

The Paradox of Racial Subjectivity:
Racial Double-Consciousness and Husserlian Intersubjectivity

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In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois describes the experience of being conscious of himself as a black person in a racialized society:

[T]he Negro is...gifted with second-sight of this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Barnes & Noble Classics: 2003, 9).

I would like to develop a Husserlian interpretation of “double-consciousness,” in which Du Bois’ two perspectives are two competing sets of intentional relations. Du Bois, as an intending subject, understands and thus experiences himself in one way, while at the same time he is an intentional object for the white gaze of intersubjectivity, which sees him quite differently.

This is a specific version of the problem in Husserl’s paradox of subjectivity. In the paradox, there are two different accounts of the ego that need to be reconciled: the empirical ego, which is a part of the world, and the transcendental ego, which is the same ego (albeit under the transcendental attitude) but constitutes the entire world, including the empirical ego. While framing the paradox, Husserl quickly introduces transcendental intersubjectivity: the problem is not merely that I constitute my empirical ego, but that other transcendental subjects do as well. Husserl’s goal in resolving the paradox, therefore, is to reconcile two competing sets of intentional relations. On the one hand, the constitution of objects is always already intersubjective, and any account of constitution that ignored intersubjectivity would necessarily exclude any sense of the object that was not primordially presented to me. This is particularly acute in the case of the paradox: the constitution of myself as empirical is problematic precisely because there is more to what I (empirically) am than merely what I (transcendentally) intend. Since constitution always occurs within intersubjectivity, phenomena are more than what is revealed to my ego through intentional relations; they also include all of the co-intentionalities of other (possible) egos, appresented to me as the horizons of the object. Because my empirical self is an object for others, my constituted self exceeds my own primordial intentionality. On the other hand, these non-primordial intentionalities must still be (ap)presented through me. Thus, the paradox of subjectivity is really a paradox of how constitution of subjects, whether my own or others, can exceed my own intentionality if the intentional relations still must be (ap)presented to me. In terms of double-consciousness, the paradox asks how the non-primordial intentional relations of the white other can be reconciled with my transcendental ego’s constitution of my self as I understand myself.

I believe a Husserlian analysis of double-consciousness has two advantages. First, if racial identities are real, they are not biological but must be socially valid (setting aside for the moment all the different ways in which that can be cashed out). For Husserl, meaning is confirmed via the fulfillment of intentions. This means that an analysis of the way in which racial intentions are fulfilled or unfulfilled can help inform the possibilities for altering racial meanings into less pernicious identities. Second, it seems that only a Husserlian approach can explain the fact that it is a *single* person who has this two-fold experience of himself or herself. Some phenomenological approaches would insist that either one perspective or the other must be correct (Sartre, for instance, might assert that Du Bois is only entitled to claim that he has his own view of himself if he acts upon it and not upon the racialized view of society), while other phenomenologists do not recognize that there is a problem in acknowledging a common subject of these two perspectives.

However, if this proposal is to succeed, there must be room for rich racial identities within Husserl's concept of the subject. Many have criticized him as too Cartesian in positing an autonomous, non-enworlded and hence non-racialized substratum as the transcendental subject. While this criticism is undoubtedly true in the *Cartesian Meditations*, I would like to suggest that Husserl's later reflections on intersubjectivity in his research manuscripts as well as the *Crisis* at least point towards a concept of the transcendental subject which can be constituted as a racial subject, even if Husserl did not finish developing this account.

There are two aspects of Husserl's later account of intersubjective constitution that are particularly important for this thesis: non-primordial intentionalities and necessarily enworlded egos. In what follows, I will present some texts from Husserl that suggest that the transcendental ego's constitutive possibilities are themselves shaped by the constitutive activity of others within the horizon of the transcendental ego; these horizons and the intentionalities necessarily belonging to other subjects allow for aspect like racial identity to implicate the constitutive possibilities of the transcendental ego.

T1: "subjectivity is what it is—an ego functioning constitutively—only within intersubjectivity" (Hua. VI, 175, translated by David Carr, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Northwestern U Press: 1970, 172).

