

The immediate self-consciousness and the foundation of philosophy  
in Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Jean-Paul Sartre

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The question, I want to speak about, is as old as the occidental philosophy. It is the question about the origins, the ground of the thinking of man, of philosophy and of the things existing in the world, the being. Of course, I'm not able to give an answer to this question. It's just too big for my little brain. But in this lecture I want to tell you something about thinkers, who tried to give an answer. Their names are Descartes, Kant, Fichte, Husserl and Sartre. These philosophers were searching for a *fundamentum inconcussum* of all thinking and being. They thought, that there must be a ground, a basis, which is indoubtable and where you cannot go behind, even if you are a very hard thinking sceptic. Were they successful? Did they really find this extraordinary, absolutely evident point, where the human mind starts and the consciousness begins to create itself? These are the other questions I can't give you a sufficient answer to. But I can try to explain to you some arguments and problems I found in their philosophical conceptions. In my opinion, there are several problems they could not really solve. Especially in the phenomenological ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre. And to make these problems clearer, I wrote my thesis mainly about Fichtes and Sartres theories of self-consciousness, subjectivity and final foundation of philosophy, based on some ideas of my master-paper about experience and reflection in Husserls writings.

I'm sure, that some of you think, that people who spend their time and most of their mental power for searching something absolutely true and evident must be more or less crazy. Or rich and bored. Maybe you're right. The history of philosophy shows us some philosophers who ended in mental derangement and some who had enough money to spend the whole day sitting in a warm kitchen reading and writing strange books. But this search for certitude is one of the most important impulses for the development of the occidental philosophy. And maybe it is the nature of human beings, to ask, to criticize and to search for something that cannot further be called into question.

Platon says, that the beginning of philosophy is the astonishment, the *taumázein*<sup>1</sup>. But already the first generation of important Greek philosophers, the so-called Presocratics, did not stop thinking when they were astonished. They were astonished about the unexplained enigmas of

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<sup>1</sup> See Platon, *Theaitetos*, 155d3.

the nature and the world, from the burning of a piece of wood into ashes up to the sunrise and sunset and more generally the changing of everything. And they tried to find the origins, the principles of nature and being, the *archai* or *aitia*, which were in, behind or below the appearances. Thales from Milet f.e., who lived 600 before Christ, thought that water is the first substance, others thought it is air, fire or like Anaximander something called the unlimited [apeiron]. They started searching and thinking, finding reasons and truth. Sokrates' method was to ask the people in the market about different subjects as good [agathon] or virtue [arete] and to show that they in fact don't really know what they believe to know. Platon distinguished between *doxa* and *episteme*: *doxa* as a lower level of knowledge that concerns only the appearances and is more or less false and the *episteme* as the highest level of knowledge, concerning the ideas and the truth about the beings<sup>2</sup>. Hence, philosophy as a kind of science, which has to find rational reasons for the opinions, was established and determined the further development of philosophy from Aristotle up to the modern analytical philosophy. The rational thinking – the ancient Greek philosophers called it *nous* – was from now on the most important cognitive capacity for the philosophizing people, that is for people who, as the term philosophy originally means, 'love the wisdom' – the *wisdom*, a kind of knowledge that is maybe more or something different than scientific knowledge. But, nevertheless, basing upon the rational thinking, the different kinds of sciences developed and also philosophy, which continued its search for principles and certitude.

At the beginning of the period called the modern times, René Descartes revived the idea of a philosophy, which is able to find the absolutely evident point, that nobody can doubt. In his book *Meditations about first philosophy* [*Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*] Descartes carries out his method to find this point. First he doubts the existence of all things in the world, especially the material things we know through our senses. We can be wrong, e.g. if we think that we see a person in the forest, but it is just a tree. And, another example, you can be wrong, if you think that I am standing here and speaking to you. Are you sure that you are not dreaming? Maybe we are all dreaming, I am dreaming, giving you a lecture and you are dreaming, sitting here and listening. There is no real criterion to make sure if we are dreaming or not, Descartes says. And he goes on with his methodical doubt. What about the sciences like mathematics, which believe in the truth of statements like 'two plus three equals five'? Descartes opinion is, that the 'facts' and 'laws' in science can also be called into question because of a daemon [genius malignus], who could exist instead of god, the guarantor of

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<sup>2</sup> See Platon, *Politeia*, 476c1ff.

truth, and who could mislead the people all the time. Therefore, one of his aims in his *Meditations*, especially in the third and the fifth meditation, is to prove the existence of God. So given all these uncertain things, what is left to be absolutely true? The answer is given in the second meditation: it is the *subject*, who carries out the methodical doubt. I, the thinking subject, who doubts about everything, I am indoubtable, I exist. This is absolutely true: even if you say that nothing, included yourself exists, there exists the one who says this. The subject can never be removed. '*Ego cogito, ergo sum*'. And, Descartes says, the character of the subject is to be a substance with consciousness, a *res cogitans*, in contrast to the substance of the material things, the *res extensa*. The subject called *res cogitans* is a substance, that reflects upon itself, that has consciousness of itself. Thus, the self-conscious I is the *fundamentum inconcussum*, the steadfast grounding and first principle for true knowledge. The truth about god and the *res extensa* depends on this principle and on the detailed analysis of the *res cogitans*, as Descartes tries to show in the other meditations.

