



PRE-REFLECTIVE
CONSCIOUSNESS

SARTRE AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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8 A pebble at the bottom of the water

Sartre and Cavell on the opacity of self-knowledge *

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En disant je nous affirmons bien plus que nous ne savons
(Sartre, *La transcendance de l'Ego*)

Between 1900 and 1905, Claude Monet painted a series of paintings depicting the Palace of Westminster as he could see it from his window on the opposite banks of the Thames in London. However, one could hardly say that the Houses of Parliament constitute the topic of these paintings, since they are hardly perceptible, appearing in the distance as a rough and undefined shadow through a very thick fog typical of the London atmosphere. Monet attempts in these paintings to depict the remarkable and unique way the mist filters and retains the light, blurring the architecture of the Palace and making it hardly recognizable. This focus on the particularly striking visual impression produced by the effect of fog is even stronger in the series of paintings of Charing Cross Bridge, in which the opacity of the mist is such that it makes everything else vanish in the haze and prevents the spectator from seeing what was supposed to be the topic of these paintings.

In *Transcendence of the ego*, Sartre uses this peculiar visual experience as a metaphor in order to describe the way we appear to ourselves and to stress the irreducible opacity of self-knowledge. Something is said to be opaque when we cannot see through it, as a perfectly transparent piece of flawless glass would allow us to. The opacity is the property of something that prevents one from seeing further; it stops one's look and obstructs the gaze, as does the London fog, preventing us from perceiving distinctly the contours of the Palace of Westminster. Likewise, according to Sartre, the I always appears through a mist that veils it and makes it similar to "a pebble at the bottom of the water" (Sartre 1960, pp. 51-52). The I always manifests itself as an opaque reality whose content is not immediately accessible to us and that cannot be distinctively perceived. Such claim about the opacity of the I seems to dismiss any conception of self-knowledge relying on the assumption that our mental states are transparent enough to provide us with an immediate and unquestionable knowledge of ourselves. Far from being grounded on our ability to have direct access to our states of mind, the process through

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which we get to know ourselves entails inevitably, according to Sartre's analysis, some irreducible opacity: by describing our mental states as ours, we make the *I* the source of consciousness and conceal to ourselves the transcendence of our own ego.

The purpose of this paper is to measure the consequences of this account of the opacity of the Ego on self-knowledge. To be sure, Sartre's critical analysis of the status of subjectivity contributes to point out the limits of a strictly epistemic approach to self-knowledge, drawing on an "incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge," in the words of Anscombe, by which she means a conception which presupposes that knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with prior facts or realities (Anscombe 2000, p. 57). However, does this criticism necessarily imply that the very quest for self-knowledge is illusive and that any kind of self-knowledge must be discarded?

To address this question, I will first try to show that Sartre's radical interpretation of the intentionality thesis allows him to keep separate two claims that are usually taken to stem from one another in philosophy of mind:

- a) the claim according to which one enjoys some privileged first-personal access to one's own conscious states and
- b) the idea that this privileged access grants one some kind of indisputable authority in self-ascribing such and such mental states.

This will lead me to highlight the paradox that arises from Sartre's theory, making the quest for self-knowledge both impossible and necessary. Finally, I will draw on Cavell's analysis of the use of first- and third-person narrators in literature in order to provide a more refined account of this paradox about the opacity of self-knowledge.

The intentional translucence of conscious experience

Strongly influenced by Husserl's phenomenology and in particular by his *Logical Investigations*, Sartre develops in *Transcendence of the Ego* an analysis of consciousness that stresses the intentional dimension of conscious experiences and prioritizes the relation to an object over the link that allegedly ties the field of experience to a particular Ego. Experiences such as the perception of a bird in a tree, the feeling of the wind running through one's hair, the imaginative representation of a unicorn, the thought of the smallest prime number can all be characterized by their particular mode of relation to the object they are directed towards, and do not require an egological structure to establish this relation to an object. Knowing what kind of conscious experience we just had when we see a bird

in a tree amounts to being able to tell what this experience is an experience of. The transitivity of conscious experiences constitutes the main feature, thanks to which experiences can be described. Following Husserl's analysis in the *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 1984b, pp. 353, 361), Sartre claims that consciousness' intentional orientation towards an object is all we need in order to be able to (a) identify and (b) describe conscious phenomena. To describe them is nothing but to set out their intentional structure, insofar as their specific way of intending or aiming at a peculiar object delivers the very meaning of conscious experiences.

