CHAPTER IV

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Jean-Paul Sartre, a famous French novelist and philosopher can be called as a major spokesman of modern existentialism. In his philosophy he offers a detailed analysis of human experience and in this light he tries to explain the nature of consciousness.

According to Sartre, consciousness is always consciousness of something. There is no consciousness as such. Sartre makes a basic distinction between two stages of consciousness. He starts with unreflective consciousness which is the pre-reflective cogito. Here, there is no knowledge but an implicit consciousness of being conscious of an object. As for example, I know a table or I know Peter. It is a stage of reflective consciousness. This means an authentic reflection, the act by which we reflect on our actions or on our knowledge. In reflecting consciousness, the consciousness reflected on is assumed as its object. Again in the act of reflecting we pass judgements on the consciousness reflected on. Sartre points out that in my counting process, though I am aware of my counting yet some consciousness remains unreflected here. It is the stage of pre-reflective cogito and when I become conscious about my consciousness of counting process, then that would be the stage of reflective cogito.
According to Sartre, the intentional character of consciousness must be absolute. Borrowing the term 'intentionality' from Husserl, Sartre intends to say that consciousness is always marked by intentionality. Intentionality towards an object is what we call consciousness. Imagination and emotion as modes of consciousness are intentional. Imagination which shows self’s creative freedom must refer to something although it may be unreal. As regards emotion Sartre says, "... an emotion which is part of my mental life, and a part of consciousness, means something by being directed towards some object of its own." \(^2\)

For most philosophers the ego is an "inhabitant of consciousness". Husserl in his "Ideas" speaks of a transcendental ego as living in the acts and functions of consciousness. Sartre protests against such a view of Husserl. His excellent monograph "The Transcendence of the Ego" is a critical study of Husserl’s egological theory of consciousness. Sartre thinks that by introducing the 'transcendental ego' Husserl makes the object as dependent upon the ego. Sartre feels that denial of the transcendental ego would mean the primary of the objects of consciousness. For him there is no ego, in or behind

1. Though Husserl in his turn took this term 'intentionality' from Brentano.
consciousness, rather there is an ego for consciousness. He insists that consciousness is a spontaneity, having no contents. All the ideas are the objects for consciousness but not the contents within consciousness. 3

Sartre follows Husserl's phenomenological method in a quite different sense. Husserl always puts existence in brackets whereas the purpose of the existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre is to analyse the very existence. Husserl's philosophy is one of meanings, and not of existence. Sartre applies phenomenological method to existent phenomena. For Heidegger and Sartre, "... phenomenology is merely a method, which enables them to build up an ontological system around what they judge most worthy of description and detailed examination, namely human existence." 4

Sartre, in his Introduction of "Being and Nothingness" points out, "consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself". 5 For Sartre the object is unchanging mass and pure identity. In his words, 'an ink-stand is always an ink-stand', it cannot be otherwise. So it is being-in-itself.

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But consciousness is not the pure identity of an object. It is non-being as it is always a possibility. In Sartre's opinion the universe is divided into two regions, consciousness and object which he names 'pour-soi' and 'en-soi'. "..... the For-itself is not a person, nor a substance, nor a thing; it is merely the revelation of the In-itself". Thus the function of consciousness is to reveal.

To elucidate the structure of consciousness Sartre analyses certain typical human attitudes: - interrogation, destruction and negative judgement. By examining these three notions he comes to the conclusion that the origin of all non-being is none other than the For-itself. In interrogation we ask a question which presupposes an ignorance on my part. Sartre calls this ignorance a non-being in my consciousness. The answer to the question may be either affirmative or negative. When we know a man is rich, we know him as not being poor. If the answer is negative, that implies some form of non-being. Such knowledge we can get by a process of elimination. If the answer is affirmative what we come to know is known as not being some other thing.

Non-being is present also in the notion of destruction. Destruction means change. Destruction or disorganization in the strict sense supposes some sort of organization and order. The change is possible, only when there is human consciousness viewing

7. Ibid., p. 15.
and organizing things. That means it is the human consciousness or witness that allows us to call this change as destruction. It is for human consciousness that we know when 'A' changes to 'B', it is destroyed.

