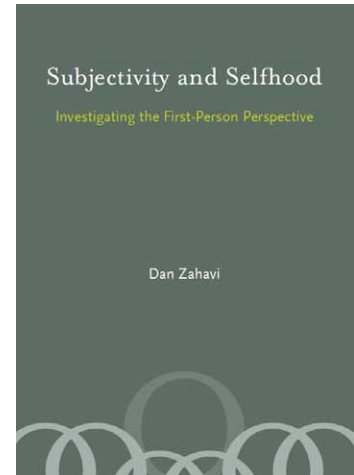


# Is the “Core Self” a Construct?

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> **Upshot** • Is lived experience always the experience of a self? The central thesis of Dan Zahavi’s book is that there is a “minimal” or “core” self, according to which a quality of “self-givenness” is a constitutive feature of experience. The adoption of a dynamic phenomenological perspective leads us to call this thesis into question.



Review of “Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective” by Dan Zahavi. MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2005. ISBN 978-0-262-74034-0. 273 pages.

DAN ZAHAVI’S PURPOSE IN THIS BOOK IS to investigate the relationship between experience, self-awareness and selfhood: Are experiences always experienced by someone? Does any episode of experiencing always involve a *subject* of experience? Is self-awareness always to be understood as awareness of a *self*? The central thesis of the book – which emerges from a detailed account of the history of this issue in phenomenology and of the arguments in favour of a non-egological theory, provided notably by analytic philosophy – is supported by all the major figures in phenomenology, such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Henry: it is that of a “minimal” or “core” self. Consciousness is indeed essentially characterized by intentionality; however, the consciousness of the perceived object is always accompanied by the pre-reflective consciousness of a perceived *subject*. It is in fact impossible to conceive of an experience – be it a perception, an emotion, a recollection or an abstract thought – without a certain phenomenal quality of “what it is like” or “what it feels like” to undergo this experience: this is what makes the experience *conscious*. And this “feeling” is necessarily *for a subject*. Experience is always lived as *mine*, its intrinsic quality is to be an experience *I* live. A quality of “mineness,” of “first-personal givenness” or “self-givenness,” is therefore a constitutive feature of experience.

As Zahavi rephrases it in the paragraph entitled “First-personal Givenness” (119), “transparency theorists” consider that experience can only be described in terms of *that of which* it is an experience: there is nothing in the tasting of the lemon apart from the taste of the lemon itself. Experience is diaphanous: it has no intrinsic and

non-intentional quality on its own. Unlike transparency theorists, phenomenologists consider that experience has two sides, the experienced object and the experience of the object. Although these two sides cannot be separated, what the *object* is like to the subject is to be distinguished from what the *experience of the object* is like for the subject, which has specific features, the main one being precisely its first-personal givenness. However this quality of mineness or “ipseity” is not explicitly attended to as an object of experience; it figures “as a subtle background presence” (124). This minimal and thin form of self-awareness, conceived of as an immediate, non-objectifying, non-positional or non-thematic self-acquaintance of the self to itself, is considered to be a constitutive feature and integral part of consciousness.

However, how is it that this dimension of first-personal givenness retains its identity throughout the multitude of changing experiences? How is it that one can be self-aware across temporal distance and recall a past experience as one’s own? According to Husserl, this persistency is due to the very structure of self-awareness, the protention–primal presentation–retention structure, which makes consciousness appear to itself as a continuous stream. Due to this structure, first-personal givenness stands permanently, like a rainbow on a waterfall, its own quality remaining unchanged by the events that stream through it. This structure accounts for the identity of self through time, in other words for an act-transcendent *ego*.

This basic sense of self is the foundation for a more elaborated sense of self, the “narrative” or “autobiographical” self, a linguistic and social construction starting in early childhood and evolving across the lifetime

that enables us to become and stay not merely “minimal selves” or pure identity-poles, but the *persons* we feel we are, with our abilities, habits, character traits, beliefs, values, goals and ideals.