This fundamental feature of conscious experience entails a second one, that Sartre calls the "translucence" of conscious phenomena (Sartre 1960, p. 42): the way the intentional object of an experience appears requires that the experience does not appear as such. In order for, say, a perceptual object to manifest itself within an act of perception, consciousness needs to be perfectly translucent and to let it appear as the object looked at, without hindering in any way the movement of the look pointing at the object. This translucence of consciousness implies that intentional experiences do not appear at all: by directing one's consciousness towards a particular object, intentionality withdraws, as it were, the experience itself from one's focus. This fundamental aspect of the intentionality thesis is familiar to whoever needs to wear glasses and does not keep them clean enough, or decided to buy colorful fancy frames. If some dust on the surface of the glass distracts us, or if our eyes are caught by the bright colors of our frames, we can no longer see what our glasses were supposed to let us look at; the glasses become an obstacle that jeopardizes visibility. In order to function properly – in order to let us see – glasses must not be *seen* as such but *looked through*. This example brings to more clarity the consequences of Sartre's analysis of intentionality: conscious experiences, insofar as they are intentional (and they all are, according to both Husserl and Sartre), are such that they establish a relation to an object through which the relation itself vanishes, so that the object can appear. The non-appearance of conscious experiences is required as a condition of possibility of the appearance of their object.

However, the translucence of intentional experiences and their exclusive orientation towards an object do not imply that experiences cannot be *present* to consciousness. They are definitely not *perceptible* in the same sense that the object of a perceptual experience is perceived, but they are nevertheless (and by definition) *conscious*. Seeing a bird in a tree certainly does not amount to seeing ourselves seeing a bird in a tree; these two experiences are essentially different and cannot be reduced to one another. Nonetheless, when we see a bird in a tree, this experience lets us be aware of the particular kind of experience we are having: the bird is precisely experienced as a perceptual object – the object of an act of perception, i.e., as a perceived rather than fantasized, recalled, or mentally depicted bird. We can misidentify the object we perceive when, for instance, we mistake a sparrow for a finch; we can be wrong about the *object* that appears to us,

but we cannot be mistaken about the *way* this object appears to us, as if we were to take the thought of a sparrow for a perception. A perceptual experience is such that the object perceived is experienced *as* perceived. This is precisely what the adjective “conscious” is meant to encapsulate: an experience is conscious insofar as it lets us be aware of the peculiar relation to the object we are experiencing.

Accordingly, beside its intentional relation to an object, every conscious experience entails a form of non-intentional awareness of itself. Our intentional experience is always present to our consciousness, even though it does not appear as the transcendent object towards which our look is turned. Sartre expresses this idea by saying that consciousness is “non-positional consciousness of itself” (Sartre 1960, pp. 44–45), which means that we do not need to reflect on our experience in order for this experience to be present to our consciousness:

A 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.
(Sartre 1960, pp. 44–45)

Conscious experiences do not need to appear in order for us to be aware of them and to *know* (to be able to tell) the peculiar kind of experience we are having. The only thing that we need to be conscious of in order to be aware of our experience is the object towards which we are intentionally oriented:

Consciousness is aware of itself *insofar as it is consciousness of a transcendent object* . . . Consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence.
(Sartre 1960 p. 40: emphasis in original)²

Sartre’s outer account of self-knowledge

So far, two major consequences regarding self-knowledge can be drawn from Sartre’s account of the translucence of intentional consciousness. These two consequences can be presented, as it were, as the two sides – negative and positive – of one and the same point about the way one knows about whatever we are experiencing.

What makes our experience conscious and enables us to *know* something about it (to identify the peculiar kind of experience we are having):

- a) is not primarily our capacity to perceive this experience inwardly or of reflecting on it *a posteriori*
- b) is nothing but its intentional orientation towards a particular object.

The first consequence expresses a negative thesis concerning inner perception, while the second sets forth the primacy of the intentional

object of conscious experience. Unlike intentional objects, conscious experiences do not need to appear positively and to be seen or perceived as such in order to come to our awareness. We do not know that we are having a perceptual experience of a bird in a tree by turning our look inwards and describing what we see: the *way* the bird appears to us is enough to make us aware of the experience we are having and to let us know that we are perceiving a bird and not fantasizing a unicorn, or whatever.³ What makes an experience conscious is nothing but its intentional orientation towards an object that Sartre describes as *transcendent*, since it is posited by consciousness as something different to itself. In the quote mentioned above, one should emphasize that consciousness is aware of itself *only* “insofar as it is consciousness of a transcendent object” (Sartre 1960, p. 40). Prior to and independently of our ability to reflect on our conscious experiences or to perceive them inwardly, our knowledge about our experiences relies primordially on the identification of the intentional object we are oriented towards when “living” in a peculiar act of consciousness.

