

Sartre, Kant, and the spontaneity of mind

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Abstract

I argue that Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* draws on Kant's theory of spontaneity to articulate its metaphysical account of consciousness's mode of being, to defend its phenomenological description of the intentional structure of self-consciousness, and to diagnose the errors that motivate views of consciousness qua person or substance. In addition to highlighting an overlooked dimension of Sartre's early relation to Kant, this interpretation offers a fresh account of how Sartre's argument for the primacy of pre-personal consciousness works, and brings the extent of his proximity to idealist models of mind into greater relief. It also affords Sartre the resources to respond to criticisms that his account of self-consciousness relies on a spurious distinction and that his view of freedom cannot explain how consciousness is conditioned by its world.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Transcendence of the Ego challenges two highly influential and enduring theses in the philosophy of mind: the post-Cartesian view that consciousness is akin to a substance (person, ego, or I) that persists through time; and the post-Kantian view that the subject's synthesizing activity is a sufficient condition for the unity of conscious experience. Sartre's arguments against these theses pave the way for his ground-breaking claim that consciousness just is intentionality, or, the sheer activity of directing mind and body to objects of thought, perception, belief, or imagination.

As commentators have shown, despite challenging some of its central tenets, Sartre's early view of consciousness also develops classical transcendental arguments in new directions (Baiaxu 2016; Baiaxu, 2020, 42–49; Darnell, 2005; de Coorebyter, 2000, 187; Gardner, 2010; Longuenesse, 2017, 45–48, 92–93; cf. Morris, 2016;

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Webber, 2010, 2018). It is often noted that Sartre builds his theory of consciousness around the transcendental imagination (Flajoliet, 2008, 74; Flynn, 2016, 63–64). While Sartre's interest in the imagination is well-documented, it grows out of earlier research into what *Transcendence* identifies as a more basic characteristic of mind: spontaneity. Fundamentally, “transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity” (TE 127/98).

I argue that *Transcendence* draws on Kant's theory of spontaneity to articulate its metaphysical account of consciousness's most basic mode of being, to defend its phenomenological description of the intentional structure of self-consciousness, and to diagnose the philosophical errors that motivate a fallacious (for Sartre) view of consciousness qua person or substance. To date, commentators have stressed Bergson's and Heidegger's influence on Sartre's view of spontaneity, but the degree to which he also draws on and transforms Kant's account has yet to be fully appreciated (Flajoliet, 2008, 165–66).¹

After briefly reviewing Kant's transcendental unity of apperception thesis (Section 2), I turn to Sartre's argument for the primacy of pre-personal self-consciousness (Section 3). While its central results challenge Kant's claims that the ‘I think’ grounds the possibility and unity of experience (Section 4), I show that Sartre profits from other tenets of Kant's theory of mind (Sections 5 and 6). To describe consciousness's sui generis mode of existence qua intentionality, Sartre repurposes Kant's view that spontaneity is an absolute and irreducible capacity for intentional self-determination; and to support his arguments for the primacy of pre-personal self-awareness, Sartre deploys a Paralogisms-style argument that limits self-consciousness to an indeterminate intuition of intentional activity.

In addition to clarifying the structure and stakes of an argument that sets the agenda for later research in phenomenology, this interpretation affords Sartre the resources to respond to criticisms that he conflates self-consciousness with consciousness of self, and that his view of freedom cannot explain how consciousness is conditioned by its world (Section 7). More significantly, by demonstrating that Sartre's accounts of consciousness's nonobjectual character and status as a nonsubstantial absolute rehearse a strategy for the formulation of first principles developed by Fichte and Schelling, it brings Sartre's proximity to idealist models of mind into fuller relief. Read in this light, *Transcendence* does not inaugurate a break with idealism *tout court*, but instead redraws its boundaries, pairing the phenomenological apparatus of intentional analysis with select idealist insights. This suggests the possibility of an alternative reading of Sartre's relation to idealism.

2 | KANT AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL UNITY OF APPERCEPTION

Sartre explicitly positions *Transcendence* as a critical reply to Kant's claim that “The I think must be able to accompany all my representations” (B131; TE 93/32).² This is a succinct statement of Kant's doctrine of the transcendental unity of apperception, a notoriously complex thesis.³ Given the aims of this paper, I will treat the transcendental unity of apperception as a view about the nature of and preconditions for conscious experience.

According to Kant, experience is made up of representations, or determinate ways that objects appear to the mind or senses (A30/B45, A370). Everything we experience appears to us in some specific way. Consider a perceptual experience, like encountering your friend on the street. As a figure gradually comes into view, and as you encounter more representations of the object, you discern increasingly familiar characteristics. Piecing some distinctive properties together, you grasp that the figure before you is your friend.

While perceiving your friend, you could also engage in higher-order reflective acts, and inquire into the content of your experience, its qualitative character, and its form. You might wonder about the origins of its form and qualitative character. When posing these kinds of questions, you become explicitly aware of an implicit condition of perceptual experience: that you are its subject.

This is why Kant claims that the “I think” must be *able* to accompany representations. It is always possible to reflect on experience, even if typically avoid doing so. But if we are in fact its subjects, it is always possible for us to become conscious of (in Kant's terms: to apperceive) the fact that we are. For Kant, this observation has wide-ranging implications. Three prove particularly important for understanding Sartre's theory of consciousness.

First, Kant maintains that there is a single, identical subject of experience (A350). Successive representations of objects refer to a unique subject, who is their proper bearer (B132). The I of the “I think” is a singular individual.

Second, both the subject and the content of experience exhibit a necessary unity (B133). The distinct representations of our friend (e.g., of her height, hair color, characteristic gestures, tone of voice, etc.) are united into a coherent whole, at the object and subject level. Subject and object unity is accomplished by the transcendental subject: “I unite them in one self-consciousness, or at least can unite them in it” (B134).

Third, the unity of experience is a product of synthesis, specifically, a form of “combination” (B134–35). The representations that acquaint us with our friend are not already out there in the world. Although the manifold enjoys a basic level of unity, the subject ultimately unites intuitions through perception and judgment. Synthesis, then, is necessary for experience in the full sense. The “synthetic unity of thinking,” Kant says, just “is the understanding itself” (B133–34n; B130).

For Kant, then, the stream of conscious life and its distinct moments are integrated and belong to one subject. The unity of consciousness is explained by the unity of subjectivity and its synthesizing activity, or, by the “transcendental unity of apperception,” which “forms out of all possible appearances, which can stand alongside one another in one experience, a connection of all these representations according to laws” (A108).

3 | SARTRE'S ARGUMENT FOR PRE-PERSONAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Sartre concedes a fundamental feature of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception thesis: that consciousness qua activity must be present throughout the entirety of conscious life. While he challenges the view that consciousness alone secures the unity of experience through synthesis, he repurposes other Kantian claims to support his arguments for its pre-personal and nonsubstantial status. Since these moves are intertwined, let us review *Transcendence's* basic argument for pre-personal self-consciousness.⁴

Imagine that you are reading a novel (TE 100–101/46; Sartre, 2003a, 150). As the story unfolds, you trace and reconstruct its development, study the novel's characters, and anticipate its possible outcomes. Engrossed in reading, you navigate diverse kinds of meaningful content under distinct guises. You recall an earlier event in the novel, imagine alternatives, and feel the hair on your neck stand up when the story takes a dark turn.

Who is the subject reading? Unquestionably, you are. Upon closer phenomenological analysis, Sartre argues, indexicals like “I” or “you” do not refer to a persisting thing, substance, or object. Unlike a novel's plot or its characters, the agent reading never appears in experience. Nevertheless, while reading, we know exactly what we are doing. If interrupted and asked, we would seamlessly reply: I was reading.

For Sartre, these data reveal something fundamental about consciousness. To grasp his point, we need to introduce some terminology. Following Husserl, Sartre accepts that “consciousness is defined by intentionality” (TE 96/38). Intentionality is an aboutness relation between a subject and an object. Conscious mental states are directed to, intend, or are about some object.

