

The Two Sartrean Theories of Personal Identity

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ABSTRACT

From Locke to Husserl, identity is defined as the persistence of self-consciousness across time. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1934), Sartre develops a phenomenology of Ego in accordance with this definition. He claims that the individuality is a production of the intentionality of a consciousness that is originally impersonal: it results from a reflection of consciousness upon its experiences; and therefore identity consists of a reflecting self-consciousness. But, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) he develops another conception of identity. He describes it as a “circuit of selfness” (*circuit de l’ipséité*). In this second theory, less known than the first, identity results from the intentional project that consciousness realizes in situation.

Because this second theorization redefines identity in terms of project and situation, it highlights the socio-historical dimension that constitutes the singularity of each consciousness. The circuit of selfness theory thus opens a new chapter in the question of identity by understanding it as the outcome of a personalization carried out by consciousness on the basis of transindividual characteristics (techniques, moral values, established norms, *etc.*) that shape its “facticity”. Hence, this theorization reshapes the problem usually linked to the notion of personal identity: it is no longer about questioning metaphysically identity by explaining (by means of theories about memory or temporalization of the self) the persistence of self-consciousness across a series of temporal dimensions, but rather describing phenomenologically (with an analysis of the intentional project of subjectivity) the dialectical and ontological relationships between, on the one hand, a consciousness and, on the other hand, a *situational dimension* from which Sartre proposes to rethink identity.

Consequently, this presentation is based on the assumption that the circuit of selfness theory breaks with the philosophical tradition that goes from Locke to Husserl. In order to identify more specifically how Sartre’s phenomenology transforms the question of personal identity, this study is an attempt to answer these two questions: how and why does Sartre develop a second theory of identity? What are the phenomenological stakes and the philosophical issues raised by this second theory? The first question leads to a study of Sartre’s *War Diaries* (1939-1940) in which – as this presentation shows – he reworked his first theory of identity by means of the following two intellectual traditions: the phenomenology of Heidegger and the French sociology that goes from Comte to Durkheim. In order

to explore the second question, the fourth part of *Being and Nothingness* and also *Search for a Method* (1957) shall be discussed because they develop a philosophical method – existential psychoanalysis – whose goal is to trace the genesis of selfness starting from the facticity of consciousness, where the social characteristics of subjectivity are concentrated. This study highlights that the principles of this method are precisely what thoroughly redefines the question of identity.

The stake of this presentation will be to examine the two sartrian theories of personal identity, but also the inflection that separates them, in order to highlight how their author transformed the traditional question of identity into a *genetic inquiry*, whose main contribution was a methodical description of the dialectical interactions between the dimensions of consciousness and situation.

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