In the case of negative judgement, I expect to see a book on the table but when I do not find it, I say, 'This book is not on the table'. Here again a form of non-being is introduced. Thus negative judgement implies some expectations which are not fulfilled. In this judgement 'the book is not on the table' my expectation about the presence of the book on the table is not fulfilled.

So far as we have seen interrogation, negation and destruction are the instances of non-being. Now we may ask regarding its origin. The objective world, as it is the pure being cannot be the cause of non-being. Then consciousness or the For-itself will be the origin of non-being, without it no reality can appear. The For-itself or human consciousness knows a thing by negating that which is not. As for Desean, "only what is not" is able to understand "what is". Only what is not Being-in-itself is able to understand "what is Being-in-itself". Consequently, the For-itself is not Being, "it is its own non-being".8

8. Ibid., p. 19 (author's italics)
Thus according to Sartre negation and non-being under the various forms interrogation, destruction and negative judgment supposes a form of nothingness in the heart of consciousness itself. Hence it must be explained in a positive way. 9

In the first place consciousness is impersonal. This means absence of the Ego from the cogito and Sartre sets forth his view in his first philosophical article *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), and on this point he completely differs from Husserl. According to Sartre, as we have seen, there is no ego as the unifying link of various representations. Phenomenological analysis of consciousness is defined by intentionality, that is, consciousness means consciousness of something. Even the feeling of personal identity is not the Ego, it is rather an activity of consciousness itself, by means of a concrete and real remembrances of past experiences. As against Husserl Sartre declares the non-egological conception of consciousness. Such conception has also been put forward by phenomenologists like Aron Gurwitsch. 10 Sartre thinks that Kant is concerned only with the formal presence of the 'I' and never attempts to show that this 'I' inhabits all our states of consciousness. Descartes contends that there is an identical consciousness behind each

9. Cf. Ibid., p. 27.
individual experiences. Both of them regarded cogito in the reflexive manner or in the second degree where consciousness itself is considered as an object. The ego according to Sartre is the result of the reflexive act. Sartre explains his position by saying that when I drive a car or read a book, there is usually no Ego. At the next moment I become aware of what I do, I reflect. As a result I become aware of my driving car or reading a book. Consequently I am no longer in the pre-reflective stage and say I am conscious of my reading a book, rather there is consciousness of reading a book. For Sartre, after reflection, we apprehend and constitute the ego. Thus consciousness becomes personal through reflection. "This cutting down of the Ego is an essential factor in Sartre's phenomenological approach". 11

Secondly consciousness is non-substantial. In this connection Sartre's conception of consciousness is opposed to that of Descartes; for whom consciousness is a thinking substance. Descartes chose the reflexive cogito instead of a pre-reflexive one, which is always consciousness of something. But Descartes started not from 'I think of something' but from 'I think that I think'. He identified himself as a thinking substance because for him the existence of the ego is an indubitable fact. He chose the reflexive cogito which is distant from the object and concluded that he was a 'thinking substance'. Last of all he has to introduce God to restore the real world.

But following Sartre's view we ought to start from pre-reflexive cogito, i.e., from the consciousness which is the consciousness of something. This is what is called intentionality. This is the state of considering consciousness as an object. As in this stage we should not say 'I am seeing a tree' rather 'There-is-a-consciousness-of-seeing-a-tree' he wants to empty consciousness of the ego, and consciousness thus is non-substantial. "And if for a moment we should try to give consciousness a kind of being which would belong to itself alone, we should have a form of nothingness, a pure translucidity".  

Thirdly consciousness is a lack and a desire. "This may not be understood as suggesting that some external being expels the In-itself from consciousness; it is the For-itself which posits itself as not being the In-itself".  

In fact, there are various ways in which something is not something else. An ink-stand is not a table, it is an instance of external negation. But when we say a quarter of moon is not a fullmoon, we make an internal relation which is the relation of lack. It is considered in relation to human consciousness because the human consciousness is able to realize the moon and in that respect understands the quarter as a lack. Like introducing negation human being can give rise to lack, because it is itself a lack.