Consequently, Sartre’s claim about the translucence of conscious experiences leads him to develop an outer account of self-knowledge, by which I mean a conception of our ability to know something about our conscious experiences that does not need to presuppose a substantial theory of the faculty which allows us to turn our look inwards in order to access our inner states. Far from entailing some inner knowledge of our internal states, the kind of transparency that self-knowledge requires is grounded on the intentional relation to a transcendent object that gives conscious experience its meaning. Our own experiences are transparent to us in that we do not need to reflect on them to know what we experience; we know it simply by looking “through” them directly to their objects. In that respect, Sartre’s account of the translucence of consciousness can be understood as a way to apply to the description of intentional experiences the analysis of the structure of belief provided by Gareth Evans in a famous passage of *The Varieties of Reference*. Evans writes:

[I]n making a self-ascription of belief, one’s eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward – upon the world. If someone asks me “Do you think there is going to be a third world war?,” I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question “Will there be a third world war?”

(Evans 1982, p. 225)

Evans’ claim about the “transparency” of belief is very similar to what Husserl and Sartre have in mind when they describe the intentional structure of conscious phenomena: nothing but the way the world appears to us might tell us about the kind of experiences we have. To experience something, to be conscious of something, is to “live” within an intentional

relation to the world or to any object so that the experiencing subject and all the subjective elements of this experience are completely absorbed in this relation.⁴ Sartre describes, for example, the way we become absorbed in the contemplation of a landscape, captivated by the story we are reading or fascinated by the movie we are watching: "While I was reading, there was consciousness *of* the book, *of* the heroes of the novel, but the *I* was not inhabiting this consciousness" (Sartre 1960, pp. 46–47). The same conclusions that Evans draws about beliefs apply to conscious phenomena, if we follow Husserl's and Sartre's analysis of intentionality: the only aspect of conscious experiences that is relevant for phenomenological description is the object in its particular mode of manifestation, while the so-called mental objects or psychic events that occur whenever something is experienced are strictly irrelevant.⁵

Sartre's version of the transparency thesis

Accordingly, Sartre's version of the transparency thesis can be summarized as follows: the description of a conscious phenomenon is always reducible to the description of the way its intentional object appears. The intentional structure of consciousness dissolves the egological features of conscious experience. Subjectivity vanishes as it is absorbed within the manifestation of the object. Take, for instance, the following statement:

(S1) I loathe Peter

This statement (S1) is supposed to express my feelings towards a specific object, namely Peter. (S1) looks like a statement that says something about myself rather than Peter: it provides an account of the way I feel and does not seem to disclose any information about Peter as such. (S1) describes nothing but my subjective attitude or disposition, so that the object towards which this attitude is oriented is not primarily and directly intended by the expression of my feelings. Peter is only *indirectly* or *obliquely* the object of (S1), which is primordially a statement about myself. This is the reason why (S1) is typically understood as a statement expressing the most common kind of self-knowledge, providing some information about our mental states that no one but us can have direct access to. (S1) sounds more personal than most beliefs, since beliefs, opinions, and knowledge can be shared and do not have this strictly private and subjective character that feelings seem to have. My feeling of hatred towards Peter seems to be much more significant and revealing, with respect to the kind of person I am, than my belief that it is going to rain tomorrow, which relies on the weather report and is shared by all those who read the same forecast and trusted it as well.

Yet, Sartre's interpretation of intentionality and his conception of the translucence of conscious experience urge us to reverse this analysis

and come to the exact opposite conclusion. Far from revealing a strictly subjective aspect of one's conscious experience, (S1) is reducible to a statement (S2) that does not require the first-person pronoun and does not make any mention of the egological dimension of consciousness. (S1) can be paraphrased as follows:

(S2) Peter is loathsome

Of course, the validity of (S2) does not follow from the validity of (S1), and there are countless cases where (S2) is false although (S1) is true. My loathing of Peter does not make Peter loathsome, and Sartre certainly does not advocate so unreasonable a theory. However, Sartre holds that:

- a) (S2) is always true *for me* when (S1) is true
- b) (S2) does not appear as *true for me*, but simply as *true*

