The Epistemic Availability of Transcendental Self-Experience:
Husserl and the Paradox of the Pure Ego

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Abstract

The following analysis is an exploration of the epistemic availability of the ego and transcendental self-experience in Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*. It challenges the possibility of the kind of self-experience Husserl attempts to acquire through the reduction, arguing that the coherence of Husserl’s account is frustrated because the epistemological question of the reduction is grounded in a paradoxical ‘acquiring’ of an epistemically unavailable ‘pure ego’. Because of the dynamic of consciousness and temporality in experience, access to the self-experience that characterizes the Husserlian ego—the ego that grasps itself as a unified self-experience, “horizontally predelineated as an experienceable object” (29)—is problematically positioned as both not possible, and yet necessary to the possibility of all consciousnesses, including itself. That is, the structure of the consciousness of internal time, manifested as horizontal and alternately successive and continuous, is fundamentally elusive to the kind of unifying consciousness which must be intended in an acquisition of the ego, challenging the structural integrity of Husserl’s account of consciousness and rendering Husserlian transcendental self-experience epistemically unavailable.
Introduction: The Reduction

The phenomenological reduction of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* is not just a neglect of the question of being as Heidegger claimed, but an actual reversal of priority. It is a shift in the point of departure: instead of beginning with a world which transcends him, Husserl begins with transcendental self-experience. He uses as his point of departure his experience of himself as pure ego, and finds within that experience a world which gets its sense and its acceptance as existent from him. The reduction places the question of the being of the world second to the question of the constitution of it within the philosophizing ego's subjective processes. It reduces the ontological question of the being of the world to an epistemological question about how one's sense of the world is constituted.

Of course, there are other readings of the reduction. The one which directly opposes mine holds that the reduction in fact is an ontological decision, wherein the philosophizing consciousness establishes the being of its ego as antecedent to the being of the world.

I have chosen to read the reduction in the manner described above for a number of reasons, the first of which is that it seems to me to be the most consistent reading: Husserl says that after the reduction, "the being of the world remains unaccepted by me" (19). So the ontological question is being set aside. He also says that my ego’s "being is, for me, prior in the order of knowledge to all Objective being" (27). Husserl is stating that for him, places in the order of knowledge matter more than places in the order of being. Husserl also claims that in the reduction, "a new idea of the grounding of knowledge also becomes disclosed: the idea of a transcendental grounding" (27). Once again, the points
are about the order of knowing. It is an epistemological question that is being discussed here.

Incidentally, Paul Ricoeur supports the reading I have chosen. He describes the epoche as a decision: "This decision consists in saying that there is no other dimension of the being of the world than the transcendental one," and "that there is but one possible system of limitation and that the ontological question is the epistemological question" (89). I find this reading to be more interesting than the alternatives. The ontological reading of the reduction I think ultimately forces Husserl's phenomenology into a rather simple idealism—and this consequence is both uninteresting and unfortunate, as Husserl would be quite disappointed to be thought of simply as an idealist.

Thus, for my purposes, the reduction has an epistemic aim. In the reduction, Husserl expects to achieve "transcendental-phenomenological self-experience" (26). He intends to "acquire [himself] as the pure ego" (21), "a concrete Ego... horizontally predelineated as an experienceable object, accessible to possible self-experience that can be perfected, and perhaps enriched, without limit" (29). Husserl wants to achieve unproblematic access to transcendental experience. He hopes to locate and describe the 'I', the "purity of myself" (Ricoeur 92); he wants to acquire his pure ego. In the Cartesian Meditations, Husserl, like Descartes, will attempt to establish a foundation for science and a theory of experience. For this foundation, he needs a principle located in an apodictic experience, and he argues that the ego cogito is this principle: that transcendental self-experience is apodictic, and provides the foundation for a theory of experience.
This analysis will challenge the possibility of the kind of self-experience Husserl attempts to acquire through the reduction. The coherence of Husserl’s account is frustrated because the epistemological question of the reduction is grounded in a paradoxical ‘acquiring’ of an epistemically unavailable ‘pure ego’: Husserl’s transcendental self-experience—and certainly an apodictic transcendental self-experience—is epistemically unavailable. Because of the dynamic of consciousness and temporality in experience, access to the self-experience that characterizes the Husserlian ego—the ego that grasps itself as a unified self-experience, “horizontally predelineated as an experienceable object” (29)—is both not possible, and yet necessary to the possibility of all consciousnesses, including itself. That is, the structure of the consciousness of internal time, manifested as horizontal and alternately successive and continuous, is fundamentally elusive to the kind of unifying consciousness which must be intended in an acquisition of the ego.