From this perspective, the self as identity-pole as well as the narrative self are grounded in a minimal but nevertheless solid basis, that of the “core-self,” which originates in the structural distinction between the experienced object on the one hand, and the experience of the object with its essential quality of “mineness” or “first-personal givenness” on the other hand. However, is this distinction really irreducible? Is it pre-given? Is it not possible to detect dimensions of experience where this distinction is more permeable, and subtle processes intended to construct and maintain it? Our attempts to explore empirically<sup>1</sup> the microdynamic

1 | This occurs notably through explicitation interviews, an interview technique aimed at helping subjects become aware of the pre-reflective

structure of this distinction have indeed led us to the hypothesis that the core self might be the result of a process (Petitmengin 2006a, 2007). When attention diverts itself from its usual absorption in the experienced object to reorient towards the experience as such, it discovers experiential strata where the distinction usually perceived between subject and object, self and non-self, weakens or even disappears, as well as a microactivity in which this scission seems to originate.

Let us take as an example the experience of listening to a sound (Petitmengin et al. 2009). A sound occurs. If I am asked to describe my experience of the sound, what I ordinarily immediately describe is *the physical event that is at the source of the sound*: “Someone has broken a glass in the kitchen,” “It is the sound of the wind in the trees.” “Sounds are “first” experienced as sounds of *things*.” (Ihde 2007: 60). Attention is only directed to the heard sound to the extent to which it enables the identification of the source of the sound, an image of which quickly hides the heard sound. A sound is produced, and in a fraction of a second, I recognise this phenomenon as the song of a blackbird that comes in through my office window, without taking any further interest in the particularities of the birdsong. This focus of attention on the object that is at the source of the sound has an impact on the structure of the lived space: I “leave myself” in a sense, to extend myself towards the source, “forgetting” the bodily sensations related to this experience, of which I only have a pre-reflective awareness. I am a little like a blind person exploring an object with the tip of his walking stick, whose attention is entirely absorbed by the object, and who has only a pre-reflective consciousness of the contact of the stick with the palm of his hand, to refer to a well-known example. The sound itself, the sound medium and the body become as though they were transparent.

A sound occurs. I may also direct my attention towards *the sound as a sound, considered independently of its source*. The sound is not considered any more as a clue, a medium giving me information about something else, but it is perceived immediately

part of their lived experience and describe it in detail (Petitmengin 2006b).

for itself. For example, I listen to the blackbird’s song as a song, even forgetting that it is the song of a blackbird, like the blind person who diverts his attention from the object explored to the tactile characteristics of the stick in the palm of his hand: smooth, round, fresh. This redirection of attention towards the qualities of the sound enables me to acquire a reflective consciousness of them, and to discern nuances that are usually obliterated by the absorption of attention into the source. This attention mode is less directional, more open, more diffuse than the mode that is focused on the source. The song of the blackbird comes *from the garden*. But if I adopt another attention mode and listen to this sound as I would listen to a piece of music, this directionality recedes. The song fills the space. The medium, which was as though it were transparent in the previous listening mode, takes on a certain density, a certain thickness.

A sound occurs. I may also divert my attention from the source of the sound – from the question “*what is this sound,*” and from the sound as a sound – from the question “*what this sound is like,*” to direct it towards *the felt sound*, towards “*what is it like to listen to this sound, what the experience of this sound is like, what this sound does to me.*” Instead of going in search of the sound, “listening out” towards it to characterise it, this disposition consists of making oneself receptive to it, of letting the sound come to you, of letting yourself be “touched” by the sound. This is like the blind man who stops exploring the tactile characteristics of the stick to turn his attention towards the internal sensations felt in the palm of his hand, who instead of touching the stick allows himself to be touched by the stick.<sup>2</sup> What is the felt sound like? It has been described to us as a beat, or a caress, sometimes as a pulsation, sometimes as a shiver... The felt sound is made up of imperceptible dynamic modifications of intensity and rhythm. It is what in music cannot be encoded by notes, but only by dynamic notations such as “crescendo,”

2| To refer Merleau-Ponty’s (1945, 1964) famous example of the hand that can be touched or touching.

