SARTRE’S EARLY PHENOMENOLOGY OF AUTHENTICITY IN RELATION TO HUSserL

Unlike Husserl, the early Sartre created his version of phenomenology to advance an existential ideal, that of the authentic Self. His phenomenology of emotions and imagination aimed at purging consciousness of all content until it emerged as pure transparency and spontaneity. Such a consciousness becomes the author of the self and makes way for the aesthetic model of authenticity by enabling spontaneous creativity, unrestrained by any transcendental principle. Hence Sartre adopted from Husserl solely such motifs that helped him to ‘evacuate’ the consciousness of all “opaque” contents like the notion of unconsciousness; he remained quite critical, for example, of Husserl’s notions of the passive hyle. Be that as it may, Husserl’s thought was, perhaps, the most important stimulus for Sartre, but the nature of this influence was confined mainly to the phenomenological method and technique and to the negative ramification of liberation in order to make room for the positive ideals of Sartre’s existentialism, i.e., freedom = consciousness and authenticity. Nevertheless, the positive content of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology is open to various interpretations and is quite elusive as is his own notion of authenticity. We must bear in mind that despite several promises, Sartre never wrote a systematic treatise on ethics or on the moral doctrine of Existentialism.

In The Transcendence of the Ego (TE), Sartre considers how consciousness can generate spontaneous creativity and tries to secure the transcendental conditions for authenticity. Using a revised phenomenological framework, Sartre argues for a non-egological intentional theory of consciousness. He maintains that anything...
considered to be part of consciousness or an immanent content of consciousness is really an object toward which consciousness directs itself. Images, emotions, motives, values, and even the ego itself, are constructed by this consciousness. The self, for example, does not disclose itself to immediate intuition in its entirety and thus, as an object transcending consciousness, belongs to the world. The world is constituted by the intentional acts of pure consciousness. Hence the self is the result of a synthetic act of organization rather than its agent. Sartre uses Husserl’s notion of ‘konstituieren’, as the ordering of our images and representations about things and the establishing of the meaning of the object and certain order.

For Sartre, the self is an object constituted within the phenomenal field. “The ego is not the owner of consciousness; it is the object of consciousness” (TE, p. 97). Consciousness is a kind of pure transparency, a mere openness to a world to which it adds nothing of its own. Consciousness is totally vacant, and this vacuity enables consciousness to be a truly spontaneous and creative force unimpeded by such inner obstacles, as “psychic dispositions” (ibid., p. 70), inhibiting emotions, or traits of character. Character is not a predetermined set of innate traits, but merely a set of dispositions. ‘Potentiality’ is a fiction, otherwise “the I, with its personality, would be a sort of center of opacity” (ibid., p. 41). The purification of consciousness maximizes creativity, enabling the individual to attain authenticity modeled on God’s own.

Sartre, like Heidegger, uses his phenomenology to attack the Cartesian cogito ergo sum. There is no ‘I’ that thinks, but only thought and reflection upon this thought. With Sartre, the dissolution of the Cartesian egological self initiated by Nietzsche reaches its climax. Sartre’s phenomenological reading of consciousness leads him to believe that there is no entity that is an original, authentic self or ego, as Rousseau tended to believe. Authenticity lies in the created products of consciousness and it is this creative process itself.

Sartre favors a “realistic” interpretation of Husserl’s concept of intentionality, which he considers “fruitful” (ibid., p. 41). Hence phenomenology is redefined as a “science of fact,” not “essences” (ibid., pp. 35, 113, n. 3). Sartre rejects the Husserlian technique of reduction along with Husserl’s notion of the transcendental ego. While Heidegger abandoned the concept of the transcendental ego in order to radicalize ontology, Sartre gives it up to radicalize consciousness. Even so, however, his account of the ego here is much like Heidegger’s concept of ‘Being-in-the-World’. The ego is not isolated but “is outside, in the world. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another” (ibid., p. 31; see also p. 75 where Sartre explicitly cites Heidegger). Sartre’s application of the phenomenological method to the realm of facts and things, as opposed to essences, is motivated by the desire to avoid the solipsism (p. 103) implicit in Husserl’s doctrine of the transcendental ego (p. 104).

Sartre, taking literally Husserl’s call to return ‘to the things themselves’, looks upon phenomenology as a triumph over subjectivism. He interprets Husserl’s notion of consciousness as movement: “To be is to fly out into the world . . . in order suddenly to burst out as consciousness-in-the-world.” Authenticity is rooted in this flight, this refusal to exist as substance, this life-long attempt to fight facticity. Such purification of consciousness has also moral implications: “No more is needed in the way of philosophical foundation for an ethics and politics which are absolutely positive” (TE, 106). Thus, early in his career, Sartre already attributed moral significance to his phenomenological explications of consciousness (ibid., p. 94). Purified consciousness, as creator of self, is like Spinoza’s notion of substance as the absolute cause of itself (causa sui) introduced in his Ethics and referred to by Sartre (ibid., pp. 39, 82). Consciousness for Sartre is a continual self-creation ex nihilo at each successive instant in time. Hence, consciousness is endowed with a God-like status.

Consciousness is intentional activity directed at what is not itself. Thus authenticity does not imply the self-referential “mineness” (Jemeinigkeit) of the self, as it does for Heidegger, but refers to a creative process which produces transcendent contents (including our own selves) “outside, in the world, among others” (Int.). Sartre places authenticity squarely in the human, all-too-human, intersubjective world: “It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves; it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men” (ibid.).

Now if consciousness is defined by intentionality (TE, p. 38), and if authenticity is the outcome of intentional acts, then authenticity is defined by consciousness. Sartre is arguing that consciousness cannot be directly influenced by the external world, and that given its spontaneity, it alone is responsible for its own escape from this freedom. Freedom is the relation of consciousness to the world and not that of the ego to the world. The attributes that Heidegger uses to describe authentic, ontological Dasein, are bestowed by Sartre on this relationship between consciousness and the world. Every intentional act is self-originating, self-determining and absolutely free. As Sartre’s thought develops, these features become the defining characteristics of authenticity.

Sartre did not believe that introspection into one’s inner self can lead to knowledge of our authenticity or