Sartre on Positional and Non-Positional Consciousness

First, let’s start with a little review. Sartre’s method in arriving at his analysis of consciousness is called *the phenomenological method* (or just *phenomenology* for short). This is something he learned from the Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl, who coined the term and introduced it (at least explicitly) into philosophy.

**Phenomenology** studies the structures of conscious experience form the first person point of view, i.e., from the perspective of what we can learn by looking at the nature of consciousness *as experienced*. As such, we are not concerned with the existence of anything “outside” experience. Is there a “real” world that exists whether we experience it or not? Am I hallucinating right now or actually perceiving this computer in front of me? Phenomenology just isn’t concerned with these questions. Both hallucination and perception are kinds of consciousness. Phenomenology is concerned with how these experiences “seem” to us, from the “inside out.” Husserl thinks there is much we can learn by looking at consciousness, as experienced. Sartre agrees.

Husserl claimed that the defining feature of consciousness is that it is always “of” or “about” something. Husserl described this by saying that consciousness is always “intentional.” (So this “feature” of consciousness that it is always of or about something has come to be called “the intentionality” of experience. There is a whole philosophical literature on this subject, quite aside from what either Husserl or Sartre had to say about it.) For reasons of his own, Sartre sometimes uses the word “positional” instead of “intentional.” So, when Sartre says that consciousness is always positional, he means that it is always of or about something, i.e., that it is always intentional.

(To add to the terminological confusion, Sartre also uses the word “thetic” as synonymous with both “intentional” and “positional.” There are various different “shades of meaning” that each of these terms conveys, but for our purposes, just view them all as describing the same thing: that consciousness is always of or about something.)
Note, this (i.e., that consciousness is always of or about something) doesn’t mean there is always some “real” thing that “corresponds” to our consciousness of it. We can after all, think about (and so be conscious of) things that do not exist. We can hallucinate pink elephants, believe in Santa Claus, or hope for things that never happen. Each of these is a form of consciousness. But remember that we are doing phenomenology here--we are describing how consciousness “seems” to us, how things “appear” to consciousness, and so are not concerned with whether or not these “appearances” are accurate or “true.”

There is another point that Sartre gets from Husserl, but that he stresses in a much more consistent (some would say in a more “radical”) way than Husserl: not only is consciousness always of about something, it is always consciousness of that thing as something that “exceeds” any given consciousness of it. Sartre describes this by saying that consciousness is always consciousness of a “transcendent” object, i.e., an object that “transcends” any particular consciousness of it.

This is a tricky but important point. Sartre claims to be offering a phenomenological description of consciousness, of how it appears from the first person perspective. But then how can he say that consciousness is always about an object that “transcends” the consciousness of it? Isn’t Sartre now theorizing about the “reality” that may or may not exist “outside” of consciousness? Hasn’t he switched from phenomenology to metaphysics?

I think this issue goes to the heart of Sartre’s notion of consciousness, and also to what he will say about non-positional consciousness. Sartre still claims to be doing phenomenological description at this point, not metaphysical theorizing. He is describing how things appear in consciousness. And what he is saying is that things always appear as from a particular perspective or point of view. But to see something “from a perspective” is to see it as something that could be seen from other “perspectives.” It is to see it as something that “exceeds” any particular perspective of it. Again, this is claimed as a phenomenological description of consciousness. Sartre is claiming that consciousness always “presents itself” (always appears) as consciousness of an object as “seen” from a specific conscious perspective, i.e., the perspective of this specific consciousness. So even in being of or about an
object, consciousness “reveals” or “alludes to” to itself because it is always consciousness of an object as “seen” from this specific consciousness. The is the essence of non-positional consciousness.

(My own way of describing this: consciousness is essentially “perspectival.” Consciousness is always consciousness of an object from a perspective—the perspective of this specific consciousness.)

But before we can say more about the distinction between positional and non-positional consciousness, we must first introduce the distinction between (what Sartre calls) reflective and non-reflective consciousness. We must introduce this first because the two distinctions are easily confused, and part of what Sartre says about non-positional consciousness can only be appreciated by understanding the difference between the two distinctions.

So what is “reflective consciousness?” This is fairly straightforward: it is a conscious state that includes an awareness of myself, i.e. that includes myself as an object of consciousness. It might be when I “reflect” upon what I am conscious of, or simply when I remember an earlier consciousness, and I remember this earlier consciousness as mine.

But most conscious states are not reflective. If I am running to catch a bus, engaged in reading a book or watching a movie (and many other examples), I am conscious of the bus, the plot of the book, or the characters in the movie. “I” am “there,” in the consciousness is some way, but I am not the “object” of the conscious state.

But now if you ask me what I’m doing, I will say, “I am trying to catch the bus,” “I am reading a book,” or “I am watching the movie.” These are “reflective” conscious states because they include me as (part of or one of) the object(s) of my conscious state. It seems clear that most of my conscious states are not reflective: most of the time I am aware of something, and very rarely do I stop to “stand back” and reflect on the fact I am aware of something. It is only when I do this standing back that “I” occur as an object in my experience.
Finally, note that reflective and non-reflective conscious states are “mutually exclusive,” that is, they do not overlap. Either I am, or I’m not, an explicit object of my experience. It can’t be both.