“staccato,” “piano,” “forte,” etc. These subtle rhythms or pulses are easier to perceive in the experience of music, but sharp attention also enables one to become aware of them in the feeling elicited by a voice, or a sound of nature. According to the pitch and the intensity of the sound, these rhythms are felt in the head, the chest, the belly, more or less deeply, sometimes in the whole body. As one interviewed subject says, “I am filled with this resonant matter, as if I was a violin or a bell on which someone was playing” (Werner 1934: 199) In this mode of listening, the sound seems to lose its identity of *sound*. This listening mode, too, has an impact on the structure of lived space: a sort

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of synchronisation, of rhythmic attunement is created between the corporal space and the space that is perceived as “external,” which has the effect of making the limit

between the two spaces much more permeable. As another subject says, “It is as though the exterior became denser and the interior less dense, more vibrant, and gradually their textures become identical. This vibration abolishes the limits of my body.”

During the turning of attention away from the source towards the heard sound, and then from the heard sound to the felt sound, the effort made to grasp and characterise an object progressively relaxes to make way for an attitude of receptivity and welcome. This loss of intentionality seems to be accompanied by a gradual synchronisation between the space perceived as “interior” and the space perceived as “exterior,” which has the effect of weakening – of softening – the distinction between the two spaces. In other words, the more attention becomes detached from its absorption in outward objects to enter into contact with the so called “inner” experience, the smaller becomes the distinction between “interior” and “exterior.”

It seems that the three dispositions of attention that we identified in the listening experience can also be found in the other sensorial modalities. For example, when I contemplate a landscape, I may identify objects: a stream, poplars, birches. A less directional mode of attention makes me forget the objects so that I distinguish contrasts of

light and shadow, nuances of green or pink reflections in the water, which the immediate recognition of objects usually masks. By adopting an even more open and receptive mode of attention, I can also let the colour come to me, fill me, a little like a perfume.

When we begin to discern this type of subtle feelings, and know how to adopt the disposition of attention that enables us to become reflectively aware of them, we detect them more and more rapidly in all the domains of our experience. We detect them in the experience of creating or encountering a work of art; at the very first stage of the unexpected emergence of a memory; in the diffuse, global and complex, but nevertheless very specific impression felt in another person's presence. We also detect them in abstract thought, for example when a new idea, before taking a precise and communicable form, first shows on the surface of consciousness as a blurred and fuzzy sensation, a presentiment, or a direction of thought, an interior line of force that silently guides research.

This "felt" dimension of our experience should not be confused with the "background" (the "horizon," the "margin") of a perception: when we focus our attention on a given object, we discern at the same time in a fuzzy manner the background – indistinct shapes and colours – on which it stands. We need only to direct our attention to another element in this background to discern it distinctly, itself surrounded by its own background. However, the felt dimension, even when one directs one's attention to it, remains fuzzy. Although hazy and blurred, this felt dimension has a very specific generic structure. Even if it lacks a definite sensorial modality, it has precise sensorial *submodalities* such as intensity, rhythm and movement. These submodalities have the characteristics of being "transmodal," that is, not specific to a particular sense, but transposable from one sense to another.<sup>3</sup> This transmodality is accompanied by a cer-

3| Unlike, for example, temperature and texture, which are specific to touch, or colour, which is specific to sight.

tain permeability of the border usually felt between the interior and the exterior spaces. We sometimes have this kind of experience when we contemplate a painting: it generates inside us a world of fleeting impressions of intensity, contrast and resonance that are neither objective nor subjective. This experience is also encountered when one listens to music, or even, as we noted, in a simple sound. Such a feeling of permeability between the inner and outer world, which seems to be related to a kind of rhythmic tuning between them, also happens in our intersubjective relationships. For example, it has been described by several psychotherapists as characteristic of some privileged moments during a therapeutic cure. This sense of dissolution of bodily boundaries is often accompanied by a transformation of the feeling of individual identity: the feeling of being a distinctive "self" becomes "lighter" and even disappears. For example, all the descriptions we collected of the unexpected emergence of an idea that we usually call an intuition – a solution to a problem, a scientific idea, a therapeutic insight, a creative intuition – mention a feeling of an absence

