Perhaps this shift can also be explained by a realisation that his claim that we cannot blame our genetic inheritance for our behaviour ...</p> <p>... does not actually require him to deny the existence of character traits altogether ...</p> <p>... he just needs to deny that we have fixed and deterministic character traits, about which we can do nothing, and which determine our behaviour.</p> <p>So long as he can account for our character traits in terms of our free choices, he can admit that people really do have traits of courage or cowardice, honesty or dishonesty, lovingness or hatefulness ...</p> <p>... and still deny that these excuse their behaviour.</p> <p>This is the basis of his account of freedom, which we will consider next.</p> |
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