In the *Crisis*, Husserl argues that the transcendental ego can only function as such within intersubjectivity. In addition to syntheses of ego and not-ego, there are I-you syntheses and we-syntheses in which objects are constituted. The intentional content of an object can exceed what I alone intend in the object, and as a result the object can only be fully constituted within intersubjectivity. As indicated above in the description of the paradox, these non-primordial intentional relations are problematic for Husserl's account of an independent constitutive subject precisely because there is more to what the subject is empirically than what the subject transcendently intends. It seems fair to apply this description to Du Bois' account of double-consciousness: it is because the white gaze of society intends him in a way which he does not (and in fact cannot primordially, because of his racial identity) that he experiences double-consciousness.

It must be acknowledged that, in his resolution to the paradox, Husserl posits a primordial ego behind transcendental intersubjectivity; this ego is responsible for the constitution of transcendental intersubjectivity and is itself untouched by the constitutive process. Such a subject would be incompatible with the type of subject I am trying to develop in this paper. I do not have space to argue for this interpretation here, but it seems like Husserl cannot posit the primordial ego without betraying his phenomenological method. Because it is itself unconstituted and is radically unaffected by its own constitutive activity, the primordial ego cannot be brought to evidence for any subject, which means that the primordial ego ends up being the same type of “mythic posit” for which Husserl criticized Kant. I would like to suggest that the primordial ego is not necessary if we give up the demand for a single absolute constitutive foundation; in that case, the community of transcendental subjects constituting each other is sufficient to resolve the paradox.

T2: “We thus are now able to speak of the *concrete I*, that is, how it is as determined in its actions and passions. This concrete I is the true I of inner experience, because that which is experienced indeed is something concrete when taken in its fullness, and the pure I is something abstractly identical” (Hua. XIV, 43, my translation with assistance from Sebastian Luft).¹

Husserl’s use of the “concrete I” as opposed to the “pure I” is not the same distinction as the mundane ego versus the transcendental ego. Rather, both the concrete I and the pure I are characterizations of the transcendental ego. In this passage, Husserl will reaffirm that consciousness is always intentional, explaining that *cogito* is always *cogito* of a *cogitatum*. The concrete I is distinguished from other Is by its I-life of constitutive activity. The pure I is only obtained by abstracting from the concrete I, but it is the concrete I that is given in phenomenological experience according to its stream of constitutive activity. This claim is a rejection of the world-annihilation experiment of *Ideas I* which left the transcendental ego radically untouched by its own constitutive activity. Here, not only is the concrete I able to be affected (it is determined in its passions), but it also is only differentiated from other concrete Is on the basis of the world which it constitutes. As a result, the autonomous Cartesian subject of the eponymous *Meditations* is no longer possible. In addition, it seems reasonable to suggest that the determinations of the concrete ego can include aspects of one’s identity such as race.

T3: “In primordially I am thus a worldly I, a psycho-physical unity in this sense, that I always can look at my lived body abstractly as a physical body among bodies and also can treat it thus and then can say to myself, I am not an additional piece of this physical body, as if it could be as another physical body...” (Hua. XV, 283, my translation).

In this text, Husserl explains how his body is given to him. Even within the sphere of primordially, his body can never be given as a mere object, nor can he consider himself as something added onto the physical body as if his body could be anything other than a *lived* body. Here, Husserl is emphasizing the embodied nature of the primordial ego. Although the living body has validity under the reduction only as a phenomenon, it is nonetheless impossible to see the body as a merely physical object, and it is also evident that the I is given as the I of an embodied individual. Because of the importance placed on embodiment, this passage suggests

¹ All translations in this outline (with the exception of Carr’s published translation) are preliminary and are for private use only.

that Husserl could give an account of the person in which racial identities are not mere accidental characterizations.

T4: “The Child. The First Empathy” (Title of Attachment XLV, Hua. XV, 604).

Unfortunately, there is not a concise text to quote as a summary of this passage. In this manuscript, Husserl investigates how a child comes to develop its habitualities. According to Husserl, the child is first born into a world-horizon that is empty, but through its experiences and especially its parents is brought into the community to which it belongs, with the associated world-horizon. This process of I-formation allows the child to act, think, and otherwise develop as a subject capable of the constitutive activities discussed earlier. The claim that the child develops a world-horizon within a community allows for socially contingent meanings, such as racial identifications, to be acquired. Although one could object that the child initially has an empty horizon and thus seems to be an independent Cartesian subject, Husserl is not making the claim that such a child could remain outside of all horizons (or if it did, it would not develop its I-character and hence would not be a truly human subject).