**Defining the Terms:**

**The Ego and the Consciousness of Internal Time**

When Husserl begins the discussion which leads up to the reduction, he speaks of abstaining from “every believing involved in or founded on sensuous experiencing, so that the being of the world remains unaccepted by me” (19), and he describes what is present or evident after this abstaining: “the whole stream of my experiencing life” (19). Since what is present or evident after abstaining from accepting the being of the world is also “Ego” or “my own pure conscious life” (21, 26), I will take these terms to be intimately related: the ego contains “the stream of my experiencing life” or “my pure
conscious life.’’ Husserl supports this reading further, I think, when he speaks explicitly of the content of the ego. Its ‘‘content is made up of subjective processes, abilities and dispositions’’ (29). The ego contains conscious life—everything that goes on in consciousness. The ego is specifically associated with consciousness as a unified whole—the kind of unity one finds in the concept of selfhood. Thus at the end of the First Cartesian Meditation in the discussion of the reduction, Husserl specifically identifies himself with the term ‘ego’: ‘‘Consequently for me, the meditating Ego who…’’ (25), and ‘‘from me as the transcendental Ego’’ (26). When Husserl talks about acquiring his pure ego through the reduction, he is talking about isolating his ego in its pure form—making his ego entirely present to itself. He speaks of the ego present after the reduction as ‘‘that Ego who grasps himself’’ (22).

In defining the term ‘ego’, our most important task is determining the relationship of this term to what Husserl calls ‘the consciousness of internal time’. This relationship is not very apparent or clear in the text, and requires some discussion to clarify. A discussion of the relationship of these two terms ends up pointing toward some of the inherent difficulties for Husserl in the task of acquiring his ego.

Husserl defines the ‘‘consciousness of internal time’’ as ‘‘the temporal form of [subjective] processes’’ (43). This consciousness embraces all other consciousnesses, all other subjective processes: in the Cartesian Meditations, Husserl talks about the consciousness of internal time as the form of conscious life, the ‘‘all-embracing consciousness’’ (43), and in On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time, he talks about it as ‘‘the ultimate constituting flow of consciousness’’ (84). In the Second Cartesian Meditation, Husserl says that ‘‘any imaginable particular subjective
process is only a prominence within a total consciousness always presupposed as unitary” (43). That is to say, any consciousness gets its sense as a unified consciousness from within the flow of the consciousness of internal time, which is somehow unified (and must be unified in order for the flow to make sense as a flow).

It is this unity (the unity of the consciousness of internal time) that I argue must be associated with the term ‘ego’. The consciousness of internal time must have unity in order for it to be thought of as a flow at all, and since the consciousness of internal time is the ultimate flow—the form of conscious life in which all consciousnesses are constituted—then its unity must be associated with the unity of selfhood that the ego provides. As the only larger term, the ego must be responsible for the unity of the consciousness of internal time if it (the ego) expects to have a unified experience of its own content (an experience of its content as belonging to it through time). The consciousness of internal time contains within its flow all of the ego’s content—it is the form of conscious life in which all consciousnesses are constituted, the flowing consciousness in which everything that belongs to the ego is manifested. Thus, the ego that grasps itself would have to grasp the consciousness of internal time. The ego that attempts to acquire itself as an experienceable object would have to acquire the consciousness of internal time in its wholeness.

It is clear that the ego is “the realm of transcendental-phenomenological self-experience” (26), and that the consciousness of internal time in some sense belongs to the ego and fills it, the form of its conscious content. The relationship of the two terms in the reduction may also be generalized: in the reduction, the ego grasps itself; acquires itself as pure, as the temporal stream of the life of the self present to itself. This would involve
a purer, more complete, more consciously all-embracing and unifying grasp of the consciousness of internal time. However, just exactly what form the ego takes is difficult to pin down, and as our discussion progresses, we will begin to see why this is the case.

