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Sartre's Concept of Intentionality

It is commonly held that the theory of the structure of consciousness is the starting point of Sartre's philosophy and also one of the main theses maintained throughout his philosophical career.¹ Out of doubt, this theory is directly influenced by the Husserlian concept of intentionality, nevertheless with some radical criticisms against the predecessor. The main subject matter of this paper thus is to investigate the inheritance and the amendment made by Sartre in regard to Husserl's concept of intentionality. So we will respectively discuss Husserl's original theory and the ambiguity and problems involved in it, Sartre's different understanding of intentionality, and finally in light of above analysis, Sartre's criticism toward Husserl.

1

In Husserl's phenomenology, the concept of intentionality is typically put as "all consciousness is consciousness of something". This seemingly self-evident allegation is of essential significance, on the ground that it makes the phenomenology quite the opposite of the traditional philosophy of representation. According to the latter, our awareness is directed toward our own ideas of the object, rather than the real object itself. Therefore a skeptical impediment may arise.² However, Husserl believes that the phenomenological intentionality is able to afford us "the primal source in which is found the only conceivable solution of those deepest problems of cognition concerning the essence and possibility of an objectively valid knowledge of something transcendent".³ For any theory who claims that it can guarantee such cognition, it must explain the following question, i.e. "What notion of 'contents' can

¹ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l'Ego* (Vrin, 1996.) p.8.

² See *Introduction to Phenomenology*, by Robert Sokolowski (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.8-16. However, as for whether Husserl's judgment does justice to the traditional concept of representation, there are disputes, for example Jocelyn Benoist maintains that latter is more than what Husserl has understood. See *Les limites de L'intentionnalité—Recherches Phénoménologiques et analytiques*, by Jocelyn Benoist (Vrin, 2005), pp. 69-80.

³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, § 97, in *The Essential Husserl—Basic writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, edited by Donn Welton (Indiana University Press, 1999), p.98.

make sense of this *self-transcending* and *object-containing* nature of experience?”⁴(My italics) Could the Husserlian theory of intentionality do afford us a satisfactory explanation for this question?

To Husserl, even though the perception of physical things and the perception of immanent mental processes are different from each other in regard of their different modes of givenness, the structure of consciousness is the same: “noesis-noema”. For the sake of simplicity, let’s just focus on the first kind of perception.

According to the phenomenological attitude, the perception of a physical thing is as follows: As a human being, we can only look at the object from a particular point, which is merely one-sided and can be changed. When we change our orientation, or any element of the circumstance undergoes any alteration, there will be a new perception, thus making the whole process of perception a flow of perceptual multiplicities which is finite in number theoretically. Besides, in every single act of perception, not only the front of the object, but its sides and backside, as well as its background would be perceived, even with different degree of determinacy.

There are several points worth noting here. Above all, the universal essence of this kind of perception (adumbrative perception in Husserl’s terminology) are **inadequacy** (in the sense that the object can be given only “one-sidedly”) and **indeterminateness** (in the sense that the core of “what is actually presented” necessarily is apprehended as being surrounded by a horizon of “co-givenness”, which is not givenness proper but only a simple observability). From this discovery, Husserl deduces the dubitability of the perception of something transcendent and finally “the essential detachableness of the natural world from the domains of consciousness”⁵. This is no other than the phenomenological reduction, whose contribution lies in leading us away from the naïve acceptance of the existence of the world and directing us to consider objects in their relation to our acts of consciousness and the intentional correlation between them.

⁴ John J. Drummond, ‘The structure of Intentionality’ in *The New Husserl— a Critical Reader*, edited by Donn Welton (Indiana University Press, 2003), p.65.

⁵ As for the dubitability of the perception of something transcendent and the absolute consciousness as the residuum of the transcendental reduction, see *Ideas I* § 48-55.

Then, what is this intentional correlation like? In *Ideas I*, Husserl introduces the new parallel model of “noesis-noema” to formulate the structure of intentionality: the noesis is the act philosophically considered and the noema is the intended objectivity philosophically considered.⁶ However, even the concept of noesis is articulated expressly, that of noema generates much controversy about how to best interpret it, because Husserl seems to confer ambiguous characteristics to it.⁷ Here we are just going to point out the major ambiguity involved, which is conducive enough for our understanding of Sartre. As we have seen earlier, due to the dubitability of the existence of natural world revealed by the adumbrated perception, the actual being of the transcendental world is “parenthesized”, and what is left over is the pure mental process, i.e. particular perceiving, judging, etc. Then, as Husserl himself asks, what is evidently “inherent” in the whole “reduced” phenomenon?