For Husserl, consciousness intends objects through acts of mind (Husserl, 2012, V §10, 96). Intentional acts are varied: subjects can think, perceive, doubt, or imagine the same object. In either case, experience is minimally characterized by a subject's active directedness, in some determinate way, towards meaningful intentional content.

Husserl also argues that intentional objects are given (or appear) to the mind under some determinate guise (Husserl, 2012, VI §17, 228). Necessarily, there is some specific way it is like to imagine, perceive, doubt, or think about a particular object. How we intend an object depends on the kind of object we intend. In phenomenological terms, every object enjoys a distinctive kind of intuitive evidence: it appears under a specific guise, and we engage it according to its mode(s) of appearance.

Like Husserl, Sartre maintains that the intentional structure of consciousness is phenomenology's most “essential principle” (TE 100/44).⁵ Sartre accepts that consciousness is fundamentally active, and that objects' qualities or properties “act on” us “like a force,” shaping how we intend them (105/56).

Using these tenets, Sartre argues that “the very structure of consciousness” demonstrates that everyday experience is pre-personal or I-less (102/49). The agent reading is never itself given as an object: “there is no *I* on the unreflected level,” that is, prior to thinking about our reading of the book. While reading, “The *I* is not given as a concrete moment, a perishable structure of my actual consciousness” (102/50). No “apodictic” or “adequate” evidence ever yields an appearance that corresponds to an *I*, person, or thinking substance (103/51).

While it is intentional, pre-reflective self-awareness is nonpositional: we do not actively affirm ourselves as the subjects of experience. Nevertheless, we are aware that we are intentionally engaged.⁶ This mode of self-consciousness never appears in the form of an explicit inference.⁷ On Sartre's view, “consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself” (TE 100/45). As Zahavi (2010) argues, Sartre defends a form of self-awareness immanent to object-directed activity. This consists in a ground-level awareness that we are engaged in some form of intentional activity, *as* we are so engaged. Consider, for example, the implicit awareness of your position in space while playing sports, walking, driving, speaking with others, or writing a paper in the library. The fact that you occupy some location never moves to the foreground of conscious life. Still, your ability to seamlessly perform these activities, and in a way fitting to the context (not too closely, loudly, quickly, or slowly), implies awareness of yourself in space concomitant with awareness of what lies around you. Something similar applies to self-awareness through peripheral vision.

Here one might pose two interrelated questions. First: if Sartre is right, what exactly do we intend when we claim that we are aware of ourselves? Second: assuming that we have pre-reflective self-consciousness, from where does our sense of self derive? Consider the latter question first.

For Sartre, the self (ego or *I*) is a product of reflection.⁸ Like pre-reflective consciousness, reflective consciousness is intentional: it takes the subject of experience as its object. The self we retrospectively identify as the subject of experience is constituted in reflection: “Consciousness produces itself facing the *I* and goes toward it” (TE 124/92–3). The *I* is a higher-order object, generated by a new (reflective) intentional stance. While reading, we never had cause to appeal to this second, explicit conception of selfhood. This self is indeed an intended object in the proper sense: hence, it too “gives itself [*se donne*] as transcendent” (99/52). It is not something we possess or are identifiable with. Pre-reflective self-consciousness qua awareness of intentional activity is irreducible to any personal conception of selfhood.⁹

In sum, for Sartre, to understand what consciousness is, look to what it does. Consciousness intends objects. In the first “unreflected” degree (98/41), it is “pre-personal” or I-less (96/36). Our explicit sense of self, sometimes described as a thing, bundle, or person, is retrospectively projected into pre-reflective experience. It is a constituted object, but not a constituting subject; consciousness comes first, and the ego comes second (118–19/80–81). Pre-reflective self-awareness, accordingly, obtains without explicit awareness of an *I*: “unreflected consciousness must be considered autonomous” (106/58).

4 | TRANSCENDENCE'S CRITIQUE OF TRANSCENDENTAL THOUGHT

According to Sartre, arguments for the primacy of pre-personal consciousness put significant stress on some core tenets of the classical transcendental model of mind:

...the *I* can evidently be only an *expression* (rather than a condition) of this incommunicability and inwardness of consciousness. [...] the phenomenological conception of consciousness renders the unifying and individualizing role of the *I* totally useless. It is consciousness, on the contrary, which makes possible the unity and the personality of my *I*. The transcendental *I*, therefore, has no *raison d'être*. (TE 97/39–40)

This text first targets the core Kantian and Husserlian thesis that consciousness's synthesizing or “unifying” activity secures the unity of experience. In Sartre's view, this assumption motivates a second thesis: that consciousness

enjoys the metaphysical status of an individual (person, thing, or substance) (TE 93–96/32–5). Crucially, while Kant adopts the first thesis, his critique of the second paves the way for Sartre's own proposal.

4.1 | The limits of synthesis

Recall that for Kant, the unity of intuited objects derives from the subject's synthesizing activity. The synthetic unity of consciousness, in turn, grounds the unity of experience. For Sartre to mount a legitimate challenge to transcendental models of mind, he must offer some positive account of how the unity of experience obtains.

Sartre's account of the unity of experience in *Transcendence* emphasizes its object-oriented character: "it is in the object that consciousness finds its unity" (TE 97/38). Consistent with Husserl's account of evidence, he holds that subjective intentional acts are oriented by intended objects. Objects' intended structure normatively guides our attempt to grasp and think them. As the reading case shows, the coherence and meaning of pre-reflective experience is not chiefly produced by acts of combining or identifying, as Kant proposes. It is formed within consciousness's active engagement towards intentional objects. In this case, as in others, phenomenological description turns up no evidence to support the view that a prior condition of unity must obtain before intentional activity connects subjects with objects.

The unity of experience, for Sartre, is akin to that of a melody:

If we take a melody, for example, it is useless to presuppose an X which would serve as a support for the different notes. The unity here comes from the absolute indissolubility of the elements which cannot be conceived as separated, save by abstraction. The subject of the predicate here will be the concrete totality, and the predicate will be a quality abstractly separated from the totality, a quality which has its full meaning only if one connects it again to the totality. (114–15/73–4)

A melody's unity is immanent or internal to it. Its parts (or notes) make sense in light of the movement as a whole, but not otherwise. Similarly, on Sartre's account, the unity of experience is formed organically, within the flow of conscious life. It is not produced or assembled from the outside; rather, it individuates itself, and includes subject and object within it.

Accordingly, the failure to appreciate that experience in its totality is itself a unified whole, Sartre contends, motivates an appeal to a view of consciousness as an "abstract" pole "whose mission is only to unify" from a distance, that is, to judge or synthesize discreet bits of sensory input into a coherent whole (115/74). This picture masks the more fundamental origin of the unity of experience, one coextensive with intentionality.¹⁰

This is not to deny, of course, that synthesis on Sartre's view plays an important role in intentional activity, which his partial adoption of Husserl's account of the retentive-protentive structure of time-consciousness demonstrates: "consciousness unifies itself concretely by a play of 'transversal' intentionalities that are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses" (TE 97/39; Webber, 2018, 288–89; cf. de Coorebyter, 2000, 193–99). While temporal synthesis "perpetually" permeates all aspects of conscious life, however, it too is underwritten by a more fundamental species of activity that Sartre thinks pervades intentionality as such (see Section 6 for a related argument) (TE 127/98–99). Temporal synthesis and spontaneity are necessarily co-present, but temporal synthesis does not itself drive consciousness's intentional activity, even if, as *Being and Nothingness* observes, "spontaneity cannot be without temporalizing itself" (EN 183–84). Rather, instances of spontaneous activity are translated into a tripartite temporal structure.¹¹

Even if one suspects that Sartre's account of unity in *Transcendence* leaves something to be desired, or that it remains incomplete until supplemented by arguments that explicitly rely on some conception of (nontemporal) synthesis, the key observation for our purposes is that his early conception of pre-reflective activity continues to inform later formulations of the unity of experience.¹² In addition to occupying a prominent place in its account of temporality, *Being and Nothingness* notes that the active projects that organize our world are a result of synthetic activity (EN 550), describes the self as a "synthesis of multiplicity" (113) and the For-Itself as a kind of "synthetic connection" (665), and analyzes choice and action in terms of "prelogical synthesis" (615). Nevertheless, Sartre observes

that synthesis rests on negating activity (666), which he defines as a spontaneous “act” (58–59, 19, 25, 30). Synthesis presupposes a “spontaneous determination of our being” that is coextensive with the essence of consciousness itself (103). For pre-reflective consciousness just is a “spontaneous projection of self towards its possibilities” (516). Sartre's latter approach to the unity of consciousness, then, allows us to pose a further question about where the negating and synthesizing activity of the For-Itself derives, or, in *Transcendence's* terms, about what we must presuppose when attributing a capacity for “poetic production” or “creation” to consciousness (TE 116/77). As I suggest in Section 6, consciousness's formation of intentions, unification of past, present, and future, and creation of possibilities all depend on its spontaneous power for self-determination.