Some passages suggest that the ego takes the form of a consciousness, of a cogitatum: “the all-embracing cogitatum of reflection is the all-embracing life itself, with its openly endless unity and wholeness” (43). As described here, the ego would manifest itself as a consciousness of the consciousness of internal time, a unified consciousness of the flowing stream of subjective processes. This is the ego as a consciousness of all other consciousnesses, the consciousness that intends conscious life and underlies it, the transcendental condition that unifies conscious life and makes it possible. But if we read Husserl carefully, we see that he also wants the ego to assume the form of the intentional object of the consciousness that intends conscious life. Husserl says he wants to acquire the ego as an experienceable object—he wants to be able to experience it, examine it, and explore it as one may through consciousness and towards its intentional object.

Throughout this analysis, we will find many instances of these dual meanings of the ego in Husserl’s work, and the various tensions between them, because this ambiguity and the conflict it cloaks anticipate the origin of the problem I am considering.

**The Horizontal Structure of Consciousness**

The difficulties for unification of the consciousness of internal time and the experienceability of the ego can be partially understood in terms of the horizontal structure of the consciousness of internal time. The discussion that follows focuses on explaining how consciousness works within this horizontal structure, and how the
irresistible temporal dynamic of the consciousness of internal time as inscribed in the
horizontal structure eludes a unifying consciousness which might attempt to grasp it and
experience it.

A. The Horizon and Intentionality

Husserl’s ideas about intentionality are important to an understanding of what is
meant by the horizon, and horizontal structure. He says in the Ideas, “in so far as
[intentive mental processes] are consciousness of something, they are said to be
“intentionally referred” to this something” (73), and “In the essence of the mental process
itself lies not only that it is consciousness but also whereof it is consciousness, and in
which determinate or indeterminate sense it is that” (74), and finally, “intentionality
[is]... the property of being “consciousness of something”” (75). For Husserl,
intentionality is the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something.
Consciousness for him cannot be isolated or even understood unless it is engaged, unless
it is active and full.

Husserl’s notion of a horizon arises out of this picture of consciousness. He
comments in the Ideas, “One easily sees... that not every really inherent moment in the
concrete unity of an intentive mental process itself has the fundamental characteristic,
intentionality” (75). That is, consciousness intends its object, and it is the noema that is
the “bearer of an intentionality” (Ideas, 75), but there is a whole horizon of indeterminacy
surrounding the noema that a consciousness actually intends.

In the Ideas, which precedes the Meditations, Husserl speaks a bit more clearly
about the horizon and what it means: “What is now perceived and what is more or less
clearly co-present and determinate... are penetrated and surrounded by an obscurely intended to horizon of indeterminate actuality” (52). The particular noema which I intend to here and now is surrounded and even, he admits in the Ideas, penetrated by a horizon of indeterminacy. In the Meditations, he speaks again of the horizon: “in being there itself, the physical thing has for the experiencer an open, infinite, indeterminately general horizon, comprising what is itself not strictly perceived—a horizon (this is implicit as a presumption) that can be opened up by possible experiences” (23). So by redirecting our consciousness and intending to the horizon, we shift the focus of our consciousness—but every consciousness is surrounded by a horizon. We will never apprehend the horizon thematically qua horizon, because the horizon is necessarily unthematic.

**B. Synthesis, Identity, and Evidence:**

*The Constitution of Intentional Objects*

Synthesis is “combination uniting consciousness with consciousness” (39). Each successive consciousness intends the various multiplicities and adumbrations which are identified through this process as the same object. In passive synthesis, consciousness grasps its object over and over as it moves through time. So “the object now present is experienced as fulfilling the empty intention” (Sokolowski, 28), but evidence is always disrupted by time (Meditations, 15), and “evidence has... a multiform horizon of unfulfilled anticipations... which refer us to corresponding potential evidences,” so that “evidences refer us to infinities of evidences” (61), and the intended object can always be more fully meant. Consciousness is always intending-beyond-itself.
An absolute evidence, in whose synthesis everything that is of the object would lie latent as an unfulfilled expectant intention would be impossible to grasp as a unified intended correlate of a single consciousness. If total or absolute evidence of synthetic unities is not possible, apodicticity is only really possible for the particular noema as I intend it in the present, as it is present to and unified with my present consciousness of it (Ideas, 79), without its sense as a constituted object synthesized across time with all of its multiplicities included in its sense. And as we will see in the following discussion, when the ego is the object being constituted, even its most immediate present cannot be completely disclosed.

