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EGO

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The “ego” is a polysemous notion in Husserl. By it, he can mean (1) the empirical self, (2) the numerically identical self, (3) the transcendental self, or (4) “monad.” For each notion, I will provide a brief account and address its reception among some of Husserl’s successors in the phenomenological tradition. At the centre of my discussion is the following historical fact. The Husserl of the first edition of the *Logical Investigations* was avowedly Humean about the self: i.e., there is no such thing as personal identity over time. By the time of *Ideas I* (and the second edition of *Logical Investigations*), Husserl reversed his position. In the latter period, he introduced the notion of the “pure ego,” a Kantian self that remains numerically identical despite psychological changes in time.

13.1. Empirical ego

In the Fifth *Logical Investigation*, the “empirical ego” is identified with a Humean notion of consciousness. In the first edition of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl writes that consciousness is “the phenomenological ego as ‘bundle’ or nexus of psychical lived experiences” (Hua XIX, 356). In the second edition, in which the phrase “empirical ego” is explicit, Husserl offers the following slight revision: “the empirical ego [is] the nexus of psychical lived experiences in the unity of the stream of lived experiences” (Hua XIX, 356). In this sense, the empirical ego is the psychological self, consisting of a stream of ever-changing psychological states. Thus, your empirical ego is a “bundle” of whatever perceptual and cognitive experiences, along with non-intentional sensations. For example, right now, your empirical ego consists of seeing the computer screen, hearing the police helicopter hovering over your neighbourhood, thinking that it’s a nice day for a long walk, while feeling hungry and itchy. Over time, this empirical ego will change constantly as various intentional states and experiences come and go.

For a better grasp of what Husserl means by “unity” in the *Logical Investigations*, he advises consideration of the above Humean conception of consciousness in conjunction with the conception of consciousness “as inner awareness of [one’s] own psychical experiences” (Hua XIX, 356), which Husserl claims is “more primordial” and “in itself prior” to the first conception (Hua XIX, 367). In this light, consciousness is to be regarded as unified in the relevant sense by virtue of exclusive or privileged access. Intuitively, it seems to make sense that the privacy of
your consciousness is what individuates you from everyone else. Personal individuation, in other words, is a function of exclusive access. Accordingly, “unity” in the relevant sense seems to be a function of what individuates you—what distinguishes you—from everyone else.

However, there is no contradiction between Husserl’s Humean conception of consciousness and his assertion of “unity” in this sense. Not even Hume would deny that your experiences are exclusive and, therefore, de facto individualizing. Unlike Locke, what Hume recognized is that personal individuation—what makes you different from anyone else—is insufficient for personal identity, the numerical identity of the self over time.¹

Consider a pocket universe consisting solely of three particles at any given time. Let each particle be individuated from the other two by colour and location. However, let there be constant change in colour and location of any particle over time without continuity of movement. Under these two sets of constraints, there is no reason for you to think that any one of these particles is numerically identical to any earlier particle in this universe. Consequently, the constraints allow for individuation of particles at any given time, but this criterion of individuation does not suffice to establish numerical identity of any of the particles. As far as you are concerned, any change in location and colour can signify the extinction of one particle and its replacement by an entirely new particle. Just so, the fact that I can’t have access to your lived experiences does not mean that either one of us remains numerically identical over time. For the claim of personal identity, some additional argument is required.

Therefore, there is no contradiction between Husserl’s claim of the unity of consciousness and his explicit disavowal of any Kantian “pure ego” in Logical Investigations. In Logical Investigations, Husserl writes:

*I must now openly admit that I am entirely unable to find this primitive ego as the necessary centre of relations. What I am in a position to recognize, thus perceive, is solely the empirical ego and its empirical relationship to whatever its own lived experiences or external objects.*

*(Hua XIX, 374)*

The empirical ego may be unified by virtue of exclusive access, which individuates that psychological self from all other selves; but such unity does not entail that there should be an underlying, unchanging self. However, in the second edition, Husserl adds in a footnote that: “Since then I have learned to find [the pure ego]” (Hua XIX, 374).