4.2 | Spontaneity without substantiality

Sartre's second criticism is linked to his first, and concerns a question left unanswered above: if we are conscious of a self in pre-reflective experience, what exactly are we conscious of?

According to Sartre, Kant's theory of the transcendental unity of apperception, and in particular, his account of the mind's synthetic activity, forces us to confront the following question: “is the *I*...made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or is it the *I* in fact which unites the representations to each other?” (TE 94/34). Put differently: do acts of consciousness constitute the *I*, or does the *I* enable consciousness's activity?¹³

As the text quoted at the beginning of this section indicates, Sartre thinks that transcendental accounts tend towards endorsing the untoward consequence that the *I* enables conscious acts much like a substance grounds its accidents. If the mind's core function is to unify experience, and if the *I* must be able to accompany all representations, then it must also persist through time. The latter requirement is easily satisfied by a substance metaphysics.¹⁴ Insofar as Husserl, like Kant, accords mind a synthetic (or constitutive) role and identifies constitutive acts as a sufficient condition for conscious experience, this challenge can also be posed to his version of transcendentalism.

While classical transcendental accounts of consciousness's activity motivate a metaphysical question about consciousness's mode of being, on this point, Sartre observes a significant difference between Kant and Husserl.¹⁵ Kant only intends to settle questions of “validity” (*droit*) and not “existence” about the mind (93/32), but Husserl explicitly takes up the latter (95/35).¹⁶ For Sartre, Husserl's decision is wholly justified. Transcendental consciousness's existence is presupposed by phenomenology's use of the method of reduction, and makes activities like reflection and description possible (95/35).¹⁷ Phenomenology depends on the possibility of these activities.

Husserl errs, however, in his positive account of consciousness's mode of existence. For Sartre, *Logical Investigations'* theory of intentional acts offers a minimalistic view of consciousness's mode of being that promises to escape traditional worries about the substantialization of the ego. *Ideas* and *Cartesian Meditations*, however, ultimately defend a “strictly personal” view of consciousness (96/37; see Husserl 2014). These texts revert “to the classical thesis of a transcendental *I*” and treat the ego as a real, enduring thing (96/37). Husserl re-introduces a “heavy and ponderable” conception of consciousness (99/42). Like Descartes, he ends up hypostatizing the ego.¹⁸ In doing so, Sartre maintains, Husserl embraces an “impure” form of reflection that posits more than what intuition justifies, and which conflicts with the spirit of his theory of evidence (110/64–65).¹⁹

To be clear, both Kant and Husserl explicitly deny that the mind is a substance. Kant's transcendental idealism hinges on the claim that the self is necessarily uncognizable, and that it is not a substance or object: “through the empty *I* as single representation nothing manifold is given” (B135).²⁰ As Beiser observes, Kant leaves the referent of the ‘*I* think’ undetermined: “While Kant holds that the ‘*I*’ of the unity of apperception is a referring expression, he simply leaves it open to what it refers, and he even admits that it could be nothing more than a series of selves whose experiences are communicated to one another” (Beiser, 2002, 161).

Needless to say, Sartre's critique of Husserl is controversial.²¹ I want to leave the question of its tenability aside and focus instead on how Sartre's critique of transcendental accounts' metaphysics of mind helps him to articulate his own position.

While Sartre accepts Kant's critique of substance metaphysics, he does not share Kant's metaphysical agnosticism about transcendental consciousness. One of *Transcendence's* core aims is to offer a positive account of consciousness's mode of being. It grounds this account on the bedrock phenomenological principle that consciousness is fundamentally an intentional agent:

The transcendental *I* is the death of consciousness. Indeed, the existence of consciousness is an absolute because consciousness is consciousness of itself. This is to say that the type of existence of consciousness is to be consciousness of itself. And consciousness is aware of itself *in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object*. All is therefore clear and lucid in consciousness: the object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence. (TE 98/40)

One central claim in this dense passage is already familiar from the reading case: all intentional activity is accompanied by a pre-reflective sense of awareness. This formulation of the claim that pre-personal self-awareness is prime, however, is deceptively simple: it marks out a distinctive characteristic of intentional activity (self-awareness) and a special kind of intentional object, one unlike any other. Self-consciousness is awareness of an *activity*, namely, intentionality. In Sartre's terms, it is "consciousness of being consciousness of [an] object," or, awareness of the very process of conscious life. The distinction between peripheral and central vision reveals an analogous form of awareness. While focusing on an object in the foreground, subjects continue to be aware of their background and surroundings. Necessarily, any specific object of our attention is situated within some larger visual field. Peripheral vision, in fact, guides central vision, insofar as it provides the necessary backdrop for more focused perceptual activity. Similarly, self-consciousness implicitly and persistently accompanies cognitive life, as an orienting ground of intentional activity.

Consciousness's basic form of activity tells us something fundamental about its mode of being, and motivates a radically new phenomenological definition of transcendental conditions:

The Transcendental Field, purified of all egological structure, recovers its primary clarity. In a sense, it is a *nothing* [un rien], since all physical, psycho-physical, and psychic objects, all truths, all values are outside it [hors de lui]; since my *me* has itself ceased to be any part of it. But this nothing is *everything* since it is *consciousness of all these objects*. (125/93)

Descriptive data reveal no trace of an ego in experience. Phenomenologically understood, transcendental consciousness cannot be a "thing" (person, ego, or object). Instead, careful attention to the structure of experience shows that consciousness grounds the possibility and unity of experience through its intentional activity, but not as a substance grounds its modes and accidents. On this basis, Sartre defines consciousness as a "*non-substantial absolute* [absolu non substantiel]" (98/42).²²

For this proposal to be plausible, Sartre must clarify how he understands the historically loaded term 'absolute.' At this point, I suggest, his argument takes an unexpected turn. Given his redefinition of the transcendental, Sartre needs a model of spontaneity—the privileged condition in his account of consciousness's being and activity—that can be articulated independently of substance (or its equivalents). To develop a radical phenomenological conception of mind, he exploits a distinction in Kant's account of the transcendental unity of apperception and appropriates core elements of Kant's conception of spontaneity. To appreciate the originality of Sartre's position, a brief review of Kant is again in order.

Before proceeding, however, it will help to pause and consider if Sartre's critique of Kant is in the end incorrect or uncharitable. As Darnell argues, among other errors, Sartre conflates the transcendental and empirical dimensions of Kant's discussion of self-consciousness, and associates Kant's bare *I* of apperception with the ego (2005, 27–31). Sartre's misunderstanding of the finer details of Kant's account of the *I* think, she contends, masks his deeper

agreement with Kant that the transcendental synthetic unity of apperception makes something like an empirical self (or ego, in Sartre's terms) possible (2005, 33), and hides the degree to which he ultimately adopts a correlate view of Kant's transcendental I of apperception (2005, 69–70).