C. Constituting the Ego: Elusive Horizons

The horizon, the object, evidence and intentionality are the structure and machinery of the transcendental realm—they describe the flowing of conscious life, the working of the ego and its form—consciousness of internal time. This conscious life that Husserl describes is contained in the ego that I supposedly acquired in the reduction, and its workings—the realm of transcendental self-experience—should now have been completely disclosed. I, the philosophizing ego, should have “apprehend[ed] myself purely: as Ego... with my own pure conscious life,” I should have “acquire[ed] myself as the pure ego” (21). I should have “gain[ed] possession of... my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them” (20). Thus we should be able to find within this machinery the means for the ego to acquire itself—or at least, we should not find any structural obstacles to this acquiring. The machinery of
Husserl's phenomenology as a whole—his phenomenology of the constitution of objects in general—must be adequate to the phenomenology of his own self-constitution.

However, Husserl's phenomenology is not adequate to the phenomenology of his self-constitution: specific obstacles in the machinery of the ego as Husserl describes it call into question the possibility of transcendental self-experience (the presence of the ego to itself), and impede the acquiring of the ego. This implies the epistemic unavailability of the ego to itself.

Whether we choose to see the ego as an underlying consciousness or as an intentional object, it is clear that neither is available in the totally disclosed capacity that Husserl wants to acquire in order to experience his ego. The ego as a consciousness eludes experience in Husserl's description of consciousness, because he says that consciousness is always intending-beyond-itself. The ego as the consciousness that intends conscious life can never rest, or fully acquire itself because conscious life stretches out into its temporal horizons, and any given present that the ego might grasp will never be completely self-contained, but rather is surrounded and penetrated by a horizon—it will contain references to the conscious life of the past and the future, the conscious life beyond that moment. The intended object can always be more fully meant—and this must, of all objects, be most true of conscious life.

And even if we were to discard all but one moment, this moment, of conscious life—would even the present be fully present? The ego could not achieve a grasp of itself as a consciousness even of only this moment, because even if it were to acquire everything going on during that moment within the consciousness of internal time (which it could not—any given moment has its own horizon), it could still not include itself. The
ego as consciousness is itself a consciousness, and ultimately must be prior to experience. In an analysis of the ego as unifying consciousness, we must note the existence of a sort of blind spot within consciousness, a space in conscious life that will resist disclosure.

An analysis of the acquirability of the ego as intentional object within the horizontal structure of consciousness does not fare much better. It generates the same scenario, except that the term ‘ego’ is identified with the object intended by an all-embracing consciousness, instead of with that consciousness itself. As consciousness intends its object, there is a whole horizon of indeterminacy surrounding the noema that a consciousness actually intends. And when the ego is an intentional object that attempts to encompass and disclose all of conscious life, it encounters the same two problems that the ego as underlying consciousness did. It stretches out into a temporal horizon, and so cannot be acquired in the fullness of its past, present and future within any given present. Also, an intentional object cannot possibly include within it the consciousness that intends it. So once again, there is a consciousness that remains behind the ego, undisclosed, preventing the complete presence of the ego to itself. Whether unifying (underlying consciousness) or unified (intentional object), the ego is not experientially available to itself.