I would not loathe Peter if he did not appear to me that loathsome. In other words, I do not hate Peter because of the way I feel, but because of the way he appears to me. Sartre draws an intimate correlation between the two categories of statements to which (S1) and (S2) belong: our way of feeling about something always relates to how this thing towards which our conscious experience is directed appears to us. Now, the way Peter appears is nothing as far as I am concerned but the way he *is*. To me, being loathsome is not only the way Peter *looks*, but rather the way he *is*.⁷ In virtue of consciousness' translucence, the intentional object towards which our conscious experience is directed does not need to appear as its intentional correlate. The hatred is so deeply embedded in Peter's way of appearing to me whenever I think of him or see him that my feeling of hatred cannot appear to me as something that qualifies *me*, but rather as something that qualifies *him*.

The impersonality of consciousness

The description of the experience that (S1) and (S2) try to encapsulate in two diametrically opposed ways is therefore much more subtle and problematic than the so-called immediate expression of our feelings could let us assume. The interpretation of (S1) as a statement expressing our knowledge of our own feelings provides a very poor, partial, and misleading analysis of the phenomenon at issue, focusing exclusively on an aspect of conscious experiences that is inessential and "superfluous" (Sartre 1960, p. 49) to their description. I will call the category of statements to which (S1) belongs 'Egological descriptions' (ED), whereas the second kind of statements (S2) can be called 'Impersonal descriptions' (ID). Like (S1), all statements that look like they express a kind of self-knowledge allegedly grounded on our ability to enjoy some kind of direct and immediate access to ourselves (ED) can be paraphrased as statements of the second kind (ID), in which the first-person pronoun does not appear and which do not refer at all to the Ego.

Sartre does not claim that the Ego bears no relevance to the description of our experience whatsoever; he only wants to show that this kind of description does not need to presuppose the Ego as the *source* of the conscious experiences described and to make it the direct (as opposed to *oblique*) object of the kind of knowledge that such descriptions provide. Sartre denies that feelings and other subjective traits of one's experience must be counted as properties that need to be ascribed to an Ego. If we stick to the phenomenological description of conscious experience, we need to admit, according to him, that mental states are "not given as having formerly been in the *me*" (Sartre 1960, p. 77), but as features of the way the world manifests itself to someone. Our feelings are revealed to us within the appearance of the object towards which the intentional experience is directed, as shown in the example analyzed by Sartre:

I pity Peter, and I go to his assistance. For my consciousness only one thing exists at that moment: Peter-having-to-be-helped. This quality of "having-to-be-helped" lies in Peter.

(Sartre 1960, p. 56)

In this example, it is nothing but the way Peter appears to me that manifests what I take wrongly for an *inner* feeling of pity that qualifies me as compassionate. Far from expressing an immediate relation to myself upon which self-knowledge could be grounded, the experiencing of my feeling is nothing but an experiencing of the objective traits of the world:

There is no me: I am in the presence of Peter's suffering just as I am in the presence of the color of this inkstand; there is an objective world of things and of actions, done or to be done, and the actions come to adhere as qualities to the things which call for them.

(Sartre 1960, p. 56)

Consequently, if all conscious phenomena can be described without using the mark of the first person, then we must come to the conclusion that consciousness is impersonal and that its spontaneity does not need to be grounded on an Ego of any kind (Sartre 1960, p. 98: "transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity"). The Ego, Sartre writes, "has no *raison d'être*" and is "superfluous" (Sartre 1960, p. 40).

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I. There is consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken, etc., and non-positional consciousness of consciousness. In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects; it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousnesses; it is they which present themselves with values, with attractive and repellent qualities – but me, I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself. There

is no place for me on this level. And this is not a matter of chance, due to a momentary lapse of attention, but happens because of the very structure of consciousness.