Darnell's careful reading of Sartre's interpretation of Kant identifies significant points of agreement between the two thinkers and highlights some important limitations in Sartre's interpretation of Kant.²³ Her suggestion that Kant's view of apperception is a precursor to Sartre's account of consciousness's activity is consistent with key claims of the argument I develop above. However, Darnell's suggestion that Sartre's criticism of Kant mistakenly equates questions of validity and fact admits of a different interpretation. For Darnell, Sartre runs together two distinct questions: first, whether “the unity of our representations is realized, directly or indirectly, by the I Think—or rather...that representations of consciousness must be united and articulated such that an ‘I think’ must always be observed in their place?” (TE 95/34); and second, whether the I “that we encounter in consciousness is made possible by the synthetic unity of our representations, or instead, if it is the I that in fact unites representations to one another?” (95/34). According to Darnell, Sartre treats the two questions as if they were equivalent. While the second “clearly contains an empirical element,” the first “is not necessarily a question of fact” (2005, 30). The tension Sartre identifies is really a “false dilemma” that Kant can answer: for Kant, the synthetic unity of apperception also explains the identity of consciousness (2007, 31).

I consider Sartre's proximity to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception in more detail below. For now, note that even if one concedes that Sartre does not have a wholly adequate account “of the unification of consciousness,” and that this motivates a basic confusion about Kant, there is arguably another motivation at work in Sartre's decision to pose the two questions above (2007, 71).²⁴ In doing so, Sartre recognizes that he is departing from “Kantian orthodoxy”: the question of consciousness's existence is really his own (and Husserl's), he maintains, while that of validity is Kant's. Just before posing the two questions above, Sartre poses another: does the introduction of an I think (or something equivalent) into the analysis of consciousness change anything fundamental about consciousness's essential structure or content (TE 94–95/34)? Sartre answers in the negative. Accordingly, he cautions us against drawing the wrong kind of conclusion about the existence of the mind, which the first horn of the first dilemma, and the second horn of the second, tempts us into. Those readings of Kant's claim that the I think must be able to accompany conscious life suggest a picture on which the I exists independently from, precedes, and ultimately coordinates appearances. As I suggest in Section 6, while he charges Kant with wrongly isolating the I as the condition of transcendental consciousness, Sartre reclaims other dimensions of Kant's account of apperception.

5 | SPONTANEITY: THE KANTIAN BACKGROUND

In addition to features reviewed in Section 2, Kant's transcendental unity of apperception thesis holds that the spontaneity of consciousness makes its unity possible (B132, B157–9n).²⁵ For Kant, spontaneity is the mind's ability to “produce representations itself” (A51/B75). Spontaneity is the free and pure “determining” capacity of thinking (B158). Our ability to freely reflect on occurrent experience, to imagine, or to recollect, are all marks of spontaneity. Three features of Kant's account of spontaneity are especially relevant.

First, spontaneity enables synthesis, without being strictly identical to it (B129–30). According to Kant, “It is one and the same spontaneity that, there under the name of imagination and here under the name of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition” (B162; B151). The sheer capacity to determine oneself to think, or the primordial “act of spontaneity,” can be expressed in various forms of synthesis (B132; A125, A129). But spontaneity is not reducible to synthetic activity as such. It is a more elementary capacity to determine oneself to engage in mental activity.

Second, Kant draws on his conception of spontaneity to qualify the degree and kind of self-knowledge we enjoy. In the Paralogisms, he argues against a Cartesian conception of self-knowledge, on which self-consciousness acquaints us with a determinate thing, or a thinking substance. Instead, Kant concludes, “Self-consciousness in

general is...the representation of that which is the condition of all unity, and yet is itself unconditioned" (A402). This condition is nothing less than "determining" spontaneity, or, the "absolute unity of apperception" (A402). Whatever this condition is, it is not a person, or something like it (Ameriks, 2000, 218).

These features make representations of self-consciousness distinctive. Unlike intuitions of objects, representations of spontaneity are unrecognizable (B428).²⁶ They do not yield an object in the typical sense: the transcendental subject "is not given as an object" (A479/B507n; B422).

Nevertheless, for Kant, subjects still experience themselves as spontaneous agents. In the Transcendental Deduction, he observes the difficulty in isolating the relevant object of self-consciousness:

...how the I that I think is to differ from the I that intuits itself...and yet be identical with the latter as the same subject, how...I as intelligence and thinking subject cognize myself as an object that is thought, insofar as I am also given to myself in intuition, ... like other phenomena, not as I am for the understanding but rather as I appear to myself, ... is no more and no less difficult than how I can be an object for myself in general and indeed one of intuition and inner perceptions. (B155–56)

The subtleties of Kant's distinction between self-consciousness in transcendental apperception and in empirical apperception (or, through the awareness of inner sense) are too complex to explore here.²⁷ For our purposes, the crucial point is that Kant ties the experience of spontaneity to a form of subjective self-consciousness that minimally consists in the awareness of a free and self-determining mode of mental activity. Unlike cognitions of objects given externally to us through the senses, and unlike reflection on the content of thoughts causally motivated by those external objects (the sort of awareness that Kant reserves for inner sense), apperception is an awareness of the structure, unity, and form of thought itself (Pippin, 1997, 45). Whereas the former two cases are initiated by external causes, apperception is initiated wholly by the thinking subject itself. Hence, a realization that a series of representations are in fact unified and jointly refer to my friend, an identification of the particular causal series that makes a given representation possible, or a grasping of the specific logical relation that ties some subset of perceived properties together, are thoughts that only I can actively bring into being through transcendental apperception. Elsewhere, Kant characterizes this form of subjective self-awareness as "consciousness of what the human being does" in pure thought (Kant, 2007, 7:161). In apperception, then, I direct myself towards, and become aware of, the very structure of thought itself, and grasp that I am its subject. Since this form of self-consciousness is determined only by me and lies outside the realm of empirical causes, it can count, for Kant, as absolute. In this mode of self-consciousness, the self never appears as object.

Third, the features above lead Kant to associate self-consciousness with a special kind of existence. While we cannot cognize ourselves as spontaneous minds, the Paralogisms argue that self-consciousness yields an "indeterminate empirical intuition" (B423n). The proposition "I think" (B419), Kant maintains, just is the claim that "I exist thinking [*ich existiere denkend*]" (B420). Alternatively: "In the consciousness of myself in mere thinking I am the being itself [*bin ich das Wesen selbst*]" (B429). The spontaneity of mind acquaints us with a "perception" that is neither "appearance" nor "thing in itself." As Longuenesse observes, this form of indeterminate perception is unlike empirical perception, insofar as it cannot, unlike empirical cognition in the proper sense, be located in relation to other cognitions in time (Longuenesse, 2017, 87–89). Nonetheless, self-consciousness produces an experience of "the sensation of thinking," or of its 'what-it's-like' character (2017, 94). Since it is indeterminate, this form of existence does not correspond to a category in Kant's typical sense.²⁸

Given Kant's characterizations of this distinctive mode of existence, and his claims that representations of self-consciousness never individuate an object, it is plausible to conclude that this class of representations instead refer to an activity. The "representation" of the "original unity of apperception" only reveals to me "that I am" (B157; B429). Here, the indexical does not refer to a thinking subject of the order of the I think, but rather, a mode of existence coextensive with the very process of thinking.²⁹ Given the distinctive aims of Kant's transcendental idealism, this implication must inevitably be qualified by the observation that "it is not possible at all through this

simple self-consciousness to determine the way I exist, whether as substance or as accident” (B420). Nevertheless, in these passages, Kant allows that the mind's mode of being may be identified with a form of activity. The mind grasps objects “through itself,” or through an abiding ability to determine itself to think them (A402). Kant does not develop this point further, but his account of spontaneity leaves open the possibility that the mind is defined by a sui generis mode of existence.

6 | SARTRE ON SPONTANEITY

Despite rejecting basic presuppositions of the transcendental view of mind, Sartre transforms key elements of Kant's account of spontaneity, and deploys a Paralogisms-style argument to defend his ego-less conception of consciousness. Sartre's Kant-inspired account of spontaneity supplies a metaphysical account of what consciousness must be for it to be defined by intentionality, and an epistemic account of the kind of intentional content grasped in self-consciousness. Sartre's account of spontaneity intersects with Kant's in three key ways.