This point makes sense in the context of our own everyday process of identification and sense of self-experience. We do not ever acquire our own identity completely. During the times when I am most conscious of myself, I am often conscious, not of a totality of myself or of a sense of my unified life, but rather of particulars: a single sensation or thought and possibly its immediate significance. Sometimes in my attempts to be self-conscious, I only succeed in being conscious of my attempt to be self-
conscious. We have a sort of myth which asserts that in the moment of death our lives will ‘flash before our eyes’ (perhaps this makes sense to us because in death we have no more future to elude us), but our memories and our senses of our selves are always, while we are living them, incomplete and flawed—sometimes outright erroneous. This is really an apparent aspect of experience: we live in time. It flows past us. In my everyday experience of myself, my past and future are not present to me—they are past, and future. The sense of what I am—my ego, my self, my identity—is never present in its totality. My ego is not a static moment, it is a flowing stream, and my sense of my self when specifically cognized will always be a moment immersed within this stream; it will never embrace and swallow in a unified totality the entirety of the stream of my conscious living.

**The Paradox of Succession and Continuity**

The problem presented by the horizontal structure is really only a specific case of a more general problem, which I will call the paradox of succession and continuity. The advantage of discussing the availability of the ego in terms of this problem is twofold: first because as I noted above, it is more general, and allows us to see the problem more clearly and so to chase it further towards its root within Husserl’s phenomenology. Second, there is a passage in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* in which Husserl himself seems to be aware of the problem in terms of succession and continuity. This is helpful, because we can explore both the problem and Husserl’s attempt at a solution to it in his own terms.
In an early lecture (1905) published in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, Husserl wonders,

Can I find and apprehend in one glance the whole retentional consciousness, included in a retentional being-all-at-once, of the past course of consciousness? Obviously, the process necessary in this case is the following: I must first grasp the retentional being-all-at-once itself, and this is continuously modified; indeed, it is what it is only in the flow (87, emphasis mine).

When I, the philosophizing consciousness, attempt to apprehend the ego, what I am grasping for is something that is always being modified. It is the flowing of conscious life; it is what it is only as it flows. The consciousness of internal time is composed of a succession of consciousnesses, engaged in a continuous flow. If I grasp the succession of consciousnesses up until the moment of my grasp, then I will have apprehended, not the flow itself, not the ego in its unity or entirety, but merely a partial history of the events of the ego—I will not have grasped the flow itself, the continuous stream; the flow itself will always elude my grasp, will always slip through my fingers. As Husserl admits, “something new is always being added “in front” in order to flow away immediately in its turn” (87). Conscious life is composed of a succession of consciousnesses and cognitive events. In order to give this succession sense as a succession, the succession must be accompanied by a consciousness of its unity as a flow, as a continuity. But it is what it is only as it flows—it is continuous, and cannot be grasped.

There is thus a tension—which Husserl acknowledges—between the consciousness of internal time as flowing, continuous conscious life and as a succession of cognitive mechanics. This tension renders paradoxical any consciousness which attempt to intend or grasp an experience of conscious life, and also renders incomplete any intentional object which claims to contain the whole sense of conscious life. This is
important because for Husserl, full disclosure of conscious life requires a unified grasp of it.

As Husserl himself puts it, the problem concerns “how it is possible to be aware of a unity belonging to the ultimate constituting flow of consciousness” (84). The unity of any given consciousness in the succession “becomes constituted in the flow” (84). In other words, consciousnesses arise as events within the succession of consciousnesses in conscious life. But they get their sense as unified from the continuity of the flow which unifies the succession. The difficulty becomes clear when we then ask ourselves how the sense of conscious life as continuous was achieved—as Husserl says, “how it is possible to be aware of a unity belonging to the ultimate constituting flow of consciousness” (84). For there is only one way for an idea to enter conscious life: it must enter in the form of a consciousness. The unity of the flow as self-identical, as ego, must be revealed in a consciousness, and yet the unity of any given consciousness is given by the flow in which it finds itself.