In one popular account of the difference between Husserl and Heidegger, Husserl is regarded as some kind of “internalist” while Heidegger is portrayed as a kind of “externalist” (Dreyfus 1991; Carmen 2003). Later, in my rendition of Husserl’s notion of the self as “concrete ego” or “monad,” I will challenge this account as ultimately misleading about Husserl. However, when it comes to Husserl’s conception of the empirical ego from the period of Logical Investigations, the internalist interpretation is hard to reproach. Indeed, on the clearly psychological conception of the self in Logical Investigations, the empirical ego consists exclusively of mentalistic lived experiences.

### 13.2. Pure ego

One of the most significant differences between the early Husserl of Logical Investigations and the mature Husserl of Ideas I is that the mature Husserl accepts the Kantian idea that there is an underlying self, which is numerically identical over time—i.e., the “pure ego.” Let me start off with a gloss of Husserl’s characterization of the pure ego in §57 of Ideas I. First,
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13.2.1. The pure ego is opaque

Husserl writes:

after the performance of [the phenomenological] reduction to the flow of manifold lived experiences, nowhere will we hit upon the pure ego as a lived experience among other such experiences; nor as a proper component of any lived experience, which arises and dissipates with that lived experience of which it is a part.

(Hua III/1, 109)

In other words, the pure ego itself is not a lived experience—a thought, a perceptual episode, a feeling or the like—of which you can be aware. Nor is the pure ego an immanent or genuine feature of any particular lived experience. It does not come and go as the experiences do.

Instead,

13.2.2. The pure ego is numerically identical over time

As a matter of fact, heading 13.2.2 is an explanation of heading 13.2.1. All that is transparent to the self are its lived experiences. But if the pure ego itself were an experience or a part of an experience, which comes and goes, then over any period of time you would have as many pure egos as you have experiences. Since Husserl insists that the pure ego is “something in principle necessary and absolutely identical between all actual and possible changes of lived experiences” (Hua III/1, 109; see also Hua IV, 98, 103–105), while all that is ever transparently available to us are the constantly changing experiences, the pure ego must be opaque.

Further, since the pure ego is neither itself an experience nor a part of an experience, the pure ego is transcendent to any individual intentional act. The pure ego is not a genuine (“reell”) constituent of any individual experience. If it were then the self would come and go with whatever experience it is attached to—which would then lead to a relapse into the disavowed Humeanism of Logical Investigations. As Dan Zahavi explains: “it is necessary to distinguish the self from any single experience, as the self can preserve its identity whereas experiences arise and perish in the stream of consciousness, replacing one other in a permanent flux” (Zahavi 2005, 131).

Nevertheless, Husserl notoriously insists on what, at face value, may appear to be a paradoxical formulation:

13.2.3. The pure ego “offers itself with a peculiar—not constituted—transcendence, a transcendence in immanence” (Hua III/1, 109–110)

At this point, it is entirely fair to ask, since the pure ego is transcendent to any individual intentional episode, to what then is it “immanent”?

As even Kant himself concedes, there is a kind of analytic emptiness to the claim that the “I think must be capable of accompanying all my presentations” (Kant 1996, 177–179). For, as we saw above, the exclusiveness of first-personal access is simply insufficient for any robust claim of personal identity. Again, individuation does not imply—without circularity—numerical identity over time. Nevertheless, the unity of consciousness—from the intuitive sense that there exist some experiences that are distinctive by virtue of their being mine and no one else’s—does offer an entity to which the pure ego can be immanent. In §33 of Ideas I, Husserl suggests as much when he writes that, under the phenomenological reduction, what remains is “‘pure conscious-
ness’ with its pure ‘correlates of consciousness’ and, on the other side, its ‘pure ego’” (Hua III/1, 58; my italics). Similarly, in a research manuscript from 1921, Husserl writes of the “monad”—the later Husserl’s preferred term for “pure consciousness”—that it “steadfastly bears within itself the absolutely identical ego-pole” (Hua XIII, 43; my italics). From these passages we can infer the following: in addition to the individual lived experiences that constitute your unified consciousness, that same consciousness features a pure ego that is neither itself any of the lived experiences nor a part of any such lived experience. Thus, the pure ego is transcendent to any individual lived experience but immanent to that unified consciousness.

Although Husserl repeatedly denies any accusation of solipsism, Merleau-Ponty (1958) and Levinas (1969, 1998) both suggest some reason to believe that Husserl’s commitment to the pure ego implies commitment to an epistemological version of solipsism. On the metaphysical version of solipsism, there is in fact no one else but oneself. In general, there is no good reason to believe in metaphysical solipsism; and certainly there is no reason to believe that anything Husserl claims commits him to metaphysical solipsism. By contrast, according to epistemological solipsism, other selves may exist but one cannot know that they, in fact, do exist. In order to know that p, one must at the very least be able to think or conceive of that p. Accordingly, in order to know that some other self exists, one must be able to conceive of that other self. Let S conceive of the existence of some other self, non-S. What makes non-S an other self is that non-S possesses a unified consciousness comparable to S’s. The conception of the consciousness of some other, Husserl calls “analogue appresentation” (Hua I, 138–145; see also Hua XIII, 249). On analogue appresentation, the conception of non-S’s consciousness is simply to conceive of some consciousness from some spatio-temporal location other than one’s own. However, according to the doctrine of the pure ego, S cannot think of anything without accompaniment by that pure ego particular to S. Thus, in attempting to conceive of non-S’s consciousness, S cannot help but conceive of her own consciousness. Since S can have no access to non-S’s pure ego, and any conceivable consciousness inhabited by S’s pure ego is S’s consciousness, it is impossible for S to conceive of any other self. Since S cannot conceive of any other self, S cannot thus know that any other self exists.

A plausible reply to this objection, on behalf of Husserl, is this. There is, in general, no good reason to believe in metaphysical solipsism. So no one must think that no other self exists. Epistemological solipsism does not entail metaphysical solipsism; just because you cannot know that any other self exists does not entail that, therefore, no other self in fact does exist. Thus, even if Husserl winds up committed to epistemological solipsism, nothing keeps him from asserting the existence of other selves. In Husserl’s account, then, in perceiving the living body of non-S, S can ascribe to non-S some consciousness that is a lot like S’s. Of course, S cannot know with certainty that non-S does possess such consciousness. But there is no reason for S to think that non-S doesn’t either. Further, Levinas in particular suggests that since S cannot conceive of non-S’s consciousness, S has thus no right to ascribe to non-S any “universal” phenomenological features based solely on her own (Levinas 1969, 220–221; 1998, 110–111, 116–118). In response, the Husserlian can simply reply that, nor is there reason to think that non-S doesn’t possess such a consciousness.

Although personal individuation over time is insufficient for personal identity, if there is such a thing as a pure ego that is immanent to consciousness, then such a pure ego would suffice as an account of how anyone is individuated from anyone else over time: e.g., only you—your pure ego—can enjoy access to your consciousness. However, a notorious problem in Husserl’s account of the pure ego is that he nowhere provides an explicit argument that there should be such a thing at all. Since, in the first edition of Logical Investigations, he offers classical Humean reasons to be suspicious of the existence of any such pure ego, an argument is owed. Fortunately, we can
piece together some skeletal argument by focusing on a role that Husserl ascribes to the pure ego. According to Husserl, the pure ego is also transcendental (Hua IV, 121).

### 13.3. Transcendental ego

In at least one sense, S is “transcendental” for Husserl if S is constitutive of anything transcendent. In §97 of Ideas I, Husserl is about as clear on this point as he is anywhere; he writes:

> The designation of the phenomenological reduction and, similarly, the sphere of pure lived experiences, as “transcendental,” consists precisely therein, that we find in this reduction an absolute sphere of qualia (Stoffen) and noetic forms, to whose determinately predisposed nexus belongs—in accordance with immanent eidetic necessity—that remarkable consciousness of any determined or determinable [thing], which is given.
>
> (Hua III/1, 204)

Pure consciousness, which is the “residuum” of the phenomenological reduction, consists of some ever-changing “nexus” of lived experiences. However, pure consciousness can be considered transcendental insofar as it is consciousness of some “determined or determinable” transcendent object. Husserl continues:

> In contrast to this consciousness stands something fundamentally other, non-genuine, transcendent. And herein lies the source of the only conceivable solution to the most profound of epistemological problems, pertaining to the essence and possibility of objectively valid cognition of what is transcendent. The transcendental reduction exercises the *epoché* in view of reality. However, to that which remains left over [from the reduction] belong the noemata, with the noematic unity that lies within them, and therewith the means by which the real is given to consciousness itself.
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> (Hua III/1, 204; see also Hua III/1, 104–108, 178)

To that bundle of numerically diverse lived experiences appear, as noemata, external objects that are transcendent to any such lived experience. What is distinctive about these noemata is that they represent objective unity despite the subjective diversity of lived experiences.

Accordingly, F is *transcendent* to an intentional act if that intentional act is not exhaustive of F (Hua III/1, 68–69, 73–78, 85–87; Hua XI, 330–331). For example, you see at t₁ the front side of this table. The table, however, is not just its front side. And barring some strong version of phenomenal idealism, nor is the table just your experience of it. There are further features to that table: e.g., its backside, its inside, etc. You see at t₂ the back side of the table. If, like Brentano, you believe that intentional objects are immanent to their intentional acts—i.e., that intentional objects are “in-existent”—you must now conclude that between t₁ and t₂, you have seen two objects (Brentano 1995, 88). By contrast, Husserl insists—along with common sense—that between t₁ and t₂, you have seen just one object, that the two sides are merely two different profiles of the same object (Hua III/1, 186; Hua XIX, 386–387). The object of consciousness, in other words, is a “noematic unity.” Nevertheless, there is no denying that the experience of seeing at t₁ and the experience of seeing at t₂ may be very different from one another. So how are these two different experiences “synthesized” with one another to determine the numerical identity of the intentional object, i.e., the table? Husserl ascribes this transcendental role of
constituting the act-independent transcendence of the intentional object to the pure ego. Hence, the pure ego is also transcendental.

To the question, how can the pure ego establish the identity over time of the transcendent object despite the diversity over time of its own experiences of that object, we can infer a Kantian reply. It is because the pure ego is itself numerically identical over time that it can, so to speak, hold on to the diversity of its experiences in the same stretch of time as those of a numerically identical object. In order to constitute the numerical identity of some transcendent intentional object, you have to yourself be numerically identical over time. Or, as Henry Allison somewhat flippantly puts it in his well-known commentary on Kant's Transcendental Deduction: “the unity of consciousness is correlated with the consciousness of unity (it takes one to know one)” (Allison 1983, 139). According to this argument, then, if S can identify F as the same table over time, it is because S itself is numerically identical over time.

To this kind of Kantian argument, Sartre (1991) suggests the following objection. It is not the self that constitutes the numerical identity of any transcendent object. Instead, the “object is transcendent to the consciousnesses that grasp it, and it is in this object that the unity of the consciousnesses is found” (Sartre 1991, 38). In other words, it is because the transcendent object itself is numerically identical that the variety of diverse lived experiences about the object wind up united with one another as experiences of the same object. On this view, S can identify F as the same table despite the diversity of its experiences of F over time because F is, in fact, the same table. F’s own numerical identity is what forces S’s consciousness about F to be unified over time.