(1) Like Kant, Sartre identifies spontaneity as the most fundamental conscious act. Consider the following definition of transcendental consciousness:

transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity [*une spontanéité impersonnelle*]. It determines its existence at each instant, without our being able to conceive anything *before* it. Hence, each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo*. Not a new *arrangement* [arrangement], but a new existence. (TE 127/98–99)

This definition is consistent with arguments for consciousness's pre-personal character, and cashes out *Transcendence's* accounts of the mind's basic mode of activity in terms of a theory of spontaneity. Most immediately, like Kant, Sartre defines spontaneity as a radical capacity to determine oneself to engage in intentional acts. Every species of intentional act is an expression of the spontaneity consciousness, or, of its capacity to initiate, modify, or interrupt cognitive activity.

The suggestion that “each instant” of consciousness discloses a spontaneity that is “creation” rather than “*arrangement*” implies that spontaneity is the basic condition for any implicit or explicit ordering activity, that is, for any form of synthesis. Judgment, imagination, recollection, etc., depend on spontaneity because they presuppose a ground, which Sartre likens to “existence,” from which to begin and unfold. Spontaneity is fundamentally creative because it corresponds to an ability to initiate new intentional acts and to modify existing ones.³⁰ This latter feature of the mind, Sartre holds, can explain why consciousness “produces itself” in the guise of an ego in reflection (129/100).

As the second line in the definition above indicates, spontaneity for Sartre is the unconditioned and underivable foundation of conscious experience. That nothing can be conceived “*before*” spontaneity entails that no prior condition or activity explains spontaneity or makes it possible. Consciousness's spontaneity cannot be sought from any source other than consciousness itself: it is a “first condition and an absolute source of existence” (131/106). For this reason, like Kant, Sartre calls our basic capacity for intentional self-determination an “absolute” (TE 104/54, 98/40; A402).

In a compelling interpretation, Longuenesse has argued for a similar reading, on which spontaneity, for Sartre, enables the exercise of cognitive, perceptual, and imaginative functions. In her estimation, Sartre's account of non-thetic self-consciousness, on which there is awareness of an I that “does not reach the level of reflection,” is indebted to Kant's first *Critique* (2017, 58). She also marshals evidence demonstrating that “Sartre's ‘pre-reflective cogito’ is close to the Kantian ‘I think’..., where there is no object I that is represented as falling under the concept ‘think.’” (2017, 48). For Longuenesse, “Kant's mere (intellectual, spontaneous) self-consciousness, as the consciousness of a complex unity of synthesis..., is comparable to Sartre's non-thetic consciousness (of) self” (2017, 92).

This interpretation draws important connections between Kant and Sartre, clarifies key features of Sartre's early account of consciousness, and is a natural ally of the interpretation I defend. However, our accounts differ on a critical interpretive point, which I address below.

To better appreciate this point, first consider *Transcendence's* treatment of the will. This example highlights the fundamentality of spontaneity and shows how the features above conspire to support everyday forms of intentional activity.

Understood in its Augustinian or Cartesian senses, the will is a basic capacity for choice that is unhindered by any external or internal conditions. On this view, while we might be mistaken about whether something we desire is good or bad, for example, we can never be compelled not to desire it, if we in fact will to do so. According to Descartes, whenever we entertain a proposition put forward by the intellect, "we are moved" by the will "to affirm or deny or to pursue or avoid in such a way that we do not feel ourselves to be determined by any external force" (Descartes, 1996, 40).

For Sartre, this understanding of the will conflicts with the phenomenological evidence. Consider cases where you attempt to rid yourself of some troubling thought, or when you try to make yourself fall asleep, but fail to do so. Here, Sartre suggests, we aim to transform our mental states, but encounter residual resistance to doing so. This resistance is a mark of a deeper condition, which gives rise both to our occurrent attitude and to the attitude we aim to adopt. In these cases, the will is "maintained and preserved by that consciousness radically opposed to the one it wants to give rise to" (TE 128/99). No bad thought, and no realization that you will need to wake up early next morning, is sufficient to compel you to effect a change of attitude. While the will might range over states, feelings, or objects, it "never turns back against consciousness": it can never take hold of or constrain the condition on which it depends (128/99). Rather, the will is "an object that constitutes itself for and by this spontaneity" (128/100). While the will plays a fundamental role in intention-formation, desire, and action, the spontaneity of consciousness ultimately explains the will's practical success or failure.³¹ As in perception or imagination, the mind's ability to determine itself to take up or reject some attitude (or, in the case above, to adopt simultaneously conflicting attitudes) is the explanatory bedrock of conscious life.³²

(2) Unlike Kant, Sartre argues that it is possible to positively describe the mind's *sui generis* mode of existence qua spontaneity. To do so, however, he draws a distinction between consciousness of an I and awareness of thinking activity. This distinction, recall, is central to Kant's account of the transcendental unity of apperception (B155).³³

Sartre's arguments for the possibility of nonobjectual self-awareness, he maintains, show that "The certain content [*Le contenu certain*] of the pseudo-'Cogito' is not 'I have consciousness of this chair,' but 'There is [il y a] consciousness of this chair'" (TE 104/53–4). The difference is subtle but significant. Both statements invoke a kind of existence. The first identifies it with the I, or with a metaphysically individuable entity. The second predicates existence of consciousness simpliciter. It marries existence with intentional activity as such, without tying it to any additional underlying or enabling ground. This distinction is phenomenologically substantiated by the presence of a distinctive kind of intuitive evidence in the latter case: here consciousness appears as pure directedness to objects. The "law" of its "existence," recall, just is intentionality (98/40).

If spontaneity provides an account of consciousness's activity, then according to Sartre, it also offers an account of what consciousness is, or, a metaphysics of mind. The "phenomenological description of spontaneity" excludes the possibility that consciousness is a passive entity (128/100). Taking the results of Sections 3 and 4 into account, this suggests that consciousness is instead a self-determining entity that comes to know the world through its activity. In accordance with the definition quoted at the beginning of this section, this implies that consciousness is essentially spontaneous.

As this suggests, Sartre endorses the view that an "I am" follows from a phenomenological analysis of consciousness, provided it is indexed only to intentional activity (B157; B429). On Longuenesse's interpretation, however, Sartre goes even further, and also adopts Kant's view that the "'I think' is the very expression of the act of thinking" (2017, 48). Sartre clearly accepts Kant's claim that no object corresponds to the proposition 'I think'; but the suggestion that this proposition, in his view, also captures consciousness's proper mode of being fails to make sense of the distinction above and its role in Sartre's overall argument.

After making his case for pre-personal self-awareness, Sartre observes that “the consciousness that says ‘I think’ is precisely not the one that thinks” (TE 100/45). The evidence of pure thinking activity is unlike that given by explicit affirmations of the proposition ‘I think.’ Reflection on ourselves as intentionally engaged agents yields no determinate object, but only an ongoing process. For Sartre, this analysis entails that consciousness’s spontaneity is underivable from the ‘I think’: for “the I that appears on the horizon of the ‘I think’ is not given [*ne se donne*] as the producer of conscious spontaneity” (124/91).³⁴ While this conclusion arguably departs from (some of) the Kantian letter, for Sartre, propositional awareness of thinking is a higher order translation of a more fundamental form of mental activity. Accordingly, the proposition ‘I think’ could never capture what is most distinctive about consciousness, for it necessarily ties thinking activity to a subsisting I.³⁵

Nevertheless, Kant’s distinction between object awareness and intuition of activity is of critical importance (B155). Sartre uses it to show that self-consciousness acquaints us with a form of existence coextensive with activity. He does not employ Kant’s other formulation, “I exist thinking,” to make this point (B420). Still, to develop his own phenomenological account of (self-) consciousness’s mode of being qua spontaneity, Sartre takes up Kant’s suggestion about the availability of an alternative analysis of self-consciousness, one grounded on the intuition of thinking activity; develops Kant’s claim that there is an inextricable connection between sheer presence to self (or thinking) and existence; and pushes the Paralogisms’s claim that the mind’s *sui generis* mode of existence can be intuited or perceived (Kant’s chosen term) one step further. This resolves the epistemic question that arises from Sartre’s analysis of self-consciousness, which we encountered in Section 3, namely, that of the distinctive kind of content encountered in self-consciousness.