12. Ibid., p. 30 (author's italics)
13. Ibid., p. 31 (author's italics)
The nature of his lack appears clearly in his consideration of desire. Consciousness lacks being and this would make it a totality. To be being is the desire of consciousness, yet it cannot be identified with the In-itself. "A Being-for-itself can never be a Being-in-itself without losing, ipse facto, its most characteristic feature of consciousness." 14

Fourthly, consciousness is haunted by values and possibilities. The desire of the For-itself to be the In-itself is its ideal, Sartre calls it value. Value reveals itself through the For-itself or human consciousness. Something becomes valuable through the desire of consciousness. According to Sartre the notion "possible" does not mean the result of our ignorance nor vanishes through the cessation of our ignorance. The full moon as a "possible" is the result of the presence of a human witness or the For-itself which may go beyond the reality of a quarter moon.15 As Sartre remarks, there is "a permanent possibility for the consciousness to break off with its own past, to tear itself away from what it is toward that which is not yet but can be." 16 This is, in essence, freedom.

Sartre rejects Husserl's egological theory of consciousness and feels that the idea of an ego inhabiting consciousness is absurd. Denying transcendental 'I' Sartre admits a 'me'. He

14. Ibid., p. 33 (author's italics)
15. Ibid., p. 34
16. Ibid., p. 96 (author's italics)
complains that by positing an 'I' behind consciousness Husserl makes it thoroughly personal. According to Sartre self or the Ego belongs to the world, it is an object of consciousness. This does not, however, mean that the ego is interpreted as material but what it means is that the ego is not a subject which directs the consciousness. In his opinion, consciousness is unified by intentionality. As Sartre says, "... consciousness is defined by intentionality. By intentionality consciousness transcends itself. It unifies itself by escaping from itself. The unity of a thousand active consciousness by which I have added, do add, and shall add two and two to make four, is the transcendent object "two and two make four".17 "The object is transcendent to the consciousness which grasps it, and it is in the object that the unity of consciousness is found."18

It can be said that a temporal unity is obtained by the objects towards which consciousness is directed. It is consciousness which unifies itself. In order to explain the fact of self-unification Sartre refers to Husserl's view in Cartesian Meditations. Husserl states that consciousness comprises all particular conscious processes. "... the whole of conscious life is unified synthetically".19 He says consciousness in its

18. Ibid., p. 38.
flow produces the unity. For example in a melody, one part refers to another.

In 'Being and Nothingness' Sartre's analysis of temporality retains the basic character of consciousness as that which is temporal, self-developing and self-unifying. "As an aspect of the for-itself's being, time is a synthetic unity and, consequently, more than the mere addition of past, present, and future." Consciousness must be a perpetual synthesis of past consciousness and present consciousness. Hence Sartre thinks that it is not necessary for conscious experiences to be unified by substantial ego. For consciousness itself produces the idea of the ego.

According to Sartre individuality of consciousness follows from the nature of consciousness. Consciousness has an inwardness and incommunicability. It constitutes a synthetic as well as an individual totality and also is distinguished from other totalities of the same type. He adds that "... the phenomenological conception of consciousness renders the unifying and individualising role of the 'I' totally useless. It is consciousness, on the contrary which makes possible the unity and the personality of my I."


Regarding the nature of consciousness Sartre would say that it is translucent, all is clear and lucid in it. Consciousness being self-revealing is conscious of itself. It is aware of itself in so far as it is conscious of an object. It is pure existence without essence. Sartre calls this consciousness in the first degree or unreflected consciousness; for it, to be is to appear. But in the second degree the unreflected consciousness becomes reflected. The ego is given here through reflected consciousness. The ego is grasped through reflection as an object, transcendent to consciousness.

Sartre seeks to oppose the popular view according to which the ego is responsible for the psychic states, love, hate etc., and these determine our consciousness. As opposed to the popular view Sartre holds that consciousness determines these various psychic states and constitutes the ego. For Sartre the ego has two aspects, the 'I' and the 'me'. Sartre remarks, "the I is the ego as the unity of actions. The 'me' is the ego as the unity of states and qualities".22 Sartre thinks the distinction between the two is functional but not grammatical. According to him consciousness or experiences of different objects get organised and constitutes the feeling of I at a later stage. For him, "The transcendental I is the death of consciousness".23