Now, inherent too precisely in perception is this: that it has its noematic sense, its “perceived as perceived,” “this blossoming tree there, in space”—understood with inverted commas—precisely the *correlate* belonging to the essence of phenomenologically reduced perception. (*Ideas I*, §88)

The term “noematic sense” indicates once again the “self-transcending” and “object-containing” feature of intentionality. But what kind of relationship between this noematic sense and the object simpliciter can assure such feature? First of all, these two are distinguished from each other, just as what the inverted commas signify, i.e. “a radical modification of sense”, “a reverse change of signs”. (*Ideas I*, §89) The modification and change here are derived from the fact that the givenness of noema is

⁶ Here I invoke the expression “philosophically considered” from John J. Drummond’s article “The Structure of Intentionality”, in *The New Husserl— a Critical Reader*, edited by Donn Welton (Indiana University Press, 2003). It means to show the opposition in regard to the natural attitude.

⁷ To give a full discuss of this problem in the current paper is not realistic, and for better understanding, it will be helpful to read the following literatures: *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*, ed. H. Dreyfus (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984); *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, by Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993) esp. pp.95-101; *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy*, by J. N. Mohanty (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), esp. pp.201-202; *The Origins of Meaning: A Critical Study of the Thresholds of Husserlian Phenomenology*, by Donn Welton (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983); *Husserlian Intentionality and Non-foundational Realism*, by John. J. Drummond (Dordrecht: Kluwer, c1990.) John. J. Drummond generally classifies the participants of the debate into three groups: those who emphasize the noema as the intended objectivity itself as intended, those who emphasize the noema as sense, as “an abstract intensional entity which semantically mediates the act’s reference of the object”, and those who have adopted an irenic approach to the controversy. See his article above mentioned in *The New Husserl*, note 32, pp. 90-91.

related to particular act of consciousness (particular orientation in specific circumstance) and from reflective characteristic of its givenness (a peculiar reflection can be directed to it at any time). So it seems that the noema is something immanent, as Husserl hints implicitly and claims explicitly in different places:

In every case the noematic correlate, which is called “sense” here (in a very extended signification) is to be taken *precisely* as it inheres “immanently” in the mental process of perceiving, of judging, of liking; and so forth; that is, just as it is offered to us when we *inquire purely into this mental process itself*. (*Ideas I*, §88)

Every memory intends something and what it intends has, as such, the same position in time as the memory... Thus, it again becomes clear that there are no grounds for removing the “noema” from the immanent experience and denying it the character of a really immanent moment.⁸

However, if we include the noema in consciousness as its really immanent component parts, then in order to explain the relation between the immanent object and the real object, we may have to appeal to a depicting consciousness, which will not only cause an infinite regress as Husserl himself realized in §88, but also violate his original intention of facing the thing itself without any mediation. Therefore, these ambiguities and difficulties make Husserl’s confidence be questioned.

2

In our above analysis, we have already shown that the major contribution of the phenomenological reduction is to turn our attention to the immanent relation between the act of consciousness and its correlate, and that the fundamental essence of intentionality is the noematic sense given in particular ways. These two aspects were highly esteemed by Sartre. In *A fundamental idea of Husserl’s phenomenology: Intentionality*, Sartre put Husserl in a place in the contrast of the “digestive philosophy” of idealism and realism who either reduces the transcendence of objects into our immanent ideas about the objects, or presupposes the objects as “an absolute

⁸ Edmund Husserl: *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis*, p.335. I quoted this sentence from *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, by Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern and Eduard Marbach (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.98.

which would subsequently enter into communication with us”⁹. But for Husserl, the immanent relation between the act of consciousness and the object shows us that although the world is essentially external to consciousness, it is nevertheless *essentially relative to* consciousness. More important, it is worth noting that Sartre pays much attention and attaches much importance to the self-transcending feature of consciousness and this emphasis lead to the dispute between the two philosophers. According to Sartre, as the object is of different nature from consciousness, it can in no way enter consciousness, or put it another way, consciousness can never “reach” it. Therefore, in consciousness there is nothing but the inclination of transcending itself:

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. (...)It is just this being beyond itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance which makes it a consciousness.¹⁰

This necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself Husserl calls “intentionality”¹¹

Also in *The Transcendence of Ego*, Sartre writes,

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.¹²

Sartre defines consciousness by intentionality, and intentionality is nothing but the inclination of self-transcending. So the metaphor “clear as a strong wind”, “clear and lucid” means that consciousness is an absolute activity, insofar as “being consciousness of something” is its law of existence and that there is nothing behind it as its supporting substance. Sartre names this kind of consciousness as “consciousness in the first degree” or “unreflected consciousness”¹³. Here it is easy for us to note the

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre: *Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: L'intentionalité*, in *Situations I*. I quote this sentence from the appendices of *La Transcendence de l'Ego* (Vrin, 1996), p.110. While it must be admitted that Sartre's criticism against the idealism is more explicit, whereas that against the realism is not that clear in this short essay.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.111.