**The Paradox of the Pure Ego:**

*The Ego as Intentional Object v. the Ego as Transcendental Condition*

Thus the final, most general formulation of the problem is the following, which I call the paradox of the pure ego: the consciousness which grasps the consciousness of internal time (giving it the unity necessary to constitute the pure ego, unified and entirely revealed) would have to be originally present in order to give the flow continuity as a flow. But this grasping consciousness is itself a consciousness, and must have its place in the succession of conscious life—its unity as a consciousness can only be established by
its prominence from within the flow which it is supposed to unify. The ego as a consciousness that underlies conscious life as transcendental condition cannot be reconciled with the ego as an intentional object of a consciousness that intends conscious life. The ego must be understood as the consciousness of the flow which contains and allows all other consciousness; it is the transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness and conscious life. But this consciousness is only possible once the ego as the object it intends—the ego as intentional object—is, paradoxically, already in place. The unity of the ego which allows its status as the transcendental condition of consciousness could only have been achieved from within the flow which makes it possible.

The level of generalization which we have achieved in this discussion allows for its extension beyond the Husserlian vocabulary. When we ask "how it is possible to be aware of a unity belonging to the ultimate constituting flow of consciousness" (84), the question we are asking, put simply, is, how is it possible to achieve an awareness of the unity of one's own mind? The answer to this question ends up taking the rather comic form of a chicken-and-egg paradox: the occurrence of any given thought depends on a whole host of other thoughts, and especially on the notion of these thoughts as connected—as unified in the context of a mind. If each mental moment were completely disconnected and fragmented, no thought could form. But the notion of the unity of one's own mind is itself a thought. So how did it get there? Husserl seems to have stumbled into a rather overwhelming structural obstacle to his project.
Husserl's Solution: The Marvelous Fact

Husserl is deeply invested in the project of exploring and analyzing the structure of consciousness, and, overwhelming or not, he is determined to defend the validity of his project against this obstacle. To resolve the paradox and allow a unified (hence completely epistemically available) experience of the ego, a description of how the unity of transcendental self-experience is arrived at is required. Husserl needs to either show us how to dissolve the paradox, or else he must make one of the two following claims: (1) that the problematic consciousness of the consciousness of internal time is original—that its unity underlies experience, and is a transcendental condition. Or (2) he can claim that the ego is an intentional object of a consciousness that becomes present in the flowing of the consciousness of internal time—that its unity arises out of experience, and is intended in it.

But both of these claims would be extremely problematic for Husserl. If accepts the unified ego as transcendental condition of its unity (option 1), he would simply be reverting to Kant, and he would not be able to talk about the ego as experienceable. And Husserl will want to avoid this at all costs, because he wants an experientially available ego. To allow the unified ego to be original or to underlie experience is to imply that its unity is a priori—an original, transcendental condition of the possibility of experience. The unified ego would then not be something which admits of experiential or epistemic access. This is an unacceptable implication for Husserl: he wants to do more than Kant, and that means having an ego which is not merely formal—an ego which may actually be experienced and explored.
On the other hand, to reject the ego as transcendental condition and claim that the unity of the ego arises out of the flow of conscious life, and is experienced as an intentional object from within it (option 2) seems altogether unacceptable. This claim would hardly be a solution, because it could not address how the unity of the flow is achieved in the first place. Depending on how strictly one reads Husserl’s project as a Cartesian one, taking this side of the paradox might present difficulties, not only to the general consistency of Husserl’s description of consciousness, but to his Cartesian aims as well. For if Husserl chooses to describe the ego as an intentional object, then the status of the foundational experience becomes unclear: the flow is the original experience, but the unified ego, an intentional object which arises out of that flow and is intended in and by it, is what Husserl wants to acquire as a foundation for his theory of experience.

So Husserl makes neither of these claims, and instead attempts to diffuse the problem by adjusting his definition of the flow of consciousness as it applies to the consciousness of internal time. He claims that “the flow of consciousness constitutes its own unity” (84). Husserl tries to resolve the paradox of the pure ego by talking about the unified ego as something which becomes present in and alongside the flow of consciousness, intended to and experienced from within the flowing of the consciousness of internal time. He says, “There is one, unique flow of consciousness in which both the unity of the tone in immanent time and the unity of the flow of consciousness itself become constituted at once” (84). In other words, Husserl claims that the flowing of conscious life—the kind of flow that the consciousness of internal time manifests—is unique in that it is capable of allowing a consciousness to establish both the unity of itself
as a consciousness and the unity of the flow which it rises out of. The flow, he says, is
simply unique in this way: it will allow a consciousness that not only causes its own unity
as a consciousness, but will also constitute the unity of the flow which it arises out of,
and which is supposed to cause the unity of this consciousness as a consciousness. He
defends this against accusations of infinite regress by saying that in the case of this
unique flow, the flow and the consciousness of the flow which unifies it are in this case
the same cognitive entity: “Now the flow, inasmuch as it modifies this retentional being-
all-at-once, coincides with itself intentionally, constituting a unity in the flow” (Internal
Time 87)