(3) What is more, Sartre also deploys a Paralogisms-style argument to support his minimalist view of consciousness.

When confronted with the data of the reading example, Sartre counsels us to resist the temptation to invoke an ego as the condition for the possibility of reading activity. While transcendental approaches rightly see spontaneity as fundamental to consciousness, any inference to the existence of “the ego [as] the spontaneous, transcendent unification of our states and our actions” is fallacious (TE 116/76). This inference, Sartre maintains, conflates the ground of experience with one of its consequences:

consciousness projects its own spontaneity into the ego-object in order to confer on it the creative power that is absolutely necessary to consciousness. But this spontaneity, *represented* and *hypostatized* in an object, becomes a degraded and bastard spontaneity, which magically conserves its creative power even while becoming passive. Whence the profound irrationality of the concept of an ego. (118–19/81)

This text solves the puzzle of the ego’s origin: the ego is produced by a spontaneous act issuing from consciousness. Consciousness’s spontaneity allows it to (creatively) reify itself, or, to transform itself into an object. The ego, then, is an objectual representation of activity.

In addition to confirming that spontaneity underlies the mind’s powers of creation and imagination, this text also tells us something new about why Sartre thinks that transcendental accounts (especially Husserl’s) are liable to go wrong: in addition to misdescribing the structure of experience by defining consciousness chiefly in terms of its synthesizing functions, they also threaten to objectify consciousness. In self-consciousness, we encounter a mode of existence—intentionality—that resists objectification. The content of this experience, or the appearance of subjectivity as such, is only given as an activity: “purely and simply consciousness of being conscious” (98/40). Any attempt to define consciousness by appeal to objectual categories commits a category mistake: object-like (or “passive”) representations of spontaneity distort its essence (118/80; see also B429). If we look for spontaneity in the ego, we will fail to find it (127/98).

On this point, Sartre’s proximity to Kant is clear. In the Paralogisms, Kant calls the “illusion of taking the unity in the synthesis of thoughts for a perceived unity in the subject...the subreption of hypostatized consciousness

(*apperceptionis substantiate*)” (A402). Similarly, after offering a positive account of consciousness's mode of being qua activity, Sartre contends that synthesis offers no evidence of substance, and characterizes the error of invoking an underlying substance as its condition of possibility as a form of hypostatization (TE 118–19/81). Sartre's phenomenological argument against the possibility of encountering an ego (or something like it) in self-consciousness explicitly develops what he describes as a Kantian distinction between fact and validity. Sartre supports his own account of the intentional structure of self-consciousness by deploying Kant's argument against the validity of inferences to the existence of a unified subject behind appearances. *Transcendence* thereby articulates a phenomenological version of Kant's claim that “I cannot cognize as an object itself that which I must presuppose in order to cognize an object at all” (A402).

7 | CONCLUSION

Despite criticizing their reliance on a coordinating I, Sartre recognizes that Kant's accounts of apperception and spontaneity are of central importance for any phenomenological theory of consciousness. Kant leaves open the possibility that spontaneity is more radical than synthesis and likens self-consciousness to an intuition of extra-objective, self-determining spontaneous activity. Sartre exploits the first possibility, which helps him substantiate the crucial distinction between consciousness as object and as activity. He also uses a conception of spontaneity proximate to Kant's to explain the possibility and limits of self-knowledge. In Sartre's hands, spontaneity becomes the absolute enabling condition of mental activity. While other dimensions of Sartre's relation to Kant have been acknowledged, his proximity to Kant's conception of spontaneity, and his use of a Paralogisms-style argument to support his case for pre-personal self-consciousness, have yet to be sufficiently acknowledged. Given its distinctive resources, Kant's account of spontaneity should enjoy a more prominent place among the precursors to Sartre's view. To conclude, I want to explore some implications that follow from these results.

(1) This interpretation helps Sartre respond to two criticisms directed against his account of consciousness.

First, according to Renaudie, Sartre's claim that self-consciousness is possible without consciousness of a self relies on a spurious distinction. For Renaudie, Sartre's

distinction between self-consciousness and object-consciousness appears to be suspicious: one cannot see why we should speak of self-consciousness rather than mere consciousness, if the former does not add any significant determination to the latter (if it does not say anything more than the latter), and if “self” is not supposed to refer to anything within this expression. So we must conclude that the self is as superfluous as was the “transcendental I” in Kant's *Critique of pure reason*. (2013, 106).

If Sartre's distinction is untenable, then he must either accept that self-consciousness is simply consciousness of a self, that is, of something determinate or real; this defeats his claim that consciousness is not akin to a persisting substance, ego, or I. Alternatively, he must concede that his view of consciousness is vacuous and fails to pick out anything distinctive. If Renaudie is right, then Sartre's account of consciousness is nothing less than incoherent.

Properly understood, Sartre's interpretation of spontaneity defuses this worry. Renaudie's charge overlooks the possibility that self-consciousness, while intentional, is not a standard instance of object-consciousness. As we saw, on Sartre's view, pre-reflective self-consciousness is a distinct mode of intentional presence. Any form of directedness to transcendent objects implies the concomitant possibility of an awareness that a subject is so directed. For Sartre, the latter form of awareness grasps the very process of intentionality itself, as it is immediately present to consciousness. Unlike its externally-oriented, object-directed, imaginative or perceptual guises, consciousness of spontaneity is consciousness of an activity. In addition to bringing its other qualitative features to light, maintaining the activity/object distinction guards against falling prey to a version of what Sartre calls the “illusion of immanence”

in phenomenological analyses of self-consciousness: namely, the view that its distinctive kind of intentional content must also exist separately from its immediate pre-reflective presence (I 20, 173). Here, the term 'self' ultimately refers to an activity, not a thing: accordingly, its mode of appearance cannot be projected onto or identified with other objects' modes of appearance. But its nonobjectual character does not annul its status as a distinct form of consciousness.

Second, Sartre's early account of consciousness helps him counter Merleau-Ponty's charge that his theory of freedom, which is directly informed by his account of spontaneity, cannot account for the degree to which human action is motivated and constrained by the world.

In addition to identifying consciousness as an absolute condition, Sartre maintains that it "can be limited only by itself" (TE 97/39). *Being and Nothingness* develops this thesis and describes freedom as an absolute power of choice that reflects our capacity for spontaneous self-determination (EN 495, 516). According to Merleau-Ponty, by identifying freedom with an unlimited internal capacity for choice and intention-formation, Sartre's theory fails to explain a fundamental feature of embodied action: the degree to which action is motivated and limited by the conditions of an agent's immediate environment or "situation" (2005, 502–505). By suggesting that all worldly limits fall within the purview of consciousness's spontaneous projects, Sartre is forced to conclude that everything is up to us, or, that freedom encounters no genuine limits. In addition to flirting with an extreme form of subjectivism, this suggestion also appears to conflict with the basic data of everyday experience.

Paired with his account of intentionality, Sartre's view of spontaneity furnishes a possible reply to this criticism. Claims about consciousness's absolute, self-limiting, or spontaneous qualities are *transcendental*: they make descriptive and metaphysical points about the nature of subjectivity (TE 127/98). Transcendentally understood, consciousness is no object or mere bit of nature. Its spontaneity lends it a distinct status and implies that it cannot be limited in the way that empirical objects can.