The further history of philosophy from Descartes up to Jean-Paul Sartre can be considered as a thinking with the self-consciousness as its least common denominator and as an up to now at least unsolved problem. This is a view on the development of philosophy given by the German philosopher Dieter Henrich and his disciples, e.g. Manfred Frank, who edited several books and articles about the questions of self-consciousness. In this view, the different philosophical theories of self-consciousness from Descartes up to Sartre, e.g. the theory of Kant, Fichte, Hölderlin, Franz Brentano, Husserl or others, could not solve a problem, that is in the opinion of Henrich and his disciples a difficulty for all kinds of theories of self-consciousness, independent of the affiliation to any philosophical movement. It is, simplified said, the *problem of circularity* and *infinite regress* in the description of self-consciousness. As Dieter Henrich points out in the short, but basic article titled '*Selbstbewusstsein. Critical introduction into a theory*' from 1969, traditionally self-consciousness is described with two characterizations: it is described (1) as a *reflection* and (2) as a *relation*, that means a relation between two elements: e.g. the I as a subject and the I as an object. The I reflects upon itself or it knows itself: the I knows the I. In other words, in the criticized theories of self-consciousness there is always a difference between two elements included: between (1) the I as *reflecting* and (2) the I as *reflected*, and self-consciousness is therefore regarded as the relation between these two I's.

Now, these facts of an presupposed inner difference in self-consciousness cause the problems of circularity and infinite regress mentioned above. If self-consciousness is described just as an act, when the I is reflecting upon itself, there is, we said, a reflecting and a reflected I, or in

other words, the I as a subjective reflecting I and as an objective reflected I. The knowledge in self-consciousness now is the knowledge of the *reflected I*, it is the aim and the matter of the act of reflection, but what about the *reflecting I* itself? How do we know about this? If we want to say, as traditional theories did, that we have to carry out an act upon the *reflecting I* to get knowledge about it, there is in this act another reflecting I included, a second reflecting I, that must be the aim of a third reflecting act to be known. And in this third act there is again a reflecting I included, which needs a fourth act of reflection to be known. And in the fourth act there is again a new reflecting I included and so on. Therefore, an infinite regress in the explaining of self-consciousness is constituted. In other words, if we describe self-consciousness as a reflection and a relation between two elements, we can never explain or have knowledge about the first element, the reflecting I itself.

So what is the consequence? Dieter Henrich says, that there must be another kind of self-consciousness, that is not based upon reflection: a kind of immediate self-awareness, that should not be described as a relation between two elements. Henrich calls this immediate self-consciousness '*familiarity with itself*', in German: '*Vertrautheit mit sich*'.

But how can it be described, if not as a relation and reflection and what is its character? First, Henrich stresses, that it is not the result of any undertaking [Unternehmen] or activity like e.g. a reflective or intentional act, but a kind of *event* [Ereignis], an event, that is, so Henrich, "plainly singular and without any relation"<sup>3</sup>. Henrich also calls it a *dimension* [Dimension] or a *medium* [Medium] to express, that this consciousness *is* not a relation, but the *fundament* or *ground* of events in consciousness, which stand in relations, e.g. perceptions [Wahrnehmungen] and feelings [Gefühle]<sup>4</sup>. Second, he says, that it is the *presupposition* [Voraussetzung] for all kind of consciousness. And as a presupposition of all kind of consciousness, including the reflective self-consciousness that constitutes an I, it must be itself considered as an *I-less* or *Ego-less* event, a quasi anonymous consciousness, maybe like the consciousness of a somnambulist. Further it cannot be described as a relation: it is a kind of *non-relational* consciousness, that is also a kind of *non-intentional* consciousness. Maybe at this point you remember Husserl's emphasis on the intentionality of consciousness. For Henrich, the '*familiarity with itself*' cannot be described in the way Husserl did it. And, this is the last point in my reproduction of Henrich's position, this immediate self-consciousness has nothing to do with *identification* or self-identification.

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<sup>3</sup> See Henrich, *Selbstbewusstsein*, 277.

<sup>4</sup> See Henrich, *Selbstbewusstsein*, 277.

Keeping these theoretical problems in mind, let us turn back to the history of philosophy and our view on the selected theories of self-consciousness. It was the idea of Descartes, I said, to find the undoubtable ground in the I respective the *res cogitans*, that reflects upon itself. Now, the idea of finding the ground in the I or self-consciousness can also be found in the transcendental philosophy of Kant, especially in his thinking developed in the *Critique of pure reason* from 1781 respective 1787. The self-consciousness named ‘synthetic unity of apperception’ or the ‘I think’, in German: “transzendente Einheit der Apperzeption” oder das “Ich denke”, is, as Kant says, ‘the highest point of all use of reason [Verstand], of logic and of the transcendental philosophy’<sup>5</sup>. Its role can therefore be regarded as a kind of foundation of his philosophical concept.