(Sartre 1960, p. 49)^s

The coming back of the Ego through reflection

Egological descriptions of one's experience like (S1) are therefore misleading insofar as they misinterpret and overestimate the role of the Ego by positing it as the source of consciousness. Statements of this kind are less dangerous because of what they say than because of what they conceal. The use of the first-person pronoun in such descriptions is not only useless, but, as Sartre puts it, "a hindrance" (Sartre 1960, p. 49). Indeed, egological descriptions conceal to consciousness its own translucence and reverse covertly the order between consciousness and its objects: (S1) looks like the immediate expression of some feelings that are ascribed to one's I whereas the self-ascription of such states of mind is the result of a reflective process through which the I has been in fact constituted and posited as the source of consciousness. "Reflection," Sartre writes, "intends a relation which traverses time backwards and which gives the *me* as the source of the state" (Sartre 1960, p. 77). Then, coming back to the example of my compassionate feelings towards Peter's suffering, "it is no longer Peter who attracts me, it is my helpful consciousness which appears to me as having to be perpetuated" (Sartre 1960, p. 58). The so-called immediate self-knowledge that ED are supposed to express is in fact to be understood as a retroactive and mediated form of reflection that makes the Ego its direct and primary object, while the intentional object of the conscious experience is only considered the oblique and secondary object of the description. The Ego is nothing but the transcendent object of an act through which consciousness conceals its own spontaneity by positing the Ego as its origins:

The ego is an object apprehended, but also an object constituted by reflective knowledge . . . Consciousness constitutes it in a direction contrary to that actually taken by the production: really, consciousnesses are first; through these are constituted states; and then, through the latter, the ego is constituted. But, as the order is reversed by a consciousness which imprisons itself in the world in order to flee from itself, consciousnesses are given as emanating from states, and states as produced by the ego. It follows that consciousness projects its own spontaneity into the ego-object in order to confer on the ego the creative power which is absolutely necessary to it.

(Sartre 1960, pp. 80-81, translation modified)

This reflective operation that reverses the relation between consciousness and the Ego is implicitly at work in the moral understanding of consciousness and underlies the feeling of guilt. I feel guilty when I take myself to be the

origin and the cause not only of the actions I accomplish, but also of the thoughts, feelings, or desires that I experience. The I is always suspected to be the secret source of the conscious feelings one experiences, and should be made responsible for them for that reason. The theory of the self-love developed by French moralists like La Rochefoucauld pushes this reasoning to an extreme point, making the reference to oneself the essential structure of all moral emotions, even the most selfless and altruistic ones (Sartre 1960, p. 54). However, such analysis of the self is only made possible through reflection's reversal of the relation between consciousness and the Ego, preventing one from recognizing the impersonal structure and absolute spontaneity of consciousness. Therefore, that which one takes generally for the height of lucidity (for instance, the ability to discern self-love behind so-called moral feelings) in fact brings self-knowledge to the highest degree of confusion and opacity.

The opacity of the Ego and the impossibility of self-knowledge

Not only does reflection reverse the intentional relation between consciousness and the Ego, it also conceals itself in such a way as to make ED look like the most obvious and immediate form of description of one's experience. By concealing its true nature, reflection prevents access to the unreflected level of conscious experience and introduces inevitably some opacity within consciousness.⁹ Indeed, in opposition to consciousness' translucence, the Ego "is opaque like an object" (Sartre 1960, p. 78). Insofar as it has been posited by reflection, the Ego is primarily the intentional *object* (rather than the *subject*) of a peculiar act of consciousness that constitutes it (Sartre 1960, p. 80), an object that consciousness "*posits and grasps . . . in the same act*" (Sartre 1960, p. 41). Being the intentional object towards which reflective consciousness is oriented, the Ego is as transcendent and empirical an object as any other thing given in our experience of the world. The Ego, Sartre writes, "is outside, *in the world*. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another" (Sartre 1960, p. 31).¹⁰ Therefore, far from being "a translucent quality of consciousness" (Sartre 1960, p. 41), the Ego is a transcendent object projected within consciousness as its "inhabitant" (Sartre 1960, p. 41), bringing with itself the opacity and the "indistinctness" (Sartre 1960, p. 85) that characterize the objects of perception. The Ego can be said to be "opaque" not only because of its ontological status as a transcendent object, but also (and maybe mostly) because it prevents consciousness from acknowledging its impersonal spontaneity. Reflection prevents us from seeing *further* than our Ego and lets impersonal consciousness "flee from itself" (Sartre 1960, p. 81).

Accordingly, Sartre's analysis of intentionality reveals the existence of a paradoxical relationship between translucence and opacity. The intentional translucence of conscious experience lets consciousness become fascinated by its own creation, introducing within itself the opacity of the object it constituted:

Everything happens, therefore, as if consciousness constituted the ego as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself before this ego which it has constituted, absorbing itself in the ego as if to make the ego its guardian and its law.