To evaluate this objection, let me return to the conceptual distinction between personal individuation and personal identity that I discussed in sections 13.1 and 13.2. As a matter of fact, Sartre is aware that numerical identity of the self over time is not necessary to establish personal individuation (Sartre 1991, 39–40). Thus, individuation does not imply identity. Nevertheless, consider the following example. S walks around table F while looking at it. In Sartre’s account, it is because F itself is numerically identical over time that F can combine S’s various experiences of it. But, while walking around F, let S have thoughts and sensations irrelevant to the visual cognition of F: e.g., during the same stretch of time, let S think about the current political situation in the Middle East while feeling sad. In this case, F surely cannot also be credited with combining the F-irrelevant thoughts and sensations. Regardless, just intuitively, the F-irrelevant thoughts and sensations are also united in S. One account simply appeals to personal individuation: what the visual experience of F, the F-irrelevant thought and sensation, all have in common with one another is that they are available only to S. But this appeal to individuation is not only rather thin but it also does not eliminate Husserl’s preferred account, which is that the three different intentional episodes are united by virtue of S’s numerical identity over time. As I pointed out in section 13.2, although not necessary, something like a pure ego would be a sufficient explanation of personal individuation.

13.4. Monad

In some of his later writings, Husserl uses the Leibnizian term “monad” for “the ego taken in full concreteness” (Hua I, 102). At face value, the Husserlian monad is largely equivalent to what, in the period of Ideas I, he meant by “pure consciousness.” In Ideas I, pure consciousness is the “phenomenological residuum” of the epoché, that about the self which survives the phenomenological reduction (Hua III/1, 59, 94). The later Husserl characterizes the monad as “the residuum of the phenomenological reduction” (Hua XIII, 52), such that he even equates...
the phenomenological attitude with the “reduction to my pure monad” (Hua XIII, 52, 262). However, on this face-value equivalence of the “monad” with “pure consciousness,” it seems we must renounce any ready internalist or strictly psychological interpretation of what the mature Husserl means by “consciousness.” For, according to the later Husserl, the monad consists not only of the pure ego and its lived experiences, but can also consist of an “environment” [Umwelt] composed by garden-variety objects, whose appearances are constrained by some subject’s psycho-physical constraints (Hua XIII, 47, 246–254, 276–277, 287–291). That this is not a new position, or a reversal of his position in Ideas I, can be gleaned from the following considerations.

First, I take for granted the standard, majority view that what Husserl in Ideas I calls “noema” is just some intentional object. In particular, I agree with John J. Drummond that, in perception, the noema is not ontologically different in kind from some garden-variety object of perception: e.g., the noema of seeing a table just is, ontologically, the table itself (Drummond 1990, 94). Nevertheless, Husserl also insists throughout Ideas I that the noema is also immanent (Hua III/1, 182, 202–205, 220–221; see also Hua XIII, 411). Now, if we keep in mind the anti-Brentanianism that I touched upon in section 13.3, if some perceptual noema is an ordinary object then that noema cannot be immanent to any intentional act. But then to what would the noema be immanent? In a remarkable parallel to Husserl’s conception of the pure ego, the best answer seems to be that, although the noema is transcendent to any particular lived experience, the noema is immanent to that personal unity of various lived experiences. That is, the noema is immanent to unified consciousness. Notice, this interpretation dovetails with Husserl’s conception of the monad: the monad partially consists of some environment, the “same numerically identical nature” that any monad shares with any other monad (Hua XIII, 267).

In this light, we are now confronted by another puzzle: namely, what must be the nature of Husserlian “consciousness” that it can consist of ordinary objects like chairs, tables and walls that make up some environment? The best answer seems to be the rejection of the sort of internalist interpretations of Husserl advanced by commentators like Dreyfus (1991) and Carmen (2003). For Husserl, consciousness cannot be some kind of purely mental or soul-like entity. Instead, by “consciousness,” it seems Husserl has in mind a kind of place in the world—literally, some location in space-time—the appearance of which is constrained by some set of psycho-physical circumstances (Hua XIII, 253–254, 291). And surely, there is nothing clearly internalist about such a conception of consciousness.

Note

1 By contrast, Locke writes: “since consciousness … [is] that [which] makes every one to be, what he calls self; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being” (Locke 1975, 335; my italics).

References

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