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INTENTIONALITY:
A FUNDAMENTAL IDEA OF
HUSSERL’S PHENOMENOLOGY

Do you recognize in this description your own circumstances and your own impressions? You certainly knew that the tree was not you, that you could not make it enter your dark stomach and that knowledge could not, without dishonesty, be compared to possession. All at once consciousness is purified, it is clear as a strong wind. There is nothing in it but a movement of fleeing itself, a sliding beyond itself: If, impossible though it be, you could enter into a consciousness you would be seized by a whirlwind and thrown back outside, in the thick of the dust near the tree, for consciousness has no “inside”. It is just this being beyond itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance which makes it a consciousness.

Imagine for a moment a connected series of bursts which tear us out of ourselves, which do not even allow to an “ourselves” the leisure of composing ourselves behind them, but which instead throw us beyond them into the dry dust of the world, on to the plain earth, amidst things. Imagine us thus rejected and abandoned by our own nature in an indifferent, hostile, and restive world – you will then grasp the profound meaning of the discovery which Husserl expresses in his famous phrase. “All consciousness is consciousness of something”. No more is it necessary to dispose of the effeminate philosophy of immanence, where everything happens by compromise, by protoplasmic transformations, by a tepid cellular chemistry. The philosophy of transcendence throws us on to the highway, in the midst of dangers, under a dazzling light.

Being, says Heidegger, is being-in-the-world. One must understand this “being-in” as movement. To be is to fly out into the world, to spring from the nothingness of the world and of consciousness in order suddenly to burst out as consciousness-in-the-world. When consciousness tries to recoup itself, to coincide with itself once and for all, closed off all warm and cozy, it destroys itself. This necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself Husserl calls “intentionality”.

I have spoken primarily of knowledge to make myself better understood: the French philosophy that has moulded us understands little besides epistemology. But for Husserl and the phenomenologists our consciousness of things is by no means limited to knowledge of them. Knowledge, or pure “representation”, is only one of the possible forms of my consciousness of this tree; I can also love it, fear it, hate it, and this surpassing of consciousness by itself that is called “intentionality” finds itself again in fear, hatred, and love. Hating another is just a way of bursting forth toward him; it is finding oneself suddenly confronted by a stranger in whom one lives, in whom one suffers from the very first, the objective quality “hateful”.

So is it that all at once hatred, love, fear, sympathy – all these famous “subjective” reactions which were floating in the malodorous brine of the mind – are pulled out. They are merely ways of discovering the world. It is things which abruptly unveil themselves to us as hateful, sympathetic, horrible, lovable. Being dreadful is a property of this Japanese mask, an inexhaustible and irreducible property which constitutes its very nature – and not the sum of our subjective reactions to a piece of sculptured wood.

Husserl has restored to things their horror and their charm. He has restored to us the world of artists and prophets: frightening, hostile, dangerous, with its havens of mercy and love. He has cleared the way for a new treatise on the

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passions which would be inspired by this simple truth, so utterly ignored by the refined among us: if we love a woman, it is because she is lovable. We are delivered from Proust. We are likewise delivered from the "internal life"; in vain would we seek the caresses and fondlings of our intimate selves, like Amiel or like a child who kisses his own shoulder, since everything is finally outside, everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others. It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves: it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.

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Notes

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1 Translation by Joseph P. Fell of “Une Idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l’intentionnalité”, in Situations I (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). This essay first appeared in Nouvelle Revue Française, LII, January 1939. [Tr.] We are indebted to Editions Gallimard, to whom the copyright belongs, for permission to print this translation.


2

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE EGO

For most philosophers the ego is an “inhabitant” of consciousness. Some affirm its formal presence at the heart of Erlebnisse, as an empty principle of unification. Others – psychologists for the most part – claim to discover its material presence, as the center of desires and acts, in each moment of our psychic life. We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially in consciousness: it is outside, in the world. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another.

i The I and the me

A. The theory of the formal presence of the I

It must be conceded to Kant that “the I Think must be able to accompany all our representations.” But need we then conclude that an I in fact inhabits all our states of consciousness and actually effects the supreme synthesis of our experience? This inference would appear to distort the Kantian view. The Critical problem being one of validity, Kant says nothing concerning the actual existence of the I Think. On the contrary, he seems to have seen perfectly well that there are moments of consciousness without the I, for he says “must be able to accompany.” The problem, indeed, is to determine the conditions for the possibility of experience. One of these conditions is that I can always regard my perception or thought as mine: nothing more. But there is in contemporary philosophy a dangerous tendency [...] which consists of making into a reality the conditions, determined by Criticism, for the possibility of experience. This is the tendency which leads certain writers to ask, for example, what “transcendental consciousness” can be. [...] For Kant, transcendental consciousness is nothing but the set of conditions which are necessary for the existence of an empirical consciousness. Consequently, to make into a reality the transcendental I, to make of it the inseparable companion of each of our “consciousnesses,” is to pass on fact, not on validity, and to take a point of view radically different from that of Kant. [...]

If we reject all the more or less forced interpretations of the I Think offered by the post-Kantians, and nevertheless wish to solve the problem of the existence in fact of the I in consciousness, we meet on our path the phenomenology of