This is important in making clear that the distinction between positional and non-positional consciousness cannot be understood as equivalent to (or even overlapping) the distinction between reflective and non-reflective consciousness. All consciousness, according to Sartre is (or involves a “layer of”--this will be described next) non-positional consciousness. So non-positional cannot mean the same as non-reflective as because consciousness cannot be both reflective and non-reflective, and yet all consciousness must be (or include a “layer” of) non-positional consciousness. (Of course, all consciousness is, for Sartre, positional. That means Sartre is claiming that all consciousness is, at one level, positional consciousness while also being, at another level, non-positional consciousness.) So now it’s time we said what that means. Sartre’s real insight comes from seeing how this is possible.

Sartre claims that all consciousness is positional--it always posits an object distinct from itself. But we have also said that consciousness seems to essentially involve some kind of non-positional “self-consciousness.” What is this “self-consciousness?”

First, it is important to note that by “self-conscious” we do not mean anything like “shy” or “socially awkward,” like when we describe someone who is nervous about public speaking as being “self conscious.” This is simply a different meaning of the word.

More importantly, we also don’t mean “consciousness of myself, as the subject of experience.” The kind of consciousness that Sartre is talking about is not consciousness of an enduring “self” that is the ultimate subject of experience. We have already seen that Hume pointed out that we have no experience of the ultimate subject of experience, but only of various objects of experience. And Sartre’s whole point in Transcendence of the Ego is to deny that there is any such ultimate subject of consciousness. What we are talking about here is not consciousness of the “self,” understood as the ultimate subject of experience, but the awareness that consciousness has of itself. So, rather than speaking of a kind of “self-consciousness” that always accompanies
consciousness of an object, it would be better to speak of an “itself-consciousness” that constitutes what it is to be consciousness of an object. **It is this “itself-consciousness” that Sartre calls non-positional consciousness.**

This “itself consciousness”—the consciousness that consciousness has of itself—that always accompanies consciousness of an object is not of itself in the same sense of “of” that it is of an object, and this is why Sartre calls it non-positional. To say that consciousness is positional is to say that it posits an object (that it is “of” an object) that is distinct from itself. But consciousness cannot be of itself in the same way that it is of an object, because consciousness cannot be distinct from itself. **Since consciousness must be aware of itself without being an object for itself, this awareness that consciousness has of itself (as being consciousness of an object) must be non-positional.** So, all consciousness is positional, in that it is consciousness of an object that is distinct from itself. But at the same time all consciousness is non-positional consciousness of itself as being positional consciousness of an object.

This may all sound like a “word game.” To say that consciousness must be aware of itself without being an object for itself (that it must be non-positional) doesn’t really explain what this means, or how it is possible. If all consciousness must be of an object, how can it be “of” itself without being an object for itself? Simply calling this consciousness-of-itself “non-positional” doesn’t explain what it is or explain why thinks Sartre thinks that all consciousness must be both positional consciousness of an object and non-positional consciousness of itself.

The explanation for this was alluded to above when we said that consciousness is essentially of an object and from a point of view (from a perspective). To be conscious of an object, Sartre claims, is to be conscious of it as it appears to this very consciousness. Consciousness is always of an object that one is conscious of as being distinct from this very consciousness of it. **So all consciousness of an object—even non-reflective consciousness where I am not included as an object of consciousness—“makes reference” to itself as the “point of view” from which the object is seen.** Of course, there is no “seer” at this “point of view.” (Or, at least, Sartre denies that there is any such “seer” or “transcendental ego.”) Consciousness “makes reference” to itself simply in virtue of being consciousness of an object that isn’t this very consciousness of it.
All of this is “heady stuff.” Sartre is analyzing what consciousness must appear to itself as being in order to be consciousness of an object. To be consciousness of an object which isn’t it (which isn’t the consciousness of it), consciousness must be “itself-conscious” as that which isn’t the object. This, for Sartre, is what positional consciousness is. Consciousness can be positional--can be about an object--only by “constituting” itself as the “background” against which an object can appear as the “foreground.” Without a “background,” there can be no “foreground.” Without something that is consciousness-of-itself-as-not-being-the-object, there can be no object for consciousness. But since consciousness is always of a transcendent object (an object that is distinct from the consciousness of it), consciousness must simply be an “itself-awareness” as that which isn’t the object. **So non-positional consciousness is Sartre’s analysis of the being of positional consciousness.** To be “of” or “about” an object (to be positional), consciousness must be an “itself-revealing” (a non-positional consciousness) as the “lack” or “non-being” of this object. In order to be conscious of an object, consciousness must be aware of itself as the non-being of this object.

So, not only is there no transcendental ego, or ultimate subject of experience, consciousness simply is the itself-awareness of the not-being of some object. Consciousness exists “for-itself” as a lack of being. For Sartre, this is what constitutes both our freedom, and our “anxiety.” We are a “hole” always looking to be “filled.” “Bad faith” arises because we want to be both at the same time. But more of that later!