These transcendental features do not, however, imply that consciousness does as it pleases. Among other reasons, Sartre's theory of intentionality shows why.³⁶ Transcendental spontaneity only pertains to one half of the intentional relation. Recall, however, that subjects are always oriented by intuitive evidence. *How* we respond to worldly input is up to us; but we do not get to choose *what* that worldly input is. The exercise of spontaneous agency is necessarily tied to some determinate object, and to a surrounding world (EN 530–31). At the empirical level, subjects encounter definite factual limits that constrain the scope of their intentional activity. In Kantian spirit, Sartre's ontological view of freedom secures consciousness' transcendental status, or its freedom from brute causal determination, without compromising its directedness to a world that it cannot contain.³⁷

Relatedly, one might wonder about the implications of Sartre's account of intersubjectivity for the view of spontaneity developed above. As Sartre argues, the presence of others establishes a clear limit to consciousness's freedom, and hence, to the exercise of its spontaneity. Even here, however, elements of Sartre's theory of spontaneity are of significant explanatory value. For Sartre, a key condition for the possibility of intersubjective experience rests on one subject's willingness to engage with another: my recognition of the other's "existence" is an "act" that I perform (EN 467). Accordingly, an (other-directed) exercise of spontaneity is a key condition for the possibility of intersubjective experience. Importantly, other subjects do not meet the criterion of an "external cause," i.e., something on the order of the in-itself, which can be determined or surmounted (66). For the limitation we encounter in intersubjectivity is experienced as a recognition of a "spontaneity identical to my own," that is, as one exercise of freedom limiting another (325). This feature, among others, helps to explain the uniqueness of the constraints that social life exercises on us. It also demonstrates that Sartre draws on basic tenets of his theory of spontaneity to explain the experience of the "we."

(2) The replies above are available provided Sartre's proximity to idealist models of mind is sufficiently appreciated. Doubtless, Sartre's own (mis)representation of his position has led some commentators to conclude that he harbours a "hostility to all forms of idealism, including Kant's" (Herbert, 2016, 53; cf. Breazeale, 2003, 176). However, as Frank has convincingly demonstrated, Sartre's "non-egological" view of self-consciousness finds historical precedent in an idealist tradition that includes, among others, Novalis, Schleiermacher, the early and middle

Brentano, and the early Husserl (Frank, 1991, 508–9). The theory of mind developed by these thinkers is far from the subjective variety of idealism that Sartre rejects (EN 16, 18).

A look at recent literature shows that, in addition to Kant, a strong case can be made for Sartre's proximity to Fichte (Breazeale, 2003, 179; Gardner, 2010; Waibel, 2015) and Schelling (Frank, 2004; Gardner, 2006). Most accounts of the Sartre-Fichte-Schelling nexus focus on practical themes, especially freedom.³⁸ Sartre's conception of spontaneity proves decisive for these comparative readings. However, I want to suggest that it also offers another lens through which to view Sartre's relation to post-Kantian idealism.

Much like Kant's groundbreaking discovery of the synthetic a priori, Husserl's "profound...discovery" of consciousness's intentional structure bequeaths its philosophical successors the challenge of identifying its underlying conditions of possibility.³⁹ Seen in the interpretive light above, *Transcendence* rehearses a phenomenological version of a key task occupying the philosophical agenda after the publication of Kant's first *Critique*: that of articulating the absolute or underivable first principle that grounds conscious experience.

On Sartre's understanding, only consciousness's spontaneity is worthy of "absolute," unconditioned status (TE 131/106):

This transcendental sphere is a sphere of *absolute* existence [*existence absolue*], [...] a sphere of pure spontaneities which are never objects and which determine their own existence. (126/96)

To formulate a phenomenological version of the absolute, Sartre radicalizes Husserl's account of the intentional structure of consciousness and identifies spontaneity as its enabling ground. In doing so, he charts a strategy reminiscent of Fichte's and Schelling's attempts to resolve what they saw as the impasses of Kant's first *Critique*. Like Fichte, Sartre maintains that the condition for the possibility of directedness to objects arises out of the spontaneous unity of consciousness.⁴⁰ In his formulation of first principles, however, Sartre is arguably more Schellingian. Unlike Fichte, Schelling denies that we can cognitively grasp spontaneity, or, that the certainty of self-consciousness can rise to the level of discursive knowledge (1993, 23–34). Synthesis is a precondition for knowledge; but the structure of self-consciousness reveals a noncognitive "identity" between "presenter and presented," rather than a synthesis between two distinct entities (1993, 24). In self-consciousness, "*being and presentation are in the most perfect identity.*"

Like Schelling, Sartre's arguments for the derivative role of synthesis also lead him to a principle that he thinks is more fundamental than Kant's "I think." Likewise, Sartre transforms Kant's account of transcendental apperception into an existential claim about consciousness's self-determining mode of being: for both thinkers, the "I am" is more basic than the "I think."⁴¹ And like Schelling, Sartre argues that the condition for the possibility of all other cognitive or intentional acts is altogether beyond the subject-object distinction: "we maintain that there is no subject-object distinction in this consciousness" (Sartre, 2003a, 150; cf. Schelling, 1993, 24).⁴²

Of course, these similarities do not, in and of themselves, demonstrate that Sartre is a covert Schellingian, or a fully committed speculative idealist.⁴³ Appreciating them, however, brings *Transcendence's* philosophical stakes into greater relief. This text aims to formulate what it sees as a new kind of foundational principle, which promises to overcome old impasses between reductive realism and subjective idealism. In idealist spirit, it locates this principle in the spontaneity of self-consciousness, and in its nonsubstantial, extra-objective, and self-determining characteristics. Sartre's subsequent work is indebted to and informed by the strategy first sketched here. In *The Imaginary*, spontaneity is rebaptized "negation," and is identified as the fundamental condition of the imagination (I 351). *Being and Nothingness*, in turn, identifies consciousness's negating activity as the enabling ground of action, freedom, and responsibility (EN 59).

So understood, within 20th century French phenomenology, *Transcendence* carves out a distinctive kind of interpretive response to the challenge of formulating philosophical first principles. This strategy inherits and repurposes the radicalized re-interpretation of transcendental consciousness developed by Fichte and Schelling. Merleau-Ponty's response to the philosophical inheritance of German idealism, on the other hand, begins from a radical re-interpretation of nature, world, and of "the real," and inflects these terms with meanings and sense-making conditions typically reserved for mind

(1967, 241). This interpretive strategy more closely resembles Hegel's critique of Kant, and attempts to situate consciousness within an intelligibly ordered world.

While I cannot defend it here, locating Sartre's early work along this interpretive axis offers a fresh interpretive framework through which to read the development of post-Husserlian phenomenology in France: instead of rejecting outright the idealism(s) of their philosophical predecessors, thinkers like Sartre and Merleau-Ponty transform select idealist tenets, trimming them to suit their own philosophical aims. Their disagreements about the status of subjectivity, nature, or freedom reflect the scope and range of possible moves within an idealist philosophical space.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Herbert acknowledges the importance of spontaneity in Sartre's engagement with Kant's theory of temporality in *Being and Nothingness*, but does not explore earlier connections (2016, 52, 55).
- ² For Sartre's familiarity with Kant's three *Critiques*, see Flynn (2016, 63–64).
- ³ For relevant analysis, see Brook (1994).
- ⁴ For an excellent overview of this argument, see Hatzimoysis (2011, 23–39). For an excellent account of Sartre's later formulation of pre-reflective self-consciousness, see Jordan (2017).
- ⁵ See Sartre (1947).
- ⁶ For a later exploration of this theme, see EN (139–141).
- ⁷ See Frank (1991, 558–59).
- ⁸ For a thorough account of reflection in Sartre, see Sommerlatte (2017).
- ⁹ For Sartre, this holds even if pre-reflective experience has an essential “for-me-ness” (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2015).
- ¹⁰ Longuenesse suggests that “Sartre endorses the Kantian analysis of ‘I think’ and in particular the phrase from the Transcendental Deduction... ‘It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations’” (2017, 67n12). On this basis, she concludes that Sartre's view of self-consciousness also takes on the synthetic functions central to Kant's “I think” (2017, 92). While Sartre characterizes the ego as a complex synthetic whole, he does not describe consciousness in these terms. His critique of the classical transcendental theory of mind leads him to identify a set of unity-giving conditions that are more radical than those derivable from Kant's “I think” (TE 97/39–40). As we just saw, he maintains that the structure of experience obviates transcendental consciousness's synthesizing function. And as I will show later in this essay, when identifying consciousness's most distinctive characteristics, he observes that its mode of activity does not produce a new “arrangement,” or a product of synthesis, but mere existence (127/98–99). By extension, pre-reflective self-consciousness is not consciousness of synthesis, but of intentional directedness, a more basic form of activity. Within the reflective stance, the ego appears as the “transcendent pole of synthetic unity” (TE 108/61; 113–14/71–72). But the reflective stance falsely motivates a retrospective projection that corrupts the phenomenological data and fails to capture the essence of consciousness. *Transcendence* can also maintain this attitude to synthesis in part because, unlike Kant's first *Critique*, Sartre's theory of objects does not require that their structure or coherence derive from synthetic acts. Sartre's reliance on Husserl's theory of evidence supports this particular commitment.
- ¹¹ Merleau-Ponty's reading of spontaneity in Sartre, which suggests (against Merleau-Ponty's own view) that spontaneity is more fundamental than temporality, offers additional support for this reading (2005, 491).
- ¹² For arguments to this effect, see Darnell (2005, 68–71).