But what is its character and its function in the context of Kants transcendental philosophy? Before I try to give an answer – and it is really hard to give one, because Kant, as everyone who reads him knows, is very hard to understand and not always very clear – I want to outline his conception in the *Critique of pure reason*, as far as it is important for the theory of self-consciousness.

Transcendental philosophy is, Kant says<sup>6</sup>, the idea of a science, that can find principles of human knowledge, which are not given in the experience of any entities in the world. These principles are not experienced, but rather the underlying conditions of all experience. Kant says, they are *a priori*, in contrast to the elements of knowledge *a posteriori*. As Kant divides the capacities of human knowledge in *sensibility* [Sinnlichkeit], *understanding* [Verstand] and *reason* [Vernunft], he gives us three kinds of elements a priori: the *forms of intuition* [Anschauungsformen] *time* and *space* belonging to the sensibility, the *categories* [Kategorien] e.g. the *causality* belonging to the understanding and the *ideas* (god, freedom, immortality of soul) belonging to the reason. For us the two capacities *sensibility* and *understanding* are relevant. Within the first, an entity, a thing in the world is given, in the second, it is thought, that is brought into the unity of *concepts* [Begriffe]. Both capacities are necessary for knowledge, they correspond to each other: neither concepts without intuition, nor intuition without concepts, can provide knowledge<sup>7</sup>.

As knowledge is a kind of interaction of intuition and concepts, the function of understanding is to synthesize the manifold of impressions, given in the intuition, respective to ‘order’ them under the rule of concepts. The concepts of pure understanding are the categories, we

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<sup>5</sup> See *KrV* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*], B 134.

<sup>6</sup> See *KrV*, B 27.

<sup>7</sup> See *KrV*, B 74.

mentioned, and the mostly taken example to show the difference between Kant and the empirist Hume is the category of *causality*. Hume thought, that causality is not *apriori*, not independent from experience, but a kind of *habit* [Gewohnheit] caused by the experience, e.g. when we see two billiard balls, one kicking off the other, or, another example, when we see the sun shining on our hand and we feel the hand getting warm. The relation between the first billiard ball or the sun as the cause [Ursache] and the second billiard ball or the feeling of warmth as the effect [Wirkung] is based on a kind of *assoziation*, Hume says, and in his opinion it is also a kind of *learning*. Hence, Humes categorie of causality has nothing like the necessity and objective validity [objektive Gültigkeit] for knowledge as it has in Kants transcendental conception. For Kant the categories are the apriori conditions of all possible experience, that is of the possibility of experience at all. They cannot be ‘found in’ or ‘taken out’ of the world we get through sensibility, e.g. through this experience of the sun shining on my hand. And as a consequence of this, Kant tries to show, how the categories are absolutely necessary for all knowledge and how they constitute this knowledge. The very difficult passage in the *Critique of pure reason*, where Kant undertakes this, is called the ‘The transcendental deduction of the categories’ [Die Deduktion der reinen Verstandesbegriffe<sup>8</sup>]. Some say this is the core [Kern] of Kants transcendental philosophy and of his so-called ‘Kopernikan revolution’ [‘kopernikanische Revolution’<sup>9</sup>], that is Kants fundamental idea, that the objective world is not forming the subjective knowledge, but reversely, the subject is forming the world and recognizes, what it lays in it. In any case this part of Kants transcendental philosophy stands in a close relation to the topic of self-consciousness.

The understanding by means of concepts respective categories synthesize or order the impressions, we said. The categories, e.g. the causality, order impressions in cause-effect-relations, categories like the unity synthesizing the manifold of single impressions to unities. But all this categorial synthesizing or unifying is not sufficient for knowledge. There is another unity, another unifying capacity, that is responsible for the unity of all the units unified by categories. This higher and all knowledge funding unity is the transcendental self-consciousness, called ‘synthetic unity of apperception’ or the ‘I think’. Now, what are the main characteristic traits of this self-consciousness?

(1) First, it should not be considered as a kind of introspection, an empirical, reflective perception of the inner state of the subject, e.g. the perception of your representations [Vorstellungen], thoughts, imaginations or sensations, you can find, if you look into yourself, maybe sitting at home in an armchair or lying on the sofa of a psychoanalytic. This kind of

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<sup>8</sup> See, *KrV*, B 129ff.

<sup>9</sup> See *KrV*, B XII ff.

self-consciousness is an empirical apperception, concerning the *inner sense*. And in this inner sense, Kant says, there is just a flow of appearances, there is no *identity*, no *standing and resting during the time*. There is, in Kants words, „no standing and resting self“ [„kein stehendes und bleibendes Selbst“<sup>10</sup>] in the empirical apperception.

So one of the fundamental differences between empirical and transcendental apperception is the *identity* of the transcendental apperception. The transcendental ‘I think’ is, as Kant says, “one and the same” [“ein und dasselbe”<sup>11</sup>] during the time, it is “the pure, unchangeable consciousness”. And this *identity over time* is founded on the capacity of synthesis, that is to say by the *synthetic unity* of all representations in the consciousness<sup>12</sup>. This unity allows us to say, that these phenomena are *my* phenomena, that they belong to me as their owner.

(2) The second characteristic trait is, that the transcendental ‘I think’ is a consciousness that ‘is possible to accompany all representations [Vorstellungen]’<sup>13</sup>. It is an essential accompanist for all kinds of mental phenomena. But as this, it is not an *object* for thinking or consciousness and, unlike Descartes *res cogitans*, no *substance*, it is, as Kant says, the *form* of representations. It has itself no content and is even no concept, just a “simple, and in itself completely empty, representation 'I'”<sup>14</sup>, so Kant. We cannot have any knowledge about itself, separated from the representations. And we even cannot say, if it is an I, a He, or an It like a thing, therefore it cannot be considered e.g. as a kind of a personel I.

(3) And the third and last characteristic trait I want to mention is that the transcendental self-consciousness is not a knowledge about my *essence* or *being-how*, in German: *Wesen* or *Sosein*, about *how* I am, but just a knowledge about the pure fact of existing, about my *existence* or *being-that*, in German: *Existenz* oder *Dasein*. Kant says, that in the transcendental self-consciousness “I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am”<sup>15</sup>. This representation of my pure existence is, as Kant goes on, “a thought, not an intuition”<sup>16</sup>. So, compared with the philosophy of Fichte, there is no intellectual intuition within Kants transcendental self-consciousness. For Kant the intellectual intuition, that creates the existence of intuited objects while intuiting them, is only possible for God, not for human beings. But, as Kant here says, that it is a thought, he says in another passage, that

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<sup>10</sup> See *KrV*, A 107.

<sup>11</sup> See *KrV*, B 132.

<sup>12</sup> See *KrV*, B 133f.

<sup>13</sup> See *KrV*, B 131.

<sup>14</sup> See *KrV*, B 404.

<sup>15</sup> See *KrV*, B 157.

<sup>16</sup> See *KrV*, B 157.

the transcendental consciousness is nevertheless a kind of intuition: it, according to Kant, “expresses an indeterminate empirical intuition, i.e. perception [Wahrnehmung]”<sup>17</sup>.

So what a strange thing is this transcendental self-consciousness! And this strange thing has to be the highest point and the basis for philosophy? Is it clear what it is, this highest and so very important topic? I don't think so. Besides these cited statements there are more statements from Kant which I don't really understand and which are not clear or even contradictory. And maybe you are of the same opinion. A number of philosophers thought like this. And so no wonder, they interpreted Kant in different ways or just tried to do philosophy without his transcendental I. Or they tried to create a new philosophy, regarding Kant as a preliminary stage to their own thinking. So let us now leave Kant and turn to Fichte, looking at his theory of self-consciousness, not without hope, that his philosophy may be more easier, more understandable and clearer.

Generally it can be said, that Fichtes thinking between the years 1792 and 1799 center round the problem of founding the philosophy in the I, in an I that stands in relation to itself and to the world, that is founding the philosophy in the self-consciousness. But unlike Kant, Fichte pays more attention to the question, what the essence or character of the I is, that functions as the first principle of all knowing and being.

What are the characteristics of his philosophy in his earlier years? Fichte thinks, as a successor of Karl Leonhard Reinhold, that philosophy should be a *system*, including theoretical as well as practical philosophy. And this system should be developed from only *one sentence*. Reinholds sentence, the so-called ‘*sentence of consciousness*’ which says, that “in consciousness the representation is related to and divided from the subject and the object by the subject”, is in the view of Fichte an empirical sentence and so not qualified to be the first principle of philosophy. Fichte is looking for a non-empirical, apriorical sentence, that is absolutely evident. He finds it, as it is shown in his *Grundlage der gesamten WL* from 1794 in a sentence of Identity, the sentence ‘*I=I*’, derivated from the sentence ‘*A=A*’. This sentence ‘*I=I*’ is equal with the sentence ‘*I am*’ and an expression of a transcendental event called ‘*Tathandlung*’, a transcendental event which is not an empirical fact like a ‘*Tatsache*’. But what is this, a ‘*Tathandlung*’?

Fichte wants to show that the I is *pure activity*, that its being is nothing but activity. The I creates its own being, in one its existence and its essence. It *posits itself*, as Fichte says, it is an I that posits itself as an I, so that there is an I that is *positing* and an I, that is *posited*, or an

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<sup>17</sup> See *KrV*, B 422, footnote.

subject-I and an object-I, but both I's and the whole process of self-positing take place within the I. In other words, the I, also called the '*absolute I*' or the '*absolute subject*' distinguishes itself in an subject-I and an object-I so that the I as a whole, expressed by the sentence 'I=I', is at the same time an identity and a non-identity. What a strange thing! And it becomes not less strange, when we mention, that this is just the first of three principles, elaborated in the *Grundlage* from 1794. In the second principle, the I posits its opposition, the *Non-I*, and the third principle points out the relation between these two positings and the mutual limitation of the I and the non-I. Generally it can be said, that here, in these three principles of Fichte lies the origin of the dialectical thinking of the German idealism. The three principles may be called as *thesis*, *antithesis* and *synthesis* and so regarded as the fundamental structure of all reality, as Hegel later shows.

But in Fichtes thinking of the I there is still missing something. What about the knowledge of the activity of the I, of its self-positing? In later works, Fichte uses this phrase: 'the I posits itself *as itself positing*'<sup>18</sup>. What does this mean? In my opinion, he wants to state, that the I posits itself and posits at the same time the *knowledge of this positing*. It posits the consciousness of itself, it creates *self-consciousness*. But is this self-consciousness a kind of reflection, a reflective consciousness or even a conceptual knowledge?

In works like the two *Introductions into the WL* from 1797 or the lecture called *WL nova methodo* he stresses, that the knowledge of the self-positing I is not a conceptual thinking, but a special kind of *intuition*, different from the intuition of empirical things: it is the *intellectual intuition*. This intellectual intuition can be considered as a kind of immediate self-consciousness. It is, Fichte says, the immediate consciousness of acting, the intuition of the I itself while the I is positing itself. So what is its main characteristic?

(1) First it is necessary for all kind of consciousness. Without this immediate self-consciousness, you can't even move your hand or your foot, you can't sit here and listen to this very interesting lecture.

(2) Then, Fichte says, it is a consciousness, where subjective and objective I are so close together that they are 'plainly one', where the subjective I and the objective I build together the unity of a 'Subject-Object' [Subject-Object]<sup>19</sup>. In Fichtes opinion, it should not be described as a relation of two elements, e.g. as a 'consciousness of consciousness', because of the above mentioned problems with circularity and infinite regress. Fichte knows these problems very well and tries to overcome them in his description of the intellectual intuition. But the question arises, if he has been really successful. Is the 'Subject-Object' or the 'I=I' no

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<sup>18</sup> See *Versuch* [*Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797)], 528.

<sup>19</sup> See *Versuch*, 529.

kind of relation with any inner difference, and therefore are the problems of circularity or infinite regress really solved? I have some doubts. And Hölderlin for example as one of the critics of Fichte stresses in a text titled *Judgement and Being* [*Urteil und Sein*] from 1795, that there is in Fichtes 'I=I' always a difference between the I and the I, and that therefore the needed or aspired identity could never be found in the self-consciousness, but in something beyond, which Hölderlin calls the 'plainly being' [Sein schlechthin].

However, the starting point to get into or to find Fichtes intellectual intuition is now, in his later works, no kind of sentence any more like 'A=A' or 'I=I', but the *individual experience* of thinking yourself. Fichte makes an *experiment*: First think of something, e.g. of a wall you see, then abstract from this wall and all things around you, go within yourself, think of yourself as thinking the wall, that is think of yourself as an I and look at that what happens, when you do this. You will find, that there is pure activity in your consciousness and that you know yourself immediately in the way of an intellectual intuition. This intuition can not be demonstrated through concepts, Fichte says, 'everyone has to find it for himself and in himself, otherwise he or she will never find it'. So, my question here is about the necessity of the intellectual intuition. If, as Fichte thinks, the intellectual intuition is an individual experience, if there is only a possibility maybe for some individuals, to get into this intuition, how can it be regarded as funding every knowledge of all human beings, as a vital condition for knowledge at all? Is experience generally suitable to be the starting point for an absolutely necessary transcendental condition?

The philosophies of Kant and Fichte are two kinds of thinking that we call transcendental philosophy. Their purpose is to find the non-empirical basis or elements of empirical knowledge. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another important philosopher pursued this aim: Edmund Husserl. His philosophy called phenomenology triggered off a movement, mainly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to which philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Max Scheler and many others belong to. I can't give you here an insight in the richness of phenomenological thinking, neither that of Husserl nor of one of the following generations of phenomenologists. My focus in this part of my lecture will be on the one hand on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, which is based in many items on Husserls thinking and on the other hand on the theory of self-consciousness.

Sartres philosophy in *The being and the nothingness* from 1943 is called a phenomenological ontology. So his aim can be described as building up an ontology – here you can see the influence of Heidegger – based on the phenomenological discoveries of Husserl. Husserls philosophy deals with questions about subjectivity and consciousness, especially in his book

*Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy, first book* from 1913, where a transcendental phenomenology of the constitutional elements in the pure consciousness is developed. Hence, Sartre's starting point is not Heidegger's 'Dasein', mentioned in his book *Time and being*, that includes a criticism of the modern philosophy of subjectivity like Husserl as well as traditional or modern anthropology, e.g. the philosophical anthropology of Gehlen or Plessner. Sartre stands in the tradition of Descartes and Husserl, his starting point is the consciousness they analysed, the *cogito*. And Sartre's special and here in the first place interesting contribution to this topic is his theory of an immediate self-consciousness called the *pre-reflexive cogito*.

Before I try to explain his thinking about the pre-reflexive cogito, I want to give a short review of some of the main ideas and terms of his phenomenological ontology. Sartre divides reality in three ontological areas: the *being-for-itself* [être pour-soi], the *being-in-itself* [être en-soi] and the *being-for-others* [être pour-autrui]. The *being-for-itself* stands for the subject, the human being, that is special about consciousness. The *being-in-itself* is the opposite, we can say generally the objective or 'transcendent' region, that is not the subject – 'transcendent' here understood in a not strictly metaphysical sense. The *being-for-others* is the ontological region that belongs to the subject, but is determined by the other people in the world, so that the subject on one hand cannot determine or realize it and on the other hand cannot get rid of it. Plainly speaking we can say, that it is the exterior of myself that is never under my control.

Another fundamental ontological term is, as the title of his book shows, the *nothingness*. Sartre's theory of nothingness is situated in the context of his philosophy of subjectivity or his anthropology, and therefore nothingness is on one hand the state of being nothing, and on the other hand a fundamental capacity of the subject respective the consciousness. So Sartre creates a new verb to speak about this capacity: he says that the subject 'nothings' [néantiser]. The subject itself 'is nothingness' and it has to 'nothing' the world respective the being-in-itself. This is the real character of the human being. We can never be something, because our consciousness always 'nothings' that means creates a distance between itself and our own being respective the not-subjective being-in-itself. This is, in other words, the *freedom* to which we are condemned. Or, in the well-known thesis of his popular writing *The existentialism is a humanism* from 1946: 'the existence precedes the essence'. That means, that human beings exist, that they are 'thrown into being' as Heidegger says, or with Sartre, that they are 'in Situations', and that everyone has to create himself, has to give himself, although it is basically not possible, a being and ethics without any reference to God.

Now what role plays the consciousness and especially the self-consciousness in this philosophy, which wants to be in one an ontology, phenomenology and anthropology? In the writing from 1946 he says, that the cartesian cogito, the self-reaching consciousness, is the only possible starting point for the philosophy and the absolute truth<sup>20</sup>. This foundation of philosophy starts within Sartres earlier writings, especially with the essay from 1937 titled *The transcendence of the ego*. Dealing primarily with Husserls but also with Kants theory of a transcendental I, Sartre asserts, that there is no kind of I, whether a transcendental I [Je] or a psychological I [Moi] in the original, that means non-reflective consciousness. This first-degree consciousness is an impersonal or ‘prepersonal’ ‘transcendental field’ as Sartre says.

The main character of consciousness is for Sartre, in accordance with Husserl, its *intentionality*. But intentionality has not the special meaning, as it had in Husserls philosophy. For Sartre, the intentionality of consciousness is its character to transcend or to escape from itself, to be outside of itself, in the concrete world that is around us. So the immediate self-consciousness is nothing for itself, it is or exists just insofar as it is consciousness of an object outside. It is not an object for itself, not positing itself; this can only be said in case of a reflexive self-consciousness, e.g. when we speak about a psychological I [Moi].

And, another aspect of this phenomenon, the immediate consciousness is an impersonal *spontaneity*, an absolute that creates itself, totally undetermined, like a permanent *creatio ex nihilo*. Therefore it should be regarded as the first principle and origin for the being of man.

As the philosophy in the main work *The being and the nothingness* is an ontology, the immediate self-consciousness there is considered as an *ontological dimension*, Sartre says it’s the “transphenomenal dimension of being of the subject”<sup>21</sup>. But it’s a misunderstanding, if ‘transphenomenal’ is understood as behind or beyond the appearance, maybe like Kants ‘things in themselves’ [Dinge an sich]. To be and to appear is equal in the case of the immediate self-consciousness. The pre-reflexive cogito *is* its appearance. Here we can remember Fichte, who thought that the active I is creating its own being while it’s positing itself, that the being of the I *is* its self-positing.

Now there are two kinds of self-consciousness in Sartres conception: the pre-reflexive self-consciousness and the reflexive self-consciousness. This difference is also visible in his terminology: it’s the difference between ‘*self-consciousness*’ [conscience de soi], that is the pre-reflexive cogito, and the reflexive ‘*self-knowledge*’ [connaissance de soi]. This terminological difference is used as the title for the 1948 published protocol of a discussion in the Société française de philosophie, where Sartre discussed this topic of the immediate self-

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<sup>20</sup> See Sartre, *Der Existenzialismus ist ein Humanismus*, 132f.

<sup>21</sup> See Sartre, *SN [The being and the nothingness]*, 18f.

consciousness. Here Sartre mentions some more details of the pre-reflexive cogito, in reference to *The being and the nothingness*.

One point refers to the structure of the pre-reflexive cogito. Sartre uses the term ‘presence at himself’ [présence à soi] to describe the fact that the pre-reflexive cogito is a *unity*, but not an absolute *identity* and that there is a kind of movement, a kind of alteration within the self-consciousness, that prevents us from grasping the pre-reflexive cogito as it originally is. He says that there is an “instable balance between the identity as an absolute cohesion and the unity as a synthesis of a variety”<sup>22</sup>. So this process can be called the basically self-splitting of consciousness.

This self-splitting of consciousness and therefore the genesis of consciousness or self-consciousness is not described detailed in Sartres writings. He just says that consciousness ‘bursts out of itself’ or that it just ‘appears for itself’. At least it is a ‘mystification’<sup>23</sup>, a process, which happens but cannot be explained. I think, this is not very satisfying.

Other descriptions of the pre-reflexive cogito given by Sartre are also not very satisfying. As mentioned above, he says, that there is a movement, an alteration within the pre-reflexive consciousness. But now, in *Self-consciousness and self-knowledge* from 1948, Sartre answers to the hegelian philosopher Hyppolite, that the pre-reflexive consciousness is a kind of ‘mediated immediated’, but without any dialectical movement, even without any movement<sup>24</sup>. So what is it now, something moving or not moving?

Another topic, which is also not as clear as desirable in Sartres writings, concerns his thoughts of *self-foundation* of consciousness. In the earlier writings like *The transcendence of the Ego* Sartre thinks that consciousness founds its essence and its existence, in accordance with a *creatio ex nihilo*. But in the other writings, Sartre regards consciousness just as founding its *essence*, not its *existence* any longer. The founding of its existence is caused by the *being-in-itself*, and this happened in a mysterious metaphysical event called ‘decompression of the being-in-itself’ [Seinsdekompression]. Thus, the consciousness respective the pre-reflexive cogito is both: with regard to its essence founded by itself and with regard to its existence founded not by itself, but by the being-in-itself.

But the first mentioned, the essential self-foundation, is not the only aspect of Sartres thinking of self-foundation of consciousness. We said already, that the pre-reflexive cogito founds its essence or its sense [Sinn].

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<sup>22</sup> See Sartre, *SN*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> See Sartre, *SuS* [*Self-consciousness and self-knowledge*], 263.

<sup>24</sup> See Sartre, *SuS*, 261f.

If we remember, what we heard about the nothingness and Sartres thesis, that the subject is nothingness and that it 'nothings', we can say, that the pre-reflexive consciousness is also the ground of the negation. And because of this and because of the fact that negation is for Sartre the condition of freedom, the pre-reflexive cogito is finally the ground and primordial condition of the freedom of human beings. This thinking of Sartre is quite similar to Fichte, who also thought, that the events in the self-positing I are the conditions of the freedom of man.

And after all, as I indicated with Sartres term 'mystification', the pre-reflexive consciousness is also the ground of all kinds of reflection.

With regard to the traditional difference between *grounds of knowledge* [Erkenntnisgründe, *ratio cognoscendi*] and *grounds of being* [Seinsgründe, *ratio essendi*], we can say, it is Sartres opinion that the pre-reflexive consciousness is in at least three different ways a ground of being: (1) it is the ground of the essence of man, (2) the ground of the negation and therefore of the freedom of man and (3) the ground of the human capacity to reflect.

As Sartres theory in *The Being and the Nothingness* is a phenomenological theory, this theory has another typical characteristic feature. It is Sartres reference to empiricism, that is to empirical phenomena which are used to verify and demonstrate his statements. In our case, Sartre presents several empirical facts or descriptions about empirical facts concerning the pre-reflexive self-consciousness. I want to speak about two of his examples to demonstrate the pre-reflexive cogito. The first is his description of the event, when we are reading a book. During the act of reading a book, there is, Sartre says, no I [Je] and no I [Moi] within the consciousness. We have a positing consciousness of the book, but only a pre-reflexive, non-positing consciousness of ourselves. In other words, when we read a book, we do that without paying attention to ourselves as the readers, we have no reflexive self-consciousness, but are 'absorbed' by the letters and the act of reading. Just if someone interrupts us and asks, what we are doing, our consciousness changes into a reflective consciousness and we know ourselves as somebody who was just before in the act of reading a book.

The same happens, if we count e.g.cigarettes in a box. In the act of counting, we have a positing consciousness of the cigarettes, but only a non-positing, pre-reflexive consciousness of ourselves. Just if somebody asks us: 'What are you doing?' and we answer, 'I count', a reflective consciousness of ourselves is constituted.

As I tried to show in my thesis, these examples could be regarded as inspired by Husserl and his thinking of the phenomena of *attention* [Aufmerksamkeit], described in his *Logical*

*Investigations* [*Logische Untersuchungen*], and also of the ‘*natural attitude*’ [natürliche Einstellung], carried out in Husserl’s *Ideas I*.

However, I think at this point we should have a brief look at the philosophy of Fichte and say something generally about Sartre’s theory. Fichte’s philosophy is, succeeding Kant, a transcendental philosophy, that is a conception about the non-empirical conditions of knowledge. But here Sartre presents the pre-reflexive cogito, that is the basis of his phenomenological ontology, as an empirical fact. So can his philosophy actually be called a transcendental philosophy and therefore a philosophy that really gets to the final foundational ground, that even can be reached by philosophy? I suppose, unfortunately, it can’t. There is neither a separation from all empiricism, nor any method like Husserl’s reductions or *epoché*, that leads us to the pure consciousness and to the transcendental conditions of all constitution of world and knowledge.

Compared with Fichte’s thinking of the I, there is another topic, that I discussed in my thesis in a more detailed way. It is the difference of *unity* and *identity* and the problems caused by this topic. In the history of philosophy the concepts ‘*unity*’ and especially ‘*identity*’ have been discussed extensively, e.g. in the questions about personal identity. I can’t give here a review of these discussions. I just want to remind you of Fichte’s sentence ‘I=I’, who is, as an expression for the structure of self-consciousness, in the same time an identity and a non-identity. Besides this I=I, which maybe can be called in an Hegelian way an ‘identity of identity and non-identity’, the history of philosophy knows ‘identity’ also as a totality, which includes, in contrast to the first one, no inner difference and no variety, e.g. the *Being* [to einai] of Parmenides or the *One* [to hen] of the Neoplatonist Plotin.

From this point of view, Sartre’s distinction between *being-for-itself* [etre-pour-soi] and *being-in-itself* [etre-en-soi] is a distinction between an identity, that includes a variety, Sartre says ‘a *unity*’, this is the *being-for-itself*, and an identity, that includes no variety, this is the *being-in-itself*. And the cogito respective the pre-reflexive cogito belongs to the being-for-itself and is therefore a phenomenon, that includes a variety or an inner difference, expressed by the term ‘presence at himself’ [présence à soi]. But this causes the problems we already know. If there is an inner difference, a duality not only between the pre-reflexive and the reflexive cogito, that we can also find in Sartre’s philosophy, but within the pre-reflexive cogito itself, we get once more the problems of *circularity* and *infinite regress*. And now just in the ‘core’ and the basis of Sartre’s philosophy.

Let me now refer to two other topics of Sartre's theory of the pre-reflexive consciousness, before I speak about a last problem, which also concerns Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. One topic in Sartre's philosophy is about the *time-character* of the pre-reflexive cogito. Although it is not clear, if Sartre thinks, that the pre-reflexive cogito is timeless or not, there are in my opinion two characteristic traits of this consciousness: its *instantaneousness* and its *permanence*. The first means, that the pre-reflexive consciousness constitutes itself *suddenly*, in the twinkling of an eye, the second means, that it constitutes itself in *every* moment, permanently. So it has to be asked, if and how these two features can be brought together.

The other topic is about the interpersonality or intersubjectivity and the accessibility of immediate self-consciousness for other people. On one hand, Sartre says, that the pre-reflexive cogito can only be reached by the consciousness itself, not by the consciousness of others. Therefore, in principle we can't grasp the consciousness of other people, he says. But on the other hand, the immediate self-consciousness can be determined by the others, as Sartre shows in his theory of intersubjectivity, that is in his analysis of 'the view' and of the phenomenon of 'shame'. So there is another topic, which is not clarified by Sartre.

But let's now get to the end of this lecture and turn to a last problem in this philosophy. If we think about the statement of Sartre, that there is a kind of movement within the consciousness and of his examples of reading and counting, we face a problem, which I want to call the *problem of modification*. As primarily described in *The being and the nothingness*, the phenomena of consciousness cannot be grasped in their original immediate state, that is they can only be grasped as disappearing phenomena. They receive a kind of *modification*, when they get into reflective consciousness. This modification, shown by Sartre in different ways and described with terms like 'opacity' or 'obfuscation' [Trübung] causes a problem, that is not only a problem for his phenomenological ontology.

As I tried to show in other writings, this is already a fundamental problem for Husserl's phenomenology, which wants to be a final, rational and scientific philosophy, a 'strict science' as Husserl says. Husserl's attempt in his later thinking concerns the existence of a last, functioning transcendental subject that is called 'last-functioning I' [letztfunctionierendes Ich] or 'pre-subjectivity' [Ursubjektivität]. It is studied especially in the context of time-consciousness. The character of this 'last-functioning I' is, as Klaus Held showed in his same-titled book, its 'living presence' [Lebendige Gegenwart], that means among other things a 'unity of standing and streaming', a unity which includes immutability and alteration. But, as Held shows, it is quite inaccessible for the analysis of phenomenology because of the fact,

that it can only be analysed in the reflection, a reflection, that modifies the original phenomenon.

Now in Held's and also in my opinion, because of this fact of modification, of altering the basic phenomena of consciousness in the act of 'knowing' it, the phenomenology cannot get into this pre-reflexive consciousness as it originally is. The phenomenological reflection always gets nothing but a modified phenomenon, not the phenomenon as it is in itself. Thus the last ground of philosophy cannot be reached by phenomenology. And so it must be said, that Husserl's final foundation of philosophy has failed. And the same has to be said about the philosophy of Sartre. His description of the pre-reflexive cogito supplies many interesting, helpful and more or less clear and understandable details about this phenomenon. But as a founding philosophical theory like the transcendental theories of Kant or Fichte, which indeed have their own problems, it is unsuitable. The pre-reflexive cogito is disappearing, and with it – once more – the chance of a successful final foundation of philosophy.