¹¹ Ibid. p.112.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendence de l'Ego* (Vrin, 1996) p.40.

¹³ Ibid. p.41.

divergence from Husserl, even though the short essay of *Intentionalité* is usually taken as a respect for the predecessor: as we have already shown, although Husserl recognizes that the object and consciousness are of fundamentally distinguished nature, he still maintains that in consciousness there is the noematic sense as well as the appearings of various sense data. Keeping this difference in mind, we will get much closer to Sartre's criticism against Husserl in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and nothingness*.

3

In the introduction of *L'être et le Néant*, Sartre expressly criticizes that Husserl is not "always faithful to his original intuition"¹⁴, and that he is "completely betrayed his own principle"¹⁵. To Sartre, Husserl's original intuition and principle is precisely the essence of self-transcending manifested in the famous slogan "all consciousness is consciousness of something". Consequently, anything other than this absolute inclination must be eliminated from the domain of immanence. Here we will analyze two such things that is embraced by Husserl but discarded by Sartre.

In the first place, as we have pointed out in the first section, it seems that Husserl regard the noema as something immanent of the consciousness. The reason for holding this not only lies in the reasonable deduction that since the phenomenological reduction has put everything into "parenthesis" except the immanent things, the noema as an element of residuum of the reduction must be something immanent; but also lies in the ambiguous feature Husserl gives to it. As an "object" with inverted commas, the noematic correlate maintains a strange relationship with the real object: on the one hand, it differs from the latter on the ground that it is given as something immanent and can be reflected at any time; on the other hand, it is bestowed the same "content" and matter with the real object. Thus Husserl wants to bridge the gap between the subject and the object through giving the noema a level of hylé, but in Sartre's eyes, what he gets is just "a hybrid being which is refused by the

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre: *L'être et le néant—Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Gallimard, 1943), p.24.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.28.

consciousness and cannot become a part of the world.”¹⁶ Furthermore, since Sartre understands consciousness solely as self-transcending, he will not tolerate Husserl’s position of taking the noema as something unreal, as a correlate of the noesis, therefore he announces that once Husserl do this, he is “completely betrayed his own principle”.

Secondly, in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre develops a criticism toward Husserl’s concept of transcendent “I”, claiming that it is incompatible with the definition of consciousness given by Husserl himself.¹⁷ The definition of consciousness given by Husserl is definitely the intentionality, whose essence is exactly the self-transcending movement in Sartre’s opinion. The question then is that why the transcendental ego goes against such a definition.

Sartre’s argument goes as follows : since the essence of consciousness lies in its pure movement of going beyond itself and toward the object other than itself, the individuality of the consciousness can be guaranteed through its object who marked its particular direction. Besides, through the function of “transversal” intentionality which is concrete and real retentions of past consciousness, the unity of diverse consciousness can be assured. As the result, Sartre thinks that the Husserlian transcendental ego who aims at individualizing and unifying the consciousness is just “superfluous”. Furthermore, for Sartre (maybe even for Husserl), the concept of the ‘I’ is *only* established by virtue of self-reflection. But yet, self-reflection involves two aspects : the reflecting and reflected consciousness who opposed to each other and also coexistent with each other. Therefore the spontaneity of consciousness is undermined, and Sartre concludes that “this superfluous I would be a hindrance”, “The transcendental I is the death of consciousness”¹⁸.

4

After all these analysis, let’s conclude our discussion. In Husserl’s

¹⁶ Ibid. p.26.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l’Ego* (Vrin, 1996) p.20.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.40. Actually, the argument of the rejection of transcendental I in *TE* is quite complicated and compact, here I just mean to outline its main line in the light of Sartre’s understanding of the intentionality. For better understanding, see *La Transcendance de l’Ego* (Vrin, 1996) p.13-26.

phenomenology, the introduction of intentionality bears an epistemological function of giving an objectively valid knowledge of something transcendent. But unfortunately, as a philosophy of immanence, the Husserlian phenomenology encounters great impediments for accomplishing this work, as the embarrassed status of noema shows¹⁹. So it is well reasoned for Sartre to criticise the inconsistency of Husserl's theory, especially when he exclusively embraces the movement of self-transcending as the core of consciousness.

¹⁹ Of course, there are other problems, e.g. how to guarantee that the object perceived through those perceptual multiplicities is "identical and unitary". It seems that Husserl tries to ensure the identification of the object through the synthesis of those particular acts of consciousness. He says that "Only the table is the same, intended to as the same in the *synthetical consciousness* which *connects the new perception with the memory*", "the continuously regular flow of perceptual multiplicities which *interpenetrate and change into one another*" (*Ideas I*, § 41) But we have no further idea of the "synthetical consciousness work".