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of control: "It happens to me," "It doesn't depend on me," "It's given to me," "It escapes from me"... In these instants, the "sense of agency," that is, "the sense that I am the one who is generating a certain idea in my stream of consciousness" is altered. This seems to be confirmed by an analysis of the linguistic structures used to describe the experience. Indeed, the person describing his or her experience does not say "*I have an idea, I see an image,*" but "an idea *is coming to me, an image appears to me.*" The "sense of ownership," that is, the feeling that this idea is *my* idea, also seems altered, as the absence in many descriptions of the personal pronoun "I" confirms. The person does not even say "an idea is coming *to me*, an image appears *to me*," but: "*there is an idea, there is an image.*" The experience is not felt as being immediately *mine*, as being *my* experience; it is not felt as *personal*. Here we encounter a problem of vocabulary, since in order to qualify the felt dimension, where the distinction between inner and outer world and

between subject and object disappears, it becomes difficult to talk of "inner" or "subjective" experience.

The numerous descriptions we collected of this experiential dimension and of the process that enables us to recognize it led us to the following hypothesis: this felt "dimension" or "stratum" is in fact an early *stage* of a very rapid and pre-reflective microgenesis, of which only the later phases usually appear to reflective consciousness. This early phase is characterised by a less clear, or non-existent, differentiation between sensorial modes, between inward and outward space, between a perceiving subject and a perceived object. It is soon followed by tiny gestures of identification, recognition and categorisation, which lead to the identification and appreciation of an *object*. The more solid and stable the object becomes, the more "my" existence confirms itself. This mutual confirmation, originating in tiny initial movements, continues on increasingly coarse levels, thanks to discursive, conceptual and emotional processes that are more and more easily accessible to awareness. The fixation of our attention on the later stages of this process usually conceals the primitive phases. Only the result of this differentiation process appears to consciousness, as a world and a "self" that look separate and solid. But the process of loosening of intentionality, which has been described above, enables us to become reflectively aware of increasingly earlier stages of this micro-genesis.

At the level of experience we are ordinarily aware of, the absorption of attention into the object pole gives the subject pole an appearance of existence. This is a relational, indirect mode of existence, which is ungraspable, translucent, comparable to that of a reflection, and is felt as a subtle feeling of "mineness." In other words, we have the illusion of experiencing a subject through objects.<sup>4</sup> But the more attention loosens its tension towards experienced objects to come into contact with the experience of objects, the more this distinction reduces. When we stop losing ourselves in objects in order to

4| As Heidegger wrote, "I am acquainted with myself when I am captured and captivated by the world," (82) or "The co-disclosure of the self belongs to intentionality as such" (83).

come back to our experience, our feeling of mineness vanishes. Experience, when it becomes fully conscious of itself or *self-aware*, is not the experience of a self. Symmetrically, intentionality does not seem to be a constitutive feature of experience. Loss of intentionality and loss of ipseity are concomitant.

This absence of self is not incompatible at all with the reflexivity of consciousness: the essence of consciousness is indeed to be conscious of itself. But this *self-consciousness* is not the *consciousness of a self*<sup>5</sup>. Consciousness knows itself without a subject. In the phenomenological tradition, the identification of the two types of reflexivity – self-consciousness and consciousness of a self – explains the shift in meaning, which seems frequent in Zahavi’s book, from the expression “self-conscious” to the expression “conscious of a self.” But this identification seems to me insufficiently argued.

In summary, Zahavi’s thesis is that experience has two inseparable and pre-given sides: the object of experience and the experience of the object, the later being characterised by a pre-reflective feeling of mineness. On the contrary I suggest that (1) this duality is not given but is peculiar to a particular phase of a microgenesis; (2) the subject side and the object side co-constitute themselves, with the absorption of attention into the object creating a feeling of mineness; and (3) the loosening of intentionality results in the dissolution of this duality and the vanishing of this feeling of mineness.