This is indeed a “marvelous fact.” Husserl himself admits that it is “shocking
(when not initially even absurd)” (84). Husserl merely adjusts his definition of the
consciousness of internal time a little, admits it is a bit of a stretch, and then moves on.
He takes pains to insist that this quality is unique—which is good, because it haphazardly
collapses several of his careful distinctions about how consciousness works and how the
unity of a given consciousness is achieved.

More importantly however, I do not think that this solution addresses the full
extent of the problem. First of all, it only dismisses, and does not address, the presence
of the necessity of the ego as transcendental condition: there is a reason that this
consciousness seems to make sense as original, as underlying. The flowing of conscious
life, in order to be a flow, in order to maintain itself as the same thing being modified
through time, demands an original unity. As we have seen throughout this analysis, there
is an argument to be made for a unity original to the flow. It is not necessarily
satisfactory for Husserl to simply claim that this unity asserts itself simultaneously from within the flow.

Husserl’s solution thus shows him taking a position on the possibility of the intelligibility of the ego—of the flow as a unified presence. But it does not help us understand how one might be able to apprehend the flow itself. It does not show where there is space in the succession of the flow, or in its continuity, for the ego to apprehend itself. It allows the flow a unified presence, but does not explain how the flow might be apodictically or adequately self-present.

However problematic it may be, Husserl denies that the ego underlies consciousness as a transcendental condition of its possibility. In this way, he aims to defend his claim to completely disclosed, epistemically accessible self-experience. But there is another problem: the kind of self-experience Husserl wants is of “a concrete Ego… horizontally predelineated as an experienceable object, accessible to possible self-experience” (29). Husserl wants an ego as intentional object, accessible to itself as an experienceable object. Husserl claims that the unity of the ego arises within the flow as opposed to preceding it. But he does not show how this unity allows us to encounter the flow from within the flow. He claims that there is a unity present in the flow, but fails to give us the cognitive machinery to apprehend that unity and claim it as an object, “accessible to possible self-experience that can be perfected, and perhaps enriched, without limit” (29).

To clarify: Husserl’s solution attempts to defend the notion of a unified ego, for all along, Husserl’s assumption is that a unified ego implies a fully disclosed, completely accessible ego. But we have hinted throughout this analysis that this is not the case; we
have noted the existence of a sort of blind spot within consciousness, a space in conscious life that will resist disclosure. And here inaccessible space asserts itself: the benign presence of the unity of the ego within its structure does not guarantee consciousness the grasp of that unity as its object. For a consciousness which might attempt this grasp would itself elude its grasp. An intentional object cannot possibly include within it the consciousness that intends it. Even taking into account Husserl’s ‘marvelous fact’, there is still a consciousness that remains behind the unified ego, undisclosed, preventing the complete presence of the ego to itself.

**The Ego and Immanence**

Through the reduction, Husserl hopes to secure for his phenomenology transcendental self-experience as an *immanent realm*. He will do this by actively excluding the transcendence of objects. He intends to reduce all objects of experience to immanence by removing their reference to anything except his consciousness of them. Once they are ‘bracketed’ and so divested of their self-sufficiency, Husserl claims that objects are integrated into the philosophizing ego’s consciousness of them, and cannot be separated from that consciousness of them.

The sense of the term ‘immanent’ in Husserl’s phenomenology is that of something completely present, fully disclosed—something which does not depend for its sense on something outside of the intentional object and the consciousness of it. In the *Ideas*, Husserl defines immanence as the state of affairs such that “the consciousness and its Object form an individual unity made up purely of mental processes” (*Ideas*, 79).
Husserl extends this concept of immanence to include conscious life and the ego—this is how he expects to secure the ego as an immanent realm for his phenomenology.

If we apply the language of immanence to the paradox of the pure ego, we may have interesting results—and possibly a better solution than the 'marvelous fact'. It seems to me that Husserl would fare much better by claiming that questions of origin and genesis are out of his purview, and the dual senses of the ego as consciousness and the ego as the intended object of this consciousness are in tension only when we ask genetic questions. He could say that his project is a description of the structure of his ego as it reveals itself in his experience, and since it reveals itself as an underlying consciousness and as the object that that consciousness intends, so much the better: this structure manifests itself as a kind of virtuous circle reinforcing the immanence of his self-experience. The two moments of the ego cannot be entirely separated from each other, and work together, transcending each other into unity. The paradox, Husserl might say, could be dissolved when we understand what it means for the ego to be an immanent realm.

Husserl might claim that the unity is an immanent structure such that "the consciousness and its Object form an individual unity made up purely of mental processes" (Ideas, 79); that it is a complex, synthetic unity, but a unity nonetheless—there is a virtuous circle uniting the different senses of the ego. Of course, he might say, the ego cannot be understood as consciousness only, or intentional object only. This is precisely what is meant by its immanence.

But those who read carefully would see that even this attempt to rescue the unity of self-experience would not resolve the problems inherent in the structure of Husserl’s
The question then remains: what kind of experience of ourselves do we have actually get out of his own body, and still be able to experience that body with his senses.

In fact, the presence of this kind of unity in the ego would actually prevent its full disclosure, because disclosure requires the displacement of one moment of the ego from the unity.

In transcendental self-experience, the experiencing ego must separate itself from the ego experienced. In this way, an experience of fully disclosed self-presence is possible. It is not clear that we can ever acquire the experience of fully disclosed self-presence. Even the consciousness that is doing this experiencing accomplishes nothing of the sort of full self-awareness consciousness even the consciousness that is doing this experiencing accomplishes nothing of the way behind consciousness, and experiences all of the implications of this analysis include the impossibility of a unified self.

Conclusion: Orpheus and Eurydice

The implications of this analysis include the impossibility of a unified self-experience or fully disclosed self-presence. Husserl wants an account of consciousness that actually gets all the way behind consciousness, and experiences all of the unity of the self as fully present to the self. The question then remains: what kind of experience of ourselves do we have actually get out of his own body, and still be able to experience that body with his senses.

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Eurydice from the underworld. Orpheus convinces Hades and Persephone to allow him to bring Eurydice back to the surface, but there is a condition: Eurydice will follow behind Orpheus all the way out of the underworld, but he must not turn around and look over his shoulder at her until they have reached the surface. If he does, she will be taken back to Hades. Orpheus leads the way out of the underworld with Eurydice in tow. But he is nervous. He can hear her footsteps behind him, but having never seen Eurydice following him, he is uncertain and unsettled. And so, as he steps out onto the surface, he turns to look at Eurydice. Sadly, he looks too soon; she has not yet stepped out of the underworld. So Orpheus catches only a last glimpse of Eurydice being pulled back into Hades.

It seems clear that we have some notion of the unity of our own minds, and also that we have an idea that a certain amount of self-reflection, self-experience and even self-analysis is possible. This unity asserts itself only as a ghostly presence in the back of our minds, echoes of footfalls behind us. To abandon this notion altogether would leave us without a unified sense of selfhood, and might not even be possible. But as this analysis shows, an attempt to gain complete, unified, rigorous access to consciousness ignores some very simple elements of the dynamic of consciousness and temporality in experience: we will never achieve total disclosure. Applying rigorous analysis to the amorphous presence of the unity of our minds may be likened to Orpheus’ nervous backward glance, checking to be sure that Eurydice was still there. In addition to its foolishness, this attempt will never work: the unity of our selves will always recede from our grasp. I, the philosophizing ego, will never grasp myself, or acquire myself as fully present. The consciousness which attempts the acquisition will itself slip through its own
grasp, disappearing behind the experience it discloses just as Eurydice disappeared under the scrutiny of Orpheus’ gaze.
Works Cited