(Sartre 1960, p. 101)

This reciprocity between translucence and opacity ruins the very possibility of self-knowledge. In virtue of its intentional structure, consciousness conceals from itself its true nature and confines itself to a "false representation of itself." Instead of letting us be aware of our impersonal spontaneity, the translucence of consciousness misleads our knowledge of ourselves by orienting us towards the wrong direction and making us focus on the Ego as the ultimate object that self-knowledge is about. This is why the notion of an ego is so profoundly "irrational," according to Sartre; it results from the paradoxical movement of a consciousness that introduces a contradiction within itself and becomes opaque to itself as consciousness posits its object as the source of its translucence (Sartre 1960, p. 81):

Everything happens as though the ego were *of* consciousness, with only this particular and essential difference: that the ego is opaque to consciousness.

(Sartre 1960, p. 85)

As a matter of consequence, the Ego is *both* transcendent and "given as intimate" (Sartre 1960, p. 85), which makes self-knowledge strictly impossible. Being a transcendent object, the ego to which the first-person pronoun refers in ED belongs as much to the world and to the outer experience as any other "ego." Therefore, we cannot pretend to have a privileged access to our own Ego that would provide self-knowledge a specific kind of certainty: "my 'I' is *no more certain for consciousness than the 'I' of other men*" (Sartre 1960, p. 104 : emphasis in original). Knowing oneself should require the very same methods used in the case of objective knowledge: observation, approximation, anticipation, and experience. However, the intimacy that the Ego claims makes these methods inapplicable and irrelevant for self-knowledge.

These procedures, which may be perfectly suited to any *non-intimate* transcendent, are not suitable here, because of the very intimacy of the *me*. It is too much present for one to succeed in taking a truly external

viewpoint on it. If we step back for vantage, the *me* accompanies us in this withdrawal. It is infinitely near, and I cannot circle around it.

(Sartre 1960, p. 86)

Instead of opening the way for self-knowledge, the so-called intimacy of the Ego prevents it and makes it illusory. "It would be useless," Sartre writes, "to address directly to the me, and try to benefit from its intimacy in order to know it" (Sartre 1960, pp. 86–87). Therefore, there is no ground upon which self-knowledge could be safely built: relying on the intimacy of the Ego in order to guarantee direct and immediate access to oneself is no less illusory than attempting to know oneself as a transcendent and non-intimate object. "Really to know oneself is inevitably to take toward oneself the point of view of others, that is to say, a point of view which is necessarily false" (Sartre 1960, p. 87). Both first- and third-person access to oneself are strictly unable to provide some solid grounds to self-knowledge. Those who identify with their transcendent Ego in order to ascribe to themselves some states of mind or psychological traits necessarily miss out on themselves.

Therefore, in spite of consciousness' transparency to itself, self-knowledge is necessarily a failure (in the best case) or an illusion (in the worst). Instead of providing us with some kind of privilege that only the "I" would enjoy, the translucence of consciousness, along with the discrete complicity of reflection, bars the way to our knowledge of ourselves. Sartre's analysis of consciousness keeps separated two theses that seem to be logically related and that are usually considered mutually dependent: although Sartre claims that we enjoy some privileged first-personal *access* to our own conscious states (thanks to the translucence of consciousness), he nevertheless stresses that we do not have indisputable *authority* in ascribing some mental states to ourselves, since we know ourselves through the very same procedures that we use to know other's egos. The kind of self-awareness that characterizes conscious states and makes them transparent is not likely to secure first-person authority in self-knowledge.

The conclusion must be drawn that nothing, even pure reflection, can provide sufficient grounds upon which the legitimacy of self-knowledge could be founded. It is true that Sartre holds in the second part of *Transcendence of the Ego* that a "pure" and "merely descriptive" form of reflection allows us to access our conscious experience without operating the fatal reversal of the relations between the Ego and consciousness¹¹ (Sartre 1960, pp. 64–65). Sartre stresses that pure reflection is capable of revealing consciousness' absolute spontaneity and impersonal structure, as it "disarms the unreflected consciousness by granting its instantaneousness" (Sartre 1960, pp. 65, 101–102). However, pure reflection is of no help to self-knowledge, since its ability to disclose the unreflected spontaneity of consciousness prevents us from ascribing any kind of mental state to ourselves whatsoever, making any *positive* knowledge of ourselves illusory. Pure reflection can only lead to a strictly *negative* outcome: by putting forward the impersonal structure

of consciousness, such reflection makes us aware of our absolute lack of determination as a result of the radical and “monstrous” spontaneity of our consciousness (Sartre 1960, pp. 99–100¹²). Claiming some substantial and positive knowledge of ourselves would make us in “bad faith,” in the sense established by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. “Bad faith” is described by Sartre as the “inauthentic mode of being” that characterizes our attempt to identify to our transcendent Ego, letting consciousness imprison itself into a “false representation” of itself (Sartre 1960, p. 101; 1993, p. 59). We might manage to know what we are not, but never what we are, insofar as we are not what we are and are what we are not (Sartre 1993, p. 58¹³).