- ¹³ Darnell argues that Sartre's framing of this question runs together two separate though not incompatible commitments in Kant (2005, 30–33). I return to this point later in the essay.
- ¹⁴ A similar temptation arises from self-referring expressions like 'me' or 'mine' (TE 96/37).
- ¹⁵ Sartre will later associate Kant's and Husserl's views more closely (EN 272–73).
- ¹⁶ For more on this distinction, see Gardner (2010), who argues that *Being and Nothingness* eventually adopts a "de facto" interpretation of transcendental conditions, identifying consciousness's "mode of being...with transcendental" (2010, 68–69).
- ¹⁷ See Webber (2018, 287).
- ¹⁸ See Gurwitsch (1941, 329–30, 332).
- ¹⁹ As Richmond observes, Sartre's point here arguably "rebounds against his own thinking," since it seems to set a very high bar for pure reflection (Richmond, 2004, xii). For similar worries about Sartre's methodology, see Darnell (2005, 64).
- ²⁰ Kant denies that the I think yields knowledge of self, or a noumenal subject (B157, B423n, A278).
- ²¹ For Sartre's early critique of Husserl, see de Coorebyter (2000, 50–83, 273–76, 292–96). For a sympathetic take on Sartre's substantialization criticism against Husserl, see Priest (2000, 55–56). For a reply on Husserl's behalf, see Scanlon (1971).
- ²² See EN 23 for a later statement to this effect.
- ²³ See, for instance, her arguments that Sartre's "many" and sometimes conflicting "uses of the word 'I'" leads him to conflate "the role of the I of apperception as the source of consciousness(es) with the source of unity of consciousness" (2005, 70), and that Sartre "overlooks the true meaning of Kant's I of apperception, as well as the distinction between the analytic and synthetic unities of apperception" (2007, 67).
- ²⁴ According to Darnell, "Sartre's description of the unity of consciousness as grounded in the activity of unifying distinct consciousnesses does not itself explain the unifying quality of the activity" (2005, 68).
- ²⁵ For one account of the relation between spontaneity and apperception in Kant, see Pippin (1997, 34–40).
- ²⁶ Kant's discussion of pure practical self-knowledge, however, allows for a priori knowledge of "a spontaneity through which our actuality is determinable without the need of conditions of empirical intuition; and here we would become aware that in the consciousness of our existence something is contained a priori that can serve to determine our existence" (B430–31).
- ²⁷ For a recent interpretation, see Sethi (2021).
- ²⁸ See Pippin (1997, 35).
- ²⁹ On the possibility of finding a minimal notion of "reflexive" self-consciousness in Kant that retains links to Sartre and the Heidelberg school, see Kraus (2020, 107–08).
- ³⁰ This tenet underlies Sartre's theory of imagination and freedom in *L'imaginaire* (I 287, 291–92, 298).
- ³¹ For a later formulation of this idea, see EN (488).
- ³² Sartre's discussion of the vertigo felt by the young bride, which reveals the "monstrous" power of spontaneity, or its inability to be constrained by other attitudes, is another example along these lines (TE 128/100).
- ³³ While Flajoliet notes the centrality of the concept of (absolute) spontaneity in this period of Sartre's thought, and identifies Kant as an important precursor, his analysis focuses on freedom and on spontaneity's practical side (2008, 171). While this dimension of spontaneity is undoubtedly of interest to Sartre, he also offers a more general account of spontaneity's givenness to consciousness.
- ³⁴ Unlike Kant, Sartre would not accept a regressive inference or argument for this conclusion. For him, proof is tied to (the possibility of) intuitive evidence.
- ³⁵ Sartre's emphasis on spontaneity also suggests that his chief aim in appropriating Kant is to provide an account of the ground of consciousness's activity, rather than its unity. For a different reading, see Darnell's claims that "Sartre's transcendental field is the (conscious) act of unifying that makes consciousness one through time, and thus demands some principle of unity which is comparable to Kant's account of transcendental apperception...the Kantian 'I of apperception'" (2007, 65). On this basis, she concludes that it is possible "that the Kantian I of apperception could be added to Sartre's account of bringing about unity of consciousness, without contradicting Sartre's claim that the 'I think' is a result of unified consciousness" (2005, 70). However, in the texts considered above, Sartre steers clear of defining consciousness qua spontaneity as a unifying entity, and indicates that Kant account of the I think does not provide the right model of consciousness's unity (TE 97/39–40, 125/93). What Sartre calls the "prior unity" of consciousness is better understood as a non-personalistic capacity for spontaneous activity that persists through time (TE 96/36; cf. Darnell, 2005, 65). Hence, even if *Transcendence's* explanation of unity, which I suggested earlier emphasizes directedness towards objects,

is not itself fully adequate, it takes an important step towards a more complete account: spontaneity, according to Sartre, makes possible the kind of activity from which synthetic unity is born.

- ³⁶ For more on Sartre's understanding of freedom's limits, see Eshleman (2010, 42–45).
- ³⁷ While Merleau-Ponty targets *Being and Nothingness's* formulation of freedom, the latter takes up and develops *Transcendence's* basic insight that consciousness is ultimately defined by activity (EN 73). Accordingly, free action, like selfhood, must be understood as an active process. On such a view, freedom could never constrain the given in the way required by Merleau-Ponty's criticism: for, like consciousness, freedom remains an ongoing project, whose incompleteness and open-endedness does not cohere with a picture on which the subject can exercise complete control over the world.
- ³⁸ Following Henrich's reading, one might also draw connections with Fichte's treatment of immediacy, nonobjectivity, and his account of the relation between reflection and self-consciousness (2016, 39–40).
- ³⁹ Sartre arrives at this judgment in an early essay on Husserl, see Sartre (1947, 31).
- ⁴⁰ For Fichte's account of how objects arise out of the unity of consciousness's "self-positing," see Fichte (1982, 135/l:141 and 188/l:209).
- ⁴¹ Sartre's emphasis the activity of spontaneous self-determination, through which consciousness "determines its existence at each instant" (TE 127/98–99), recalls a line of argument from Schelling: as Nassar notes, "Like Fichte, Schelling concludes that the only possible first principle of philosophy is the 'I am.' However, while for Fichte the 'I am' is unconditioned because it is self-evidently certain, for Schelling it is unconditioned because it is absolutely self-determining, and, as such, all determination (predication) must be derived from it" (Nassar, 2014, 123).
- ⁴² Like Schelling, Sartre also develops this position in critical dialogue with Spinoza (Sartre 2003a, 136).
- ⁴³ For more on the Sartre-Schelling connection, see Gardner (2006). In Gardner's estimation, "Sartre's philosophy is as it were a partial reconstruction of Schelling's, employing different materials and not brought to completion." Sartre aims to "build a counter-ontology to Hegel's rationalism of the Concept," which leads him, like Schelling, to privilege the "pre-rational experience of freedom" (2006, 265).

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