The phenomenological underpinning of the notion of a minimal core self: A psychological perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that Zahavi's defence of the self as an experiential dimension, i.e. "identified with the first-person givenness of experiential phenomena", and of the notion of a pre-reflective minimal core self relies on an unwarranted assumption. It is assumed that awareness of the phenomenal mode of experiences of objects, i.e. what the object "feels" like for the experiencer, is comparable with, indeed entails, first-person givenness of experience. In consequence both the arguments concerning the foundational role of the pre-reflective minimal core self and the explanation of the unity and identity of the self through time give rise to intractable problems.

1. Introduction

Most people taking part in the debate about the Self agree that it is natural for us to think that there is such a thing as a 'self', and that the sense of a self is a fundamental feature of human experience. However, there is very little consensus when it comes to the nature and status of the self, how it is constituted and how, more precisely, the self is experienced by us, and what—if any—existence the self we think is there has. It is well known that in the formidable amount of literature on the self, within philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, and more recently within the neurosciences and psychiatry, one finds a plethora of different notions and approaches to the self.1

The questions posed and attempted answered by these different approaches are questions as to whether the self has any real existence, i.e. is there something of 'substance' being referred to by the notions of 'self', 'I' and 'mine', or is the self a mere narrative construction, a cognitive representation, or is the self a linguistic artefact, or a neurological induced illusion?

In his recently published book "Subjectivity and Selfhood", Zahavi sets out to clarify some of these problems (Zahavi, 2005). He does so by addressing a number of general questions concerning the relation between consciousness and self; the answers to which, so he contends, "are of obvious importance when it comes to a proper understanding both of the structure of consciousness and what it means to be a self" (Zahavi, 2005, p. 99).2 Central among these questions are, first, whether a subject of experience must be invoked in order to account for the unity and continuity of experiences—or, rather, are experiences anonymous mental events that occur without being anybody's states? Secondly, is there always a self involved in self-awareness, or is it possible that self-awareness may exist without assuming the existence of anybody being self-aware? Any sensible answers of these questions depend, of course, on the possibility of determining what, exactly, it means to be a self and what self-awareness entails.

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1 For a recent comprehensive introduction of these approaches see Gallagher and Shear (1999).
2 Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers refer to Zahavi (2005).
I shall present and discuss Zahavi’s proposal of a phenomenological theory of the relationship between consciousness and the self, according to which the self is an experiential dimension in the sense that it is “identified with the first-person givenness of experiential phenomena” (p. 106). This experiential self, so Zahavi contends, is a self which is both “a self immersed in our conscious life” and a self “whose awareness of itself is the self-awareness of a world-immersed self”. The self thus conceived, according to Zahavi, has the potential to clarify what it means to be a self and to be self-aware, and, by the same token, to explain both the unity of experiences and the continuity of the self through time.

The problems addressed by Zahavi on the self and consciousness are arguably some of the most contentious and intricate in the history of philosophy. The present conundrum concerning the self started with Descartes’ conclusion from his meditations that the self we know indubitably to exist is a consciousness, the selfsame consciousness, single, simple and continuing, unchangeably the same throughout one’s awareness (Shear, 1999). Although resonating deeply with common sense, this view was challenged by Hume, who famously claimed that when looking within, he could not find anything in his experiences corresponding to Descartes’ single, simple continuing or unifying self—and he concluded that our ordinary notions of the self must be some kind of commonsensical “fiction” (Hume, 1888). His own attempt at explaining how the fictitious concept of self comes about, i.e. by some kind of “logical relationships” between “bundles” of perceptions, he deemed fallacious on the grounds that, logically, it is impossible to derive from the actual content of our perceptions any principle capable of unifying them into a “whole mind” or “self”. Later on, Kant for his part argued, thus strengthening Descartes’ view, that the self as single, simple and abiding, i.e. a pure unchanging and unifying consciousness at the centre of our experiences, is a precondition for the existence of any experiences whatsoever. However, he also argued, in agreement with Hume that this necessarily inferred unitary self cannot have any experiential qualities of its own, and thus there is no possibility of having any experience let alone any definite concepts of it. Thus, Kant ends up with the paradox that the concept of a unifying, pure and unchanging self is both absolutely necessary and entirely ungraspable—a paradox, so Kant puts it, which “mocks and torments” the wisest of men (Shear, 1999).