Self-knowledge and self-concealment: a Cavellian account

The quest for self-knowledge is therefore a *necessary* failure, both because such a quest is necessarily to fail, and because it is nevertheless unavoidable and bound to happen. At the very moment pure reflection discloses the impersonal spontaneity of one’s consciousness, it seals the impossibility of self-knowledge and reveals its vanity. Self-knowledge seems to be both necessary and impossible; it remains an ideal, but an impracticable one. Knowing oneself is impossible if self-knowledge consists in ascribing certain experiences or psychological traits to an Ego that has been constituted through the very process that makes it the object of this quest. Then, self-knowledge is no less a way of *concealing* oneself than a way of *revealing* oneself, just as the fog both reveal and conceal the Palace of Westminster in Monet’s painting. Unknown and by definition inaccessible, the self is bound to remain similar to a pebble at the bottom of the water – something that can be looked at but always in the distance, through murky and opaque waters, something that is seen, though never grasped, by a necessarily unhappy consciousness.

Such an analysis leaves very little hope concerning self-knowledge and seems to make the quest for this particular kind of knowledge pointless and absurd. In the final section of this paper, I would like to sketch an approach to the opacity of self-knowledge that does not need to draw such desperate and dramatic conclusions from the acknowledgment of the close relationship between self-knowledge and self-concealment. Self-knowledge is impossible only as long as we consider that it is jeopardized and threatened by consciousness’ inevitable (since grounded on its intentional structure) tendency to conceal itself and to flee away from itself. Sartre draws on such a conception of self-knowledge when he claims that knowing oneself amounts to taking toward oneself “a point of view which is necessarily false,” namely “the point of view of others” (Sartre 1960, p. 87). By positing the self as an object, reflective consciousness conceals its true nature and turns the quest for self-knowledge into a form of self-deception.

Even if I could see myself clearly and distinctly as an object, what I should see would not be the adequate representation of what I am in

myself and for myself . . . , but the apprehension of my being-outside-myself, for the Other; that is, the objective apprehension of my being-other, which is radically different from my being-for-myself, and which does not refer to myself at all.

(Sartre 1943, pp. 312–313; 1993, p. 273)

Understanding the third-person perspective on oneself as a “necessarily false” point of view presupposes that *another* kind of access to oneself should provide the truly authentic form of self-knowledge. Sartre occasionally betrays this aspect of his thought, for instance when he writes that “each of us exists in interiority and . . . a knowledge valid for interiority can be effected only in interiority” (Sartre 1943, p. 273; 1993, p. 234).

Sartre’s approach to self-knowledge relies on the idea that a true knowledge of oneself requires the overcoming of consciousness’ predisposition to conceal and “absorb” itself in a transcendent ego. Yet, this claim seems quite counter-intuitive if we distance ourselves a little bit from Sartre’s analysis. If intentional consciousness is *by nature* involved in a self-concealing process through which it “hypnotises itself before this ego which it has constituted,” it seems that this self-concealment is part of ourselves; it defines ourselves at least as much as, and maybe more intimately than, any other character that we could ascribe to ourselves. Should we not consider that self-concealment is precisely that which makes us the kind of person we are, rather than something that would characterize our existence as inauthentic? Coming back to Sartre’s analysis of bad faith, it seems to me that the many so-called “inauthentic” roles we play all throughout our life (like the café waiter performing perfectly the expectations of any café waiter and identifying himself to his social function) disclose us to ourselves, precisely because we cannot be but actively engaged in this self-concealing process.

In a beautiful analysis of the function of the third- and first-person narrator in literature, Stanley Cavell provides a particularly interesting account of the relation between the act of concealment and the use of the first-person pronoun. In a novel, the third-person narrator does not participate in the story and is not involved in any way in the actions that he describes. The characteristic feature of the third-person narrator is both to be deprived of self-reference and to occupy a position that does not allow him to conceal anything. Cavell establishes a strong link between those two aspects of this narrative form: the logical space in which third-person narration takes place does not allow any space for any kind of concealment. The third-person narrator cannot lie, and the reader is expected to grant him absolute credibility.