22. Ibid., p. 60 (author's italics)
23. Ibid., p. 40 (author's italics)
From the above analysis it is clear that Sartre wants to give a negative theory of consciousness and now we have to examine it. Sartre at first makes an attempt to establish this negative character through a study of interrogation. When we ask a question we are surely unaware of that thing. But when we ask 'Is he here?' this question pre-supposes that we know that there is a person referred to here as he. It is not the negative state of mind because the questioning attitude is quite different from the attitude expressed in 'I do not know'. Here something is is known, but we want to know something new or test our old knowledge. Destruction for Sartre is also a state of negation, but it is negation to the witnessing consciousness. There may be the case when previous state of a thing is destroyed and replaced by some new state but no one has witnessed it. Surely it will be the case of destruction. The destruction or the change takes place before the appearance of human consciousness but from this it should not be maintained that human consciousness is the origin of destruction. It simply compares and such comparison is not possible unless there is something objective.24

Again Sartre explains knowledge in a negative manner. For example when we know a book, this means I know it as not being a chair, not a table etc. For him every knowledge is a series of negations. But it is not justified. For when I know a book,

first of all I know it is something and then as different from other things. From the very beginning if we know something as not this and not that, then what I know will become indeterminate.

Sartre again expresses the negative theory of consciousness with the help of negative judgement. He explains the negative judgement by the fact that we expect to find something, but when it is not fulfilled it is expressed in the negative judgement such as 'it is not there'. Hence if negation is subjective it is not a fact and there is no sense in admitting, two kinds of judgement, negative and affirmative. Rather we should admit an expectative judgement of which the form of expression will be, 'as I expect to find it there, it is not there'. Desen points out that Sartre has not discussed the attitude of affirmation but has selected the attitude of interrogation and negation just to satisfy some queer idea regarding the relation between the For-itself and the In-itself.

Sartre has not established consciousness as an ego. This makes consciousness, as he thinks, heavy and massive, as the In-itself. But at the end we find that he has referred to the 'psyche' as the real nature of consciousness. This psyche can be called the 'me' or the ego-feeling. Sartre has not ignored the fact of ego and feels the necessity of admitting such a fact of ego substance.
Sartre criticises Husserl's theory of 'Transcendental ego' and says that a consciousness is the whole of consciousness and this has no relation to 'I'. As we have seen Sartre distinguishes between consciousness and object, by saying that the object is In-itself or it is, whereas consciousness is For-itself or is not what it is. Consciousness cannot remain identical in two moments and has an aspiration to realise a possibility. Sartre thinks that the ego is the totality of actions and states. 25 "...Consciousnesses are first; through these are constituted states; and then, through the latter, the ego is constituted." 26

Due to his phenomenological method Sartre never admits self at the background of our experiences. Husserl in his phenomenology postulated a transcendental self which unifies the series of phenomena into the organised whole. But Sartre has pointed out that there can be no such entity as transcendental self. The phenomenological method as understood or indicated by Sartre records not only sense experiences but all sorts of experiences and he tries to analyse them. Hume has committed such a mistake and also modern realist like Ryle admits that there is a 'systematic elusiveness of I'. It seems that Sartre has committed the same kind of mistake with the empiricist philosophers. He is unable to admit the reality of the self but has not rejected it altogether. The notion of self

26. Ibid., p. 81.
recurs in his philosophy as the psyche. In his theory of freedom he insists more emphatically on the necessity of the self.

Sartre says that consciousness by its nature has an inwardness and incommunicability. If this means that consciousness is private and nobody can know what it is, it would be difficult to know that I have any consciousness. In this connection he can refer to Descartes according to whom that I am conscious can never be doubted. But Sartre does not admit mere consciousness. For him consciousness is always consciousness of something. To say that 'I am conscious' means nothing. But when I say 'I am conscious of a table', it is not mere consciousness, but it is consciousness of some object. Thus consciousness is always related to some object. My consciousness is private in the sense that I have my own way of looking at things, not in the sense that it is in some sense a privileged state of being. Though Sartre does not want to give consciousness any privileged status still he uses expressions like 'It is only more intimate'. Surely it is only another expression of the term 'inwardness'.

Again as he has pointed out consciousness is out in the world, it has no inside. Such a notion also goes against the view that consciousness has an inwardness and individuality.

Sartre's analysis of the For-itself and the In-itself as two ontological entities suggests that he is a dualist. But whether this distinction is the same as the Cartesian dualism is a different question.

27. Cf. Ibid., p. 88.