Duality corresponds to the strata of experience we are usually aware of, where we usually live and act. However, ignoring the early phases of the microgenesis of experi-

5| This thesis is the founding theme of Buddhism: a subject, a self is never experienced. Consciousness is self-conscious without being the consciousness of a self. Buddhist meditation practices aim precisely at acquiring the “clear vision” (*vipashyanā*) of the way self and non-self co-originate, vision whose Buddhist epistemology is a formalization (see, e.g., Bitbol 2006). It seems difficult to write a whole book on selfhood while ignoring completely a tradition that has been interested in the experience of self for 25 centuries, and whose writings are now available – which was not the case at the time of Husserl.

ence prevents us from understanding some of its essential aspects, such as intersubjective relationships, the process of creation, or abstract thought.

Putting in parentheses the distinction usually perceived between “inside” and “outside,” between “me” and “the world,” in an attempt to describe in detail the unfolding of a phenomenon, and in particular the process of co-constitution of objectivity and subjectivity, falls within a “genetic phenomenology” (a project described by Husserl 2001). We consider that an essential side of this project consists of also describing the process of *becoming aware* of this unfolding, by which attention frees up from its absorption in the experienced object to reorient towards the experience itself. Unfortunately Zahavi’s book does not devote much space to this type of dynamic, processual or genetic approach.

Even in chapter 4, devoted to “Reflection and Attention,” the author is more interested in the result of reflection (for example in the relation of similarity or distortion between the reflected and the reflected-upon, or in the relation of identity or fission between the reflecting and the reflected subject), than in the *process* of reflection (in the various “gestures” that enable us to go from a pre-reflective consciousness to a reflective one). Yet the author quotes several texts (notably from Fink, Husserl and Von Herrmann) providing an outline of a description of this process: reflection is not depicted as a withdrawal and distancing from experience, but as a gaining of acquaintance, familiarity and sympathy with experience, an intensification and amplification of awareness “which accentuates it in a new level of transparency and expressibility” (86). But we are not given any details about the acts that could allow us to achieve such an accentuation. Later (89–90), the author compares the reflective act with the attentional act, which enables us to shift our focus between different objects, bringing those at the margin into the centre of attention. But again, the comparison focuses on the results of these acts (“the structural relation between pre-

reflective and reflective consciousness on the one hand, between marginal and thematic consciousness on the other hand”) and not on the way they are achieved. While insisting that reflection cannot be reduced to a change in attentional focus, the author does not provide us with information about the subtle process that enables us to become

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aware of the pre-reflective dimension of experience, and that would allow us to perform this act or to recognize it.

If such microgenetic descriptions of the very process of becoming aware seems so crucial for us, this is notably because they make a first-person description reproducible. The reproducibility of a result is the kingpin of any scientific validation: to be considered as scientifically valid, an observation or experiment must be verifiable, that is, reproducible, at least potentially, by any researcher. But in order to be reproducible, this result or observation must be accompanied by a description of its own process of production. In the context of a rigorous investigation of lived experience, this requirement means that in order to be reproducible, and therefore verifiable or falsifiable, a first person report must be accompanied by a description of the process that enables one to obtain it, in other words by a description of the very process of becoming aware and describing. The phenomenologist cannot simply invite the reader to a recognition or an implicit assent, but must allow him a careful and rigorous verification in his own experience. And the reader – if he considers himself as phenomenologist – cannot take for granted a description on the basis of the authority of the person who produced it, should he be Husserl or Heidegger. He cannot dispense with the process that led to this description; he has to repeat it.

As first-person researchers, we must give ourselves the means not only to check the descriptions of the prominent figures of phenomenology, but to deepen the lines of research they have only hinted at. This requires on the one hand producing fresh and embodied descriptions that are not based on vague and general examples but on singular

experiences, situated in space and time; and on the other hand providing ourselves with methods of analysis enabling us to extract from these descriptions generic experiential structures, including dynamic structures. We consider that this is the only way to make sure our work is truly scientific – and not only exegetical – and to create a real dialogue with other disciplines in the field of consciousness research. This is also the only way we can study the process of co-origination of knower and known, mind and world, or self and non-self, at its very root, from an experiential viewpoint – a promising line of research that has remained relatively unexplored until now.

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