It could well be said that it is Zahavi’s aim with his proposal of the self as an experiential dimension to overcome these classical problems. According to this proposal, the self is constituted by the very “self-givenness” of experience, i.e. a self-givenness which is part and parcel of the phenomenal modes by which our experiences appear, their “feel” and “what it is like” for us to undergo them. The self thus conceived is “neither an ineffable transcendent precondition” (cf. the Kantian position), nor “a mere social construction that evolves over time” (cf. the Narrative position), but, rather, it is “an integral part of our conscious life with an immediate experiential reality”. This experiential sense of self, in Zahavi’s view, “deserves to be called the minimal self or the core self” (p. 106). Indeed, the phenomenological view of the self as an experiential dimension appears to Zahavi to be “of pivotal significance” in that “nothing that lacks this dimension deserves to be called a self” (p. 114). And, so Zahavi contends, it is obviously foundational for a narrative self, for, “in order to begin a self-narrative, the narrator must be able to differentiate between self and non-self, must be able to self-attribute actions and experience agency, and must be able to refer to him- or herself by means of first-person pronoun. All this presupposes that the narrator is in possession of a first-person perspective” (ibid). In other words, “it takes a self to experience one’s life as a story” (ibid).

However, as my discussion will show, his arguments concerning the nature and status of this proposed self seem to rely on an assumption which is unwarranted, namely the assumption that the phenomenal mode of an experience, i.e. what it “feels” like, is comparable with, indeed entails, first-person givenness of experience. Due to this confusion of ‘awareness of phenomenal modes of experiences of objects’ with ‘awareness of first-person mode of access to experiences’, Zahavi’s phenomenological attempt to underpin the notion of a pre-reflective minimal core self, raises more questions than it answers. Furthermore, both the arguments concerning the foundational role of the minimal core self and the explanation of the unity and identity of the self over time encounter problems which are as intractable as the classical problems and the paradox which so “mocked and tormented” Hume and Kant.

I shall start with an outline of how Zahavi attempts to substantiate his phenomenological notion of the self as an experiential dimension, and of the line of argument by which he arrives at the conclusion as to the reality of the experiential self, the minimal core self.

2. Zahavi’s arguments for the self as an experiential dimension

Zahavi’s first vehicle of inspiration is the phenomenological notion of ipseity (i.e. selfhood) as being a basic characteristic of consciousness. According to French phenomenologist from Merleau-Ponty, Sartre to Henry, consciousness remains personal because consciousness is characterised by a fundamental self-givenness. Importantly (for the arguments of Zahavi which follows later), this ipseity, according to Sartre, “is present at the pre-reflective level where no ego exists—but which allows the appearance of the ego as the transcendent phenomenon of that ipseity”, (Sartre 1939) quoted in Zahavi, p. 115). Central to these phenomenological thinkers, according to Zahavi, is an attempt to link a basic sense of self to the self-givenness of our experiential life.

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3 This proposal is developed in Chapter 5, Consciousness and Self in Zahavi (2005). For previous defences of the same proposal see Zahavi and Parnas (1999), Zahavi (2000).
In order to understand what this link entails, Zahavi's next move is to "take a closer look at the structure of first-personal givenness of experiences" (p. 116). This closer look reveals that "every conscious state, be it a perception, an emotion, a recollection, or an abstract belief, has a certain subjective character, a certain phenomenal quality of "what it is like" to live through or undergo that state" (ibid.). Thus, contrary to the widespread view, it is not only bodily sensations like pain or nausea or emotional states like happiness, depression or envy, which has a "feel" to them, a certain phenomenal quality of "what it is like" to experience them. Adopting the distinction from Husserl of intentional matter and intentional quality, respectively, Zahavi argues that just as each intentional matter (e.g. an experience of a cat, a rainbow or a mathematical state of affair) has its own phenomenal character, there is also an "experiential difference between entertaining the belief that "thoughts without concepts are empty" and the belief that "intuitions without concepts are blind"" (p. 117). Thus, every conscious state, be it a perception, an emotion, a recollection or an abstract belief has a certain phenomenal quality of "what it is like" to be in that state. In fact, so Zahavi contends, "the reason we can distinguish occurrent conscious mental states from each other is exactly because there is something it is like to be in those states" (p. 119). Indeed, "this is what makes the mental states in question conscious" (ibid.).

Although not yet explicitly mentioned, the understanding of the link between self-givenness of experiences and their qualitative character, i.e. "what they "feel" like", is that this qualitative character inevitably is given for someone. However, further inquiry into the structure of first-personal givenness is required for Zahavi to reach this conclusion. The route of this inquiry goes via a clarification of the notion of "what it is like", a notion which is ambiguous, according to Zahavi. Thus, normally, the "what is it like" aspect is taken to designate experiential properties. However, says Zahavi, "if our experiences are to have qualities of their own, they must be qualities over and above whatever qualities the intentional object has" (p. 119). Zahavi illustrates what this means by the following examples. When one is tasting a lemon it is the lemon that is bitter, not one's experience of it. Thus, the taste of the lemon is a qualitative feature of the lemon and must be distinguished from whatever my tasting of the lemon has. And even if there is no other way to gain access to the gustatory quality of the lemon than by tasting it, this will not turn the quality of the object into a quality of the experience.