The third-person narrator, being deprived of self-reference, cannot conceal himself; that is to say, he has no self, and therefore nothing to conceal.

(Cavell 2002, p. 336)

Cavell's insightful remark, as I understand it, attempts to wipe out a certain picture of the self that entails precisely the kind of presupposition upon which Sartre's conception of self-knowledge relies. There is a logical relation, according to Cavell, between having a self and having something to conceal. As the third-person narrator of a novel, one would not have a self at all out of this concealment process. The third-person narrator is deprived of self-reference because of his inability somehow to take part in the story he narrates; he "cannot make anything happen."

However, this is not the case in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Edgar pretends to interrupt the action to relate his father's death. Cavell stresses that Edgar's first-person narration of the events of the play is not an *interruption* but an *extension* of the action; it does not introduce a break in the play. Unlike the omniscient third-person narrator of a novel, Edgar is still on stage and within the play. Then, as he relates the death of his father, narrating "is what he is doing, that has become what is now happening." This is precisely why, as Cavell notices, Edgar "remains concealed to himself throughout his revelations" (Cavell 2002, p. 336).

The existence of the self and the possibility of concealment are strictly coextensive. As Cavell puts it, "the man who has the word 'I' at his disposal has the quickest device for concealing himself" (Cavell 2002, p. 336). If self-concealment is not a contingent episode of one's existence but a fundamental aspect of what "having a self" means to us, then, rather than jeopardizing the possibility of self-knowledge and making it a vain pursuit, it gives meaning to such a quest and makes it legitimate. Therefore, self-knowledge must be understood as a way of dealing with one's concealment rather than an attempt to overcome it.

Notes

1 Sartre (1936, p. 35; 1960, p. 51): "by saying I we affirm far more than we know".

2 For an in-depth analysis of the issues that these formulations raise, see Daniel Rodriguez-Navas' article in this volume.

3 This point is made clear by Husserl's theory of adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) that Sartre knew and mentions in a different context in *Transcendence of the Ego*; see Husserl's *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology*, sections 41 to 44 (Husserl 1983, pp. 86-98; Sartre 1960, p. 49).

4 "If we simply 'live' in the act in question, become absorbed, for example in the perceptual 'taking in' of some event happening before us, in some play of fancy, in reading a story, in carrying out a mathematical proof, etc., the ego as relational centre of our performances becomes quite elusive" (Husserl 1984b, p. 217). For an analysis of the relationship between Sartre and Husserl's conceptions of intentionality, see my article: "Me, Myself and I: Sartre and Husserl on Elusiveness of the Self", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 46-51, 2013. A broader study of Sartre's criticism of Husserl can be found in Stephen Priest (2000).

- 5 The source of such critique of the “mental” or “immanent” objects can be found in Husserl’s fifth Logical Investigation, section 11 (2001).
- 6 For reasons of convenience, I will call the category of statements to which (S1) belongs “egological descriptions” (hereafter ED), whereas the second kind of statements (S2) will be called “impersonal descriptions” (ID).
- 7 Peter’s way of appearing to me is a “phenomenon” in the sense “in which ‘to be’ and ‘to appear’ are one,” according to Sartre’s definition of this notion (Sartre 1960, p. 42).
- 8 Sartre follows here the conception Husserl advocates in his Logical Investigations, before abandoning it for a transcendental egology: “If we simply ‘live’ in the act in question, become absorbed, for example in the perceptual ‘taking in’ of some event happening before us, in some play of fancy, in reading a story, in carrying out a mathematical proof, etc., the ego as relational centre of our performances becomes quite elusive” (Husserl 1984b, p. 217).
- 9 Reflection “congeals” consciousness, it “darkens” it: “Consciousness is then no longer a spontaneity; it bears within itself the germ of opaqueness” (Sartre 1960, pp. 41–42).
- 10 Again, Sartre stays here very close to the analysis of the Logical Investigations, where Husserl writes: “We perceive the ego just as we perceive an external thing” (Husserl 1984b, pp. 204, 210).
- 11 On this particular question, see Raoul Moati’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 20).
- 12 “Consciousness is frightened by its own spontaneity because it senses this spontaneity as beyond freedom.” See Sartre’s analysis of the case of the bride who did not want to be left alone in the same page.
- 13 “We have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is.”

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