One of the changes that mark Husserl's transition from his early phenomenological position to his transcendental phenomenology concerns his conception of the ego. I will argue that Husserl's change of mind about the notion of ego was primarily motivated by his theory of time consciousness. In particular, I will suggest that it resulted from the desire to accommodate within his theory of intentionality an account of the simultaneous experiences of both self-change and self-sameness across time.

We must distinguish two different groups of questions about personal identity that tend to be confused with one another. The first is an ontological, or metaphysical, group of questions, roughly: what is a person, and what are the conditions for personal identity through time? The second group consists of phenomenological (or epistemological) questions, all of which derive from the general question: what is the structure of our sense, or experience, of personal identity? These groups of questions are related. We should expect that a sense of personal identity is required for personal identity, but not necessarily the converse. To see this, we need only consider the possibility of a person, brought to exist by a Cartesian evil demon, with full-fledged memories of his past experiences that never were. Such a person has a sense of identity as extending into the past, without having a past personal identity. Husserl's phenomenology, in being a theory of intentionality, addresses itself primarily to the second group of questions. Yet, as we shall see, some questions from the first group do come up in the context of his phenomenological 'ecology'.

In his Logical Investigations Husserl holds a Brentano-inspired view:

The phenomenologically reduced ego is... nothing peculiar, floating above many experiences: it is simply identical with their own interconnected unity [LI, p. 541].

Husserl may here be making two statements at the same time: If we take 'the phenomenologically reduced ego' to mean 'consciousness as reflectivity experience', then what Husserl is saying is that, upon reflection, he discovers that the experience of the 'unity' of consciousness is accounted for by no more than a reflectively observable 'interconnectedness' among experiences – and that is, roughly, a phenomenological claim. On the other hand, if we assume that by 'the phenomenologically reduced ego' Husserl means, simply, 'consciousness', then Husserl seems to address here a question about the unity of consciousness. Taking consciousness to be composed of experiences (in a broad sense, cogitationes), Husserl rejects a view that postulates an enduring element in consciousness (call it ego) as that which individuates a consciousness. Instead, he asserts that the unity, or singularity, of consciousness is a result of an 'interconnectedness' among its experiences – and that is, again, roughly, an ontological claim. There is an obvious connection between the two claims: the phenomenological observation is usually that which is cited as important evidence for the ontological claim. The way I understand Husserl's early views, he was advancing both claims.

However, to sustain these claims, we must be told more about the nature of the 'interconnectedness' that performs the job of 'unifying' consciousness. The early Husserl does not have a sufficiently clear story to tell about it. In a further reference to the ecological view, he says:

I must frankly confess... that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive, necessary center of [conscious] relations. The only thing I can take note of... [is] the empirical ego and its empirical relations to its own experiences... [LI, p. 549]

By 'empirical consciousness' Husserl means consciousness in the mundane sense – a psychological characteristic of persons, governed by psycho-physical ('empirical') laws. Under this conception, the subject or the agent of consciousness, the 'empirical ego', is a person – a psycho-physical individual. We might get

an impression that the 'interconnectedness' the early Husserl had in mind is a 'merely' causal one. But this would be a wrong impression. Indeed, the early Husserl did believe that the unity of consciousness is a product of natural laws, but he also took the phenomena governed by these laws to be irreducibly intentional: the laws in question had to account not only for the de facto unity of consciousness but also for the experience of the unity of consciousness. In a traditional jargon made contemporary, he took them to be laws that govern the occurrence and contents of a person's presentations, or representations, in such a way as to produce both the unity and the experience of the unity of consciousness. The discovery and specification of these laws would be the task of experimental phenomenological psychology. Probably the early Husserl countenanced something like Brentano's psychological laws of 'primordial association'.

In his later writings, Husserl makes a complete turnabout regarding the ego. Commenting on his earlier inability to find an ego reflectively, Husserl footnotes the above paragraph in the second edition of the Logical Investigations, saying, 'I have since managed to find it'. The view which he embraces now is this:

So much is clear from the outset, that after carrying [the transcendental] reduction through, we shall never stumble across the pure Ego as an experience among others within the flux of manifold experiences which survives [the transcendental reduction]; nor shall we meet it as a constitutive bit of experience appearing with the experience of which it is an integral part and again disappearing. The Ego appears to be permanently, even necessarily, there, and this permanence is obviously not that of a stolid unshifting experience, of a 'fixed idea'.... In principle, at any rate, every cogitatio can change.... But in contrast the pure Ego appears to be necessary in principle, and as that which remains absolutely self-identical in all actual and possible changes of experience, it can in no sense be reckoned as a reell part or phase of the experiences themselves [Ideas, p. 156].

This looks like a radical departure by Husserl from his earlier position on the ego. Not only has he 'managed to find it', but he takes it now to be 'necessary in principle'.

We get an idea from this passage as to why Husserl failed earlier to discover such an ego reflectively. Having been convinced that consciousness is 'nothing but' a sequence of interconnected events (acts), Husserl declared his failure to find an abiding conscious act (an 'idea fix'), let alone one that can occupy the ontological and phenomenological 'unifying' roles an ego was supposed to occupy with respect to its acts. Thus, the early Husserl closed rank with Hume, who declared his own failure to find a corresponding abiding impression. But Husserl never retracts this feature of his earlier position. The ego that Husserl has since 'managed to find', and now considers to be 'necessarily there', is not itself an act (idea, impression – abiding or otherwise) among others. The reason he failed to find it earlier is that he was looking in the wrong direction. His scientific convictions regarding the nature of persons distorted his earlier phenomenological conclusions. In particular, his (ontological) conviction that consciousness is 'nothing but' a series of experiences led him to adopt a phenomenological presupposition: namely, that the sense of self-unity must be accounted for solely by some sort of psychological 'interconnectedness' among a person's experiences, an 'interconnectedness' conceived by him in a sense that excluded from the outset the notion of consciousness as an endurant. It is this presupposition that made him look reflectively (tongue-in-cheek) for an ego-qua-act among other conscious acts, declaring his inability to find it.

As he never retracts his rejection of an ego qua 'idea fix', so Husserl never gives up the (correct) idea that the sense of self-unity must be accounted for by an interconnectedness among a person's experiences. What he does reject now is his earlier conception of the nature of that interconnectedness. He is resolved to let his phenomenological account of self-experience be dictated exclusively by phenomenological observation - without any naturalistic preconception. As a part of that resolve, he requires of his phenomenological theory of self-experience that it accommodate two phenomenologically observed facts: the experience of cross-time sameness of consciousness, and the experience of cross-time conscious change. It is in the course of his attempts to accommodate these phenomena that Husserl comes to the conclusion that nothing less than the endurance of consciousness, its numerical identity across time, can account for the unity of consciousness. Indeed, the newly discovered Ego is not an entity 'inside' consciousness, it is 'reduced' consciousness itself. Thus, Husserl changes his conception of the nature of the interconnectedness required for the unity of consciousness and for the experience of the unity of consciousness. That interconnectedness involves now, irreducibly, a tacit (intentional) reference by each of a