It has to be admitted, however, that when one asks for this quality, it is hard to point to anything besides the taste of lemon—in which case it would seem obvious to conclude that there is nothing in the tasting of the lemon apart from the taste of the lemon itself. This is in fact the contention of the "intentionalistic" interpretation of phenomenal qualities according to which experiences do not have intrinsic and non-intentional qualities of their own; rather, "the qualitative character of experiences consists entirely in the qualitative properties objects are experienced as having" (Dretske, 1995 quoted in Zahavi, p. 120). Thus, there is nothing in the tasting of the lemon apart from the taste of the lemon itself. However, according to Zahavi, this conclusion simply fails to realise that there are two sides to the question "what is it like". Thus, as he quite rightly points out (using a distinction introduced by Husserl), "there is a difference between asking about the property the object is experienced as having (what does the object seem like to the perceiver) and asking about the property of the experience of the object (what does the perceiving feel like to the perceiver)" (p. 121). Both questions pertain to the phenomenal dimension, but whereas the first question concerns a worldly property, the second concerns an experiential property. Thus, contrary to what an intentionalistic interpretation claims, we consequently need to distinguish (1) "what the object is like for the subject" and (2) "what the experience of the object is like for the subject" (p. 121). The wider implications hereof is, according to Zahavi, that "we are never conscious of an object simpliciter, but always as appearing in a certain way; as judged, seen, described, feared, remembered, smelled, anticipated, tasted and so on" (ibid.). Thus, we cannot be conscious of an object (a tasted lemon, a smelt rose, a seen table, a touched piece of silk, etc.) unless we are aware of the experience through which the object is made to appear (the tasting, smelling, seeing, touching). Indeed, "the object is given through the experience; if there is no awareness of the experience the object does not appear at all" (ibid.). However, experiential properties of experiences are not objects like red or bitter; they are properties pertaining to the various types of access or modes of givenness of experiences. This means that when e.g. "I am imagining a unicorn, desire an ice cream, anticipate a holiday, or reflecting upon an economic crisis", these experiences do "not only bring me into the presence of different intentional object", nor am I only "phenomenally acquainted with a series of worldly properties such as blue, sweet, or heavy, but also the object is there for me in different modes of givenness (i.e. as imagined, perceived, or recollected, anticipated)" (p. 122).

Zahavi further elaborates the point concerning how an object is there for me in different modes of givenness by saying that whereas John and Mary can both perceive the exact same cherry and all its properties, each of them has his or her own distinct perception of it, which cannot be shared by the other—just as they cannot share their feelings of pain. Because of this epistemic asymmetry between Mary's and John's experiences, Mary has no access to the first-personal givenness of John's experience—and vice versa. It is, says Zahavi, this first-person givenness that makes the experiences subjective and provide them with "a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-reference" (ibid, italics added). Thus, "when asked to specify "what the object is like for the subject" this first-person givenness is precisely one of the features to mention" (ibid.).

3. An analysis of what “first-person givenness entails and requires

Zahavi's argument of how awareness of the phenomenal dimensions of experiences, i.e. (1) what the object is like for the subject and (2) what the experience of the object is like for the subject, turns into an argument concerning the subjectivity of experiences, i.e. their first-person givenness and built-in self-reference, needs in my view to be unpacked.
First, the different phenomenal dimensions or qualities that experiences of an object may have, are assumed to be fairly general: they not only apply to my experiences but also to yours; indeed they apply to the experiences of anyone with a consciousness having in common these phenomenal qualities and dimensions of experiencing objects. Therefore, the fact that my experiences of objects happen to have these experiential qualities or dimensions, is not what makes my experiences subjective—distinctly mine as opposed to yours—and hence provides my experiences with a subjectivity and built-in self-reference. On the contrary, it is precisely assumed of these phenomenal qualities and dimensions of experiencing objects that they are intersubjectively shareable, i.e. something we share with others. Thus, it would hardly make sense to say that John and Marry are “looking” at the same apple, let alone to ask them to “look” at the same apple, without presupposing this intersubjectivity, that is, without presupposing that “looking” at the apple for both of them amounts to being presented with the apple in the same phenomenal mode of givenness. Indeed, without assuming this intersubjectivity, we would not be able to compare our experiences and determine any similarities—or differences—nor be able to realise that different points of view makes for differences of experiences,\(^5\) and to realise, ultimately, that one has unique access to one’s own experiences—and others to theirs.

So, rather, it is this realisation of unique access to one’s experiences which makes my experiences subjective. Indeed, for experiences to be given for me as subjective, and hence in the first-person mode of givenness as characterised by Zahavi, both implies and requires my awareness of the fact that although the phenomenal modes of experiencing objects are indeