

How Can We Understand Transcendence of the Ego?

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Introduction: What Is the Self?

As I understand the question “what is the self?” or “what is the ego?,” it is just an abstract, generic version of the personal, existential question “what am I?”

Thus understood, the question is one that can be asked only in first-person language—that is, language with such indexical expressions as “I,” “here,” “now.” Scientific theories, when officially formulated, are written in third-person language—that is, language devoid of indexical expressions. Hence, at least on the face of it, the answer to this question cannot be given by a scientific theory. A scientific theory could imply, for example, that *Homo sapiens* is thus or so, such as evolved from *Homo ergaster*, and requires oxygen to survive. Then I could take a step further by adding the first-person statement “I am of the species *Homo sapiens*.” But that would not end the question for me unless I added another first-person statement, such as “all that is true about me follows from the fact that I am of the species *homo sapiens* in such or such conditions.” Those first-person statements could not be supplied by any scientific theory.

Taking the question of the self in this way contrasts with much of the literature on this subject.¹ But to understand “what is the self?” as instead a

¹ See for example the collections Galen Strawson, ed., *The Self?* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), and F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson, eds., *Self and*

query about the nature or character of an entity that could be distinct from the person whose self it is seems to me to derive from a confusion about language. In this respect I agree with Anthony Kenny, who blames much on confusion between “my self” and “myself,” and Hector-Neri Castaneda, who likens “the self” to the phrase “the whale” as in “the whale is found in both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.”²

The question “what am I?” is personal and individual, and so will have different answers depending on who is asking. As a philosophical topic, though, it requires finding universal aspects, aspects that must be present, explicitly or implicitly, in everyone’s answer. That is why the abstract, general formulation “what is the self?” is after all not inapt. The specific question on this level of generality that I wish to broach is whether the self, the referent of the word *I*, is immanent or transcendent. But that requires first of all a way to understand that question.

On Sartre’s *The Transcendence of the Ego*³

Here and elsewhere I propose to approach the question “what am I?” at least in certain respects as it was approached in existential phenomenology—as read through my (analytic philosophy) eyes.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s thesis that the ego is transcendent and his arguments for this become clear in the course of a largely critical discussion of this topic in modern philosophy. He begins:

For most philosophers the ego is an “inhabitant” of consciousness. . . . We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially *in* consciousness: it is outside, *in the world*. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another.⁴

This is the informal explanation of what he means by “transcendent”: what is not “mental” or “in thought” but what thought is about, what desires are directed to outside, in the world, is transcendent.

Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992).

² Anthony Kenny, *Self* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1988); Hector-Neri Castaneda, “On the Phenomeno-Logic of the I,” *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (Vienna: University of Vienna, 1969), 260–66.

³ I am no Sartre scholar, and will claim only the inspiration of his work. I make no claims as to correct interpretation, but do hope to find interesting ways to understand him.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 31.

The transcendent objects of thought he mentions as examples include not just *concreta* in nature, but also such abstract entities as the proposition that 2 plus 2 equals 4. So there is as yet no implication here about what sort of thing the self might be, nor indeed that it is a thing at all.⁵

When Sartre sums up some of his conclusions, he writes:

First, the *I* is an *existent*. It has a concrete type of existence, undoubtedly different from the existence of mathematical truths, of meanings, or of spatio-temporal beings, but no less real. The *I* gives itself as transcendent.⁶

That the *I* is not in any sense “internal” became very important in the existential phenomenology of the 1940s and 1950s. Joseph Kockelmans, who was my teacher in several seminars, told us that their watchword was: “Monads need no windows, we are outside already!”

What is denied then? Sartre’s initial arguments are directed against two sorts of views. The first is that the referent of *I* in “I think” is a *transcendental* ego, an entity distinct from any contents of thought, and having the role of unifying our stream of conscious activity. The second target is identification of the self with anything that could count as contents of consciousness or be constituted by what is in consciousness.

For that second target, I would suggest, as a contemporary example, Daniel Dennett’s identification of the self as the fictional character who is the protagonist of the autobiography that (he contends) we are always in the process of writing.⁷ It is quite right to call the protagonist a fiction, for although that mentally, *sotto voce*, constructed autobiography (if such there be) is *about me*, it is undoubtedly full of inaccuracies and downright falsehoods. But its material is all stuff that inhabits consciousness, such as putative memories. On that sort of account, then, my self, that “center of narrative gravity,” is nothing more than the central node of a representation of myself to myself—an “inhabitant” of consciousness, not a being out in the world.

Let us grant, if only for the sake of argument, that Sartre’s critique is successful on both counts. The referent of *I* in “I think,” if that has a

⁵ Elsewhere I have argued that I am not nothing, but I am not a thing; see my “Transcendence of the Ego: *The Non-Existent Knight*,” *Ratio*, n.s., 17 (2004): 453–77.

⁶ Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, 52.

⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, and D. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992), 103–15.

referent, is neither a transcendental ego nor an entity constituted by some form of conscious activity. When the *I* appears in my thinking, as in the reflexive thought in which I am aware that, for example, I am currently enjoying myself in vivacious company and their scintillating conversation, it is an object of thought, "presenting itself" as something outside of that awareness, which is currently directed upon it.

But then a worry remains. In any such very limited, partial, and possibly defective representation of myself to myself, we can point to its implicitly recognized incompleteness as supporting the impression that it is a representation of something real, "out in the world." We appear to ourselves as at best very incompletely captured by the thoughts we have about ourselves, as indeed inexhaustibly richly decked out in non-salient attributes as well, and hence distinct from what appears in our reflexive thought. But Sartre's method, which brings this to light, is phenomenological, and his analysis can therefore uncover only the intentional correlate of our orientation. Whatever weight this analysis carried in his contemporary context, or still does to some of us, it is weak as an argument against such a philosopher as Dennett.

Specifically, as philosophers we can raise the specter of an ideal case: the case of a representation of the sort of Dennett's idea of a *sotto voce* autobiography, but one that is entirely accurate, fully adequate, and complete.

If I could even in principle have such an ideally adequate representation of myself, encompassing in its narrative everything that would be ascribed to me under ideal circumstances, it would be very hard to resist Dennett's debunking contention that this narrative is really all there is to me. It would, at least on the face of it, be tenable to hold that the protagonist of that representation is all there is to the self, and that it has the same status as a fiction, for it is constituted by the story. Not the narrative's protagonist but only the story is what is real. The story "fits" all the events and features that are normally ascribed to me, but their unity consists solely in that they fit into this elaborate construal, with its "center" holding everything together. The right way in which to understand this "holding together" would then parallel Ludwig Wittgenstein's verdict on the "foundations of mathematics": they found mathematics in the sense that, in a painting, the painted rock supports the painted tower.

Thus Sartre's argument for transcendence is too weak, and leaves itself open to a reductive construal that denies his conclusion, *unless* a case can be made that it is in fact impossible for me to have a fully adequate representation of myself as answer to "what am I?" That is, a case to the effect that I am beyond representation, beyond the very possibility of fully adequate and complete representation. This, being beyond representation,

would be the strong thesis of transcendence of the ego, and if established, it would definitively counter the sorts of views that I take to be Sartre's target.

Therefore, showing my colors as an analytic philosopher, I will turn some of Sartre's discussion into one about language. For, just as it is crucial to what I am that I am conscious, it is equally crucial to what I am that I am a being with language. Any answer to "what am I?" must include that.

How We Seem to Ourselves

When we try to think about ourselves we quickly find ourselves in a certain sort of difficulty—there is inevitably something that exceeds our grasp. But we can begin by sketching some aspects of how it seems to us that we can be *at once* aware, *and* reflecting on this awareness in a discursive manner.

Reflective Detachment

I realize that I have been doing or thinking something: I have a certain history, which I know more or less. This history includes thoughts and feelings as well as actions that I remember, or realize I am having or doing now. But this current complex of remembering and realizing is a relation to that history (including the present doing), and so does not belong to it. I am already one step beyond what I realize.

At any point whatever in my history—up to and including the present—I can have various attitudes toward that, both cognitive and evaluative: I can already be "stepped back" from it. Let us abbreviate this point to "I am detached."

This is meant as a technical phrase: it means only what I just said, not that I "feel detached" or have a "feeling of detachment" or "am neutral" with respect to my history.

The conviction that we are free, that we are free agents, is closely related to this conviction, that there is nothing that can bar me from this reflective detachment with respect to my current constraints. A Sartrean point is that, even if chained to a prison wall, there are options subjectively: I can see myself as a victim or as a rebel, I can resign myself, or I can curse my fate. These possibilities, of diverse attitudes toward my situation, disappear only when I am broken physically as well as mentally, when I am reduced to the status of a thing. Or to give a less heroic example, if I smoke or gamble, even if I realize the grip that has on me, I can at the same time be of one mind or another: either wish that I were not thus, or glory in my self-assertion.

Undetached in Act

But does my phrase “I am detached” not overstate the case? Sometimes at least, I may not be “already stepped back.” I may be so engaged in my current activity that I am not “thetically” aware of what it is.⁸

To use one of Sartre’s examples, running to catch a streetcar, I am completely focused on the streetcar and its imminent departure. I certainly know that I am running, and, for instance, that I am dressed rather than naked, but am not reflecting on that; I am only non-thetically aware of that. Is that unreflective awareness an exception? Not an exception at all! It is the very rule, the constant reality. Although it is true that (1) I am detached in this technical sense (always capable, in principle, of stepping back from my present situated acting and thinking), it is in fact also true that (2) I am never “already stepped back” from all that is currently going on with me. For, suppose that I am remembering what I have done on some occasion, and realizing what I am doing now, and maybe even reflecting on their differences or the relation between them. Then this very condition of “being already stepped back” is just what is going on at that moment that I am *not* reflecting on, that I am not “thetically” aware of, that I am not “already stepped back from.”

Let us abbreviate this new point to “I am never detached.” Again, this is a technical phrase: it does not mean that I cannot be taking a detached view of something or other, just that I am never thus related to everything I am about at that moment.

Potentially Detached, with no Limit

Technical or not, the two phrases together seem to be a contradiction. If they are not, it is because the form of these phrases was hiding their true logical form. They are all about a relationship, the terms are *relative* terms.

At any given (conscious) moment, there is something going on with me that is *not* something that I am either remembering or realizing. There is also something going on (not necessarily with me!) of which I am very, explicitly, *thetically* aware. But whatever either of these things is, I have the *possibility* of relating to it in a cognizant, realizing way.

Let us abbreviate this more nuanced point to “I am potentially detached,

⁸ I am using Sartre’s term; “thetic” awareness of something implies being able to think about it, to draw inferences, for example. Non-thetic awareness is possible, in fact ubiquitous. The distinction, though not the term, is well recognized in analytic philosophy. One example of having been non-thetically aware of something is the case of suddenly realizing that you had been hearing, e.g., the traffic, or the monotonously barking dog, all along.

with no limitation.” And if I do so relate to, for example, a prior “stepping back,” I have the possibility of thus “stepping back” from that doing-so as well. Or so it seems to me, when I think about myself.

Is That Really So?

So it seems to me. But this claim to be potentially detached, *tout court*, is actually a very strong claim, with empirical implications. It implies that, no matter how creatively I think, it is in principle possible for me to reflect on what I think or have thought. Such a stepping back, if it is to have any importance at all, must be a real act, one that will take on higher and higher complexity as I continue.

If I have this capacity, that is surely a contingent matter. A machine, programmed with a particular language, can record many aspects of its own states, but there is a real limit to how far that can go. So, why think that the same limitation does not apply to me, at least in principle?

What are we to think of this inkling of unlimited richness in my intellectual capacity?

How We Could Be Overreaching Ourselves

When we think of how we can “step back” and reflect on what we have done and are doing, we are focusing on a genuine possibility of experience. It is a genuine possibility, as we can demonstrate to ourselves simply by memory or present example, and we can easily locate examples of doing so in our past.

But if our self-conception includes that I am *potentially detached, with no limitation*, then it does of course go far beyond what we have experienced in our intellectual life so far.

The caution—that we may be extrapolating too far, a central theme for Kant—should remind us of a long controversy concerning geometry. Euclid’s Fifth Postulate implies that, through any point outside a given line, there is another line that never intersects the former, no matter how far you extend them. That is indeed borne out however long you, finite being, draw the lines. But you will not thus verify the postulate, since whatever you make will have a specific finite length. What the postulate says, no single experience will verify.

Does our sense of potential detachment without limit go too far? Even if it seems to be a direct and simple generalization from what we have done to what we can do?

The danger that this is so is precisely the point of Kant’s discussion of the *Paralogisms*: “there is no inference even from how we necessarily

represent ourselves to what we are.” The question we have here arrived at is precisely the sort of question that Kant addresses in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Transcendental Dialectic. There he begins book II by speaking of arguments by means of which we conclude from something that we do know to something of which we do not even possess a conception but to which, by an unavoidable illusion, we ascribe objective reality.⁹

These are the arguments that lead us into the Illusions of Reason, because, while they lead us to “something of which we do not even possess a conception,” they do not reveal themselves as such. Instead, we are led there under the illusion that we *do* possess such a conception, that we are making sense, though we are not. The *Paralogisms*, where Kant exhibits the Illusions of Reason that give substance to the idea of the self, are introduced here, followed by the *Antinomies*. As his general diagnosis of the way in which Reason overreaches itself, and so of how pre-Kantian metaphysics is inevitably carried into Illusion, Kant points to the activity of subsuming propositions under ever-more-general principles in order to systematize, unify, and bring them to completion.¹⁰ This *seeking conditions for every condition* is not an illegitimate enterprise—quite the contrary; but the step that posits an ultimate “unconditioned,” the demand for ultimate explanation, *that* is the overreaching that leads to nonsense.¹¹

But now let us return to the self, and see if the reach for the unconditioned must really be classified as an Illusion in this case, and if so, whether *in some respect* or *tout court*.

The Language I Live In

The much embattled conception of the self that I outlined above I encapsulated in the slogan “I am potentially detached, with no limitation.” To evaluate the strong claim here involved, we need to pay special attention to language. When I “step back” in that sense, I am reflecting. Whether the occurrence that I have thus brought to awareness—a feeling perhaps, or impression, or impulse, or intention, or bodily position or activity—is “propositional” or not, the content of the reflection surely is, and I could

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A339/B397.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A308/B365–A309/B3656.

¹¹ As is often pointed out, Kant follows this pattern of critique in the *Antinomies* but not in the *Paralogisms*, although the pattern is officially announced at the outset for all of book II of the Transcendental Dialectic. It is not difficult, though, to see how it applies to our present discussion about the self.

not have that reflection unless I could express it in language.

If there are really no limits to this potentiality, is it because there are no limits to the language in which my intellectual activity takes place? Even if that is the case, my command of it is surely not already entirely actual. We cannot claim to have the whole language already, only that at each “stepping back” I could either (1) *enter* it or (2) *create* a bit more of it. These are two possibilities to explore. In fact, neither will seem possible after all, as we shall see.

The Apparent Universality of Our Language

When we think of ourselves as living and moving in space, we do not conceive of any limits due to space, only due to our feeble finite bodies. There are things we cannot reach by moving, but we certainly do not think of that as being because those things are “beyond space,” extra-spatial. It is the same with our language: we do experience difficulties when we try to express ourselves, or describe what we see, or explicate what the world of physics is really like, for example; but we experience those difficulties as due to ourselves, and certainly do not think of those subjects as “beyond language,” ineffable.

Is there anything at all that I could think but that could not be expressed in language? Any thought so ineffable that it is beyond expression? If we cannot say it, we cannot whistle it either, so what is thus ineffable would have to be inconceivable in the strongest sense.¹² The very idea seems to belong solely in “far out” metaphysics, so let us consider the contrary.

What is the contrary? Let's begin by formulating it as:

Whatever we think at any time we could reflect on in a “stepped back” thinking, and whenever we can do that, we can express what we are thinking in language; our reflection can take the form of a description.

But there will be two ways to understand this, corresponding to the distinction I noted briefly above, between entering a language or creating more language.

¹² Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* concludes: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” As Frank Ramsey put it, “what we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either.” See Frank Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Essays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), 238.

A Universal Language?

We can begin, for now, with the easiest or simplest way to understand this, as the assertion that there is (in principle) a language in which all such descriptions can be given.

This does not come with a claim that I personally am—as I am today—able to express all that I could ever come to think, in principle. I may not even be such as to be able to complete whatever sorts of infinite processes could alone put one in a position to have the entirety of such a language. But if it is possible to express everything that we could ever think, then (according to the option we are currently exploring) there must be in principle a language in which that could be done.

So let us see where it leads us:

(*) There is in principle a language L such that everything that I can think I can express by some sentence of L.

A language L which is like that I'll call a "universal language."

The Impossibility of a Universal Language

There is an old trick to show that the idea of a universal language, in this sense, is absurd.¹³ I draw a rectangle on the blackboard. Once we all see it, we agree on a name for this rectangle, so that we can refer to it: let us call it "Rectus."

Now I consider the proposition that:

(**) Nothing true that is expressible in L is ever written in Rectus.

That does seem to make sense, does it not?

- It will be true if I quickly rub out the rectangle before anyone has a chance to write something in it.
- It will be false if I write "2 plus 2 equals 4" in it.

But instead, let us do the following. If L is a universal language, then let A be the sentence of L that expresses that proposition (**). I write A in this rectangle and *then* I quickly rub out the whole thing.

¹³ Paradoxes of this sort were a hot topic of conversation with my colleagues Frederick Fitch, Richmond Thomason, Robert Stalnaker, Robert Fogelin, and Charles Daniels during my years at Yale University in the late 1960s. I gladly acknowledge my debt to their insight and inspiration.

For one short moment, the rectangle existed, and someone who understands this language L would have seen it as *in effect* like this:

Nothing true that is expressible in L is ever written in Rectus.

So, sentence A was the only thing that was ever written in the rectangle. Was it true? If it was true then nothing true was ever written in the rectangle, so it was not written there—but we saw it with our own eyes, so we can only conclude that it was not true.

Therefore, with my precipitate rubbing out, I made sure that nothing true was ever written in that rectangle. By hypothesis, that is what A said, so it was true after all! But that, as we just saw, is impossible.

What should we say about language L? The above paradox requires: (1) that there was indeed something to be expressed; (2) that L has a truth predicate and a quantifier that allows the formulation of a sentence that says of all its sentences that, if they occur in the rectangle, then they are not true; and (3) that the truth-functions can be expressed in L. If (2) or (3) are not correct, then L is certainly not universal. But we cannot deny (1), since in our own language we are clearly able to express it, on the assumption that L exists.

What we could deny, in order to escape self-contradiction, is that L is our language, adding that, in our own language, we can express something inexpressible in L. But that makes the point as well, of course, for that means that L cannot be what it was meant to be.

So, *a universal language does not exist*. It is natural to put the blame on the idea that L has a truth predicate, because there are well-known stronger arguments that conclude that familiar kinds of languages cannot have their own truth predicate. But it is also quite natural instead to say that L cannot have a quantifier ranging over all its own sentences. “All” or “everything” in L cannot mean what they sound like. As is so often observed, a paradox automatically opens up a range of escape routes, and so this argument does not show that we cannot have a language. We can; but none of the escapes leaves us with the possibility of a universal language.

So, no way out: there cannot be a universal language. If my self-conception that “I am potentially detached, with no limitation” requires me even potentially to have command of a universal language, then it is simply incoherent.

Language in actu and Language in potentia

We are not out of options. Look here: it was *we* who just now found

ourselves able to talk about any candidate for a universal language and show it to be wanting! Does that not show that, in some way or sense, we do have something more than any such candidate?

I imagine that anyone reading the above had the idea, quite early on, that there might be an illegitimate commuting of quantifiers involved. Even if everyone has a mother, it does not follow that there is a mother of everyone. Similarly, even if everything we can think can be expressed in some language, it does not follow that there is one language in which everything we can think can be expressed! So let us look into the second option, which we have been ignoring, that language is something we can create bit by bit, in various ways.

The language I actually have, or even a language that I could actually have at some other definite moment, now or in the future, even if my life does not end, let us call a “language *in actu*.” Any such language is definitely limited in resources, not universal. But that does not establish that there is anything ultimately ineffable!

As tentative conclusion I offer that my self-conception entails that *I can transcend* any such stage, and thus command a richer language than I had theretofore. The resources for eventually express anything at all that makes sense are real as well; they constitute my “language *in potentia*.” For, these allow me to continually enrich my language *in actu*. And nothing effable is beyond their reach.

Limits to this Conception of Language?

But wait! How can I conceive of language *in potentia*? I cannot talk about it as if it were a language in the way that *a language I could actually have at some stage* is a language. For, that would make it a universal language, impossible. So this is an idea that I cannot reify.

However, there is an indefinitely extending tree, branching off in many directions, which consists of all the possible languages *in actu* that I could construct, starting from what I have now. Each new node on a branch of this tree enriches the chain of ever richer languages leading up to it.

But the same question recurs here: can I really be discussing *the tree of possible languages in actu* in the language I have now, as it seems I am doing? Perhaps I can to some extent, but if I now claim that everything that I can think I can express by some sentence in some language in this tree of possible languages *in actu*, then the problem is that I can draw rectangle Rectus again. Having drawn the rectangle again, let us reflect on the following thought:

(***) Nothing true that is expressible in some language in the tree of possible languages *in actu* is ever written in Rectus.

Unfortunately, we can now carry out essentially the same trick as before. Suppose that everything I can think is expressed by some sentence in some language that extends my current language *in actu*. Then (***) is expressed by such a sentence; let us refer to it as sentence B, and assume it written in Rectus, just before Rectus is wiped off.

- Suppose this sentence is not true, then
 - » if it also belongs to some language in the tree, it turns out to be true, hence both true and not true, which is impossible;
- but if it is true, then, given what it says, it follows that it is not expressible in any language in the tree.

So, neither this sentence nor any translation of it belongs to any language that could be or become my actual language! At least not if the tree we just conceived of describes what my language is or could become—and now we have a contradiction. So it seems that we have now reduced to absurdity even this amended conception of our limitlessness in language.

Once again, I had too high an opinion of my Self. Once again, my presentation of the idea of unlimited possibilities of discursive reflection within my scope ran into an insurmountable obstacle. What has gone wrong in this attempt of mine to represent myself to myself as a being with language?

Representation and the Logic of Natural Language

The import of the above reasoning may be obscure, may in fact look too tricky to be taken seriously. These paradox-producing rectangles may seem to have taken us on a detour after I announced that Sartre's thesis of the transcendence of the ego needed strengthening. It needed strengthening, I argued, with an argument to the effect not only that the self is in practice not adequately represented, but that it *could not* be. What I have to lay out explicitly is just how this detour about language demonstrates precisely this, once we understand what led us into paradox.

The Hidden Premise about Representation

There is actually nothing wrong with our contention that we have language! Nor is there anything wrong with our conviction that we are able to express anything that we think, on the level of discursive, reflexive

thought, in language. What went wrong was in our attempt to extrapolate conviction into a conception, a representation, of our language “as a whole,” as a complete “object” of a certain sort, as a thing to be surveyed.

When we look closely, the two arguments I gave about language, each of which arrives at a contradiction, we see one salient common feature. In both cases, the sentence written in the rectangle purported to be a statement about *all the sentences* in the language(s) in question. By assuming, without saying so, that I could do this meaningfully, I was adding a hidden premise. For, the interpretation of such quantifying words as “all” requires always the specification, and representation, of a range.¹⁴ For example, when Yogi Berra said about a certain restaurant, “nobody goes there any more, it is too crowded,” we understand that his “nobody” referred to a particular set of people, his “set.”

In my arguments, I sketched two models, representations, of our language. The first depicted it as a single, “universal,” language, and the second depicted it as a growing tree of extensions of a single, “current,” language. The emphasis here should be on “sketched,” for I did not actually construct either of those representations. In effect, I asked you, the reader, to suppose or imagine or pretend that we had those representations before us, and that they were humanly manageable representations adaptable for our use in argument.

Since we ran into contradictions, what we supposed was wrong in some respect or other. The conclusion I offer is this: It is in fact logically impossible for me to have such a representation of my own language, as a whole.

Below, I will support this conclusion by showing that it also follows from more technically respectable reasoning than my quick, tricky, informal “rectangle” argument. But first, grant me the conclusion for a moment, and let us see what follows for our subject of the self.

If I offer an answer to the question of what I am, I must include as central the fact that I am a being with language—and indeed, language adequate to the discursive expression of reflective thought. But in that case, our conclusion entails that this answer must include that I am therefore beyond the possibility of fully adequate representation: It is in fact logically impossible for me to have a fully adequate representation of myself.

¹⁴ This is controversial among some logicians. I am not denying that we can *use* such quantifier words, or the word “everything,” meaningfully without having such a range specified. My remark is about representations of language, not about the language in which we construct such representations; see further my remarks about the language-in-use in the next section.

Early on in this paper, I argued that Sartre's thesis of the transcendence of the ego needed completion. It is too weak to bear the burden of his arguments, unless the self cannot be captured in a fully adequate representation. The required strong version of the transcendence of the ego must imply that the self is, that I am, beyond the possibility of fully adequate representation.

Representation of Natural Language and Its Limits

There remains the doubt, which may reasonably be raised here, that my informal argument did not support my conclusion with sufficient logical rigor. What I can offer in support of the claim that it did is that, on the two major conceptions of language to have come out of the work of twentieth-century logicians, the same conclusion follows.

These are the conceptions of Alfred Tarski and of Haskell B. Curry, and they were formed in response to paradoxes intimately related to my informal "rectangle" argument.

On Tarski's view, our natural language is properly represented by a hierarchy of partial languages.¹⁵ At the bottom, first level, there are statements descriptive only of non-linguistic items—statements about buildings in Paris, about the mating behavior of frogs, and the like, but not about words used to describe those things. At the second level, there are terms describing language of the first level, with sentences such as "the word 'frog' is a four-letter word" and, more elaborately, "some [first-level] sentences about frogs are false." Then a third level has discourse that also describes second-level discourse, and so forth.

We can think of each level as (a representation of) a small language, and can take the hierarchy to be cumulative, such that each level contains also all the levels below it. But no level can include discourse about what is in languages above that level. In the logicians's terminology, any language on level below N is an *object language* for the language at level N and that language is a *metalanguage* for those below it. The hierarchy is clearly infinite. The contention is that any meaningful discourse in natural language will be part of some language found at some specific finite level.

But what I just wrote is about the hierarchy as a whole, so it cannot be located at any specific level! The language I use to describe such a hierarchy is outside it. That does not automatically mean that it fails to be meaningful, for an extension of this hierarchical representation can be constructed. What I wrote is then understood to be about the prior, un-extended part

¹⁵ Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4 (1944): 341–75.

only, and its description is not of the extended hierarchy in which it itself can be located. Clearly, on Tarski's conception, there can be no representation of our natural language as a whole, for each such hierarchy can be described in an extended hierarchy; there is no end to it.

I am personally more sympathetic to the less well-known conception of language that was developed by Curry.¹⁶ On Curry's view, we conduct all of our discourse, in logic and mathematics or science as well as in daily life, in a single language, our *language-in-use*.

Our language-in-use is a natural language like English augmented with such special linguistic devices and resources as may be needed. This language is subject to change as we mobilize our linguistic resources to change or augment it. We can indeed speak about it—as I am doing now—but that does not imply that it is definitely circumscribed or identified by means of a non-indexical definite description. Only proper parts of it can be exhaustively characterized.

This leaves the terms "object language" and "metalanguage" free to be properly characterized in a different way. We may study a language, call it L, as an object language, and that could be an artificial language, like a computer language, or even one we have made up without any connection to actual discourse. More often, though, it would be a circumscribed part of our language-in-use, or an artificial language offered as a good model of such a more or less vaguely or precisely circumscribed part. To discuss L, we augment the language-in-use with some technical jargon. But now we can go farther, since not all of the language-in-use needs to be mobilized to describe L. We can construct a model of the part of our language-in-use in which we described L, and call that ML, the metalanguage for L. This process we can iterate.

In this way, Curry regards Tarski's hierarchies as representations of parts of what is within the compass of our natural-language resources. But no such construction could represent the language-in-use as a whole, since each construction is carried out in a part of the language-in-use that is outside and "about" the part that is being represented.

Clearly, then, on neither Curry's nor Tarski's conception can there be an adequate representation of our natural language as a whole. Their much more rigorous efforts imply the same as the conclusion for which I argued more informally: it is literally and logically impossible for me to have a representation of my own language.

¹⁶ Haskell B. Curry, "Language, Metalanguage, and Formal System," *The Philosophical Review* 59 (1950): 346–53.

Conclusion

Since having language is a central and crucial aspect of what I am, it is literally and logically impossible for me to have a complete or fully adequate answer to the question “what am I?” The *I* is transcendent in the strong sense that the *I* is not only never entirely captured by our representations in fact, but beyond the very possibility of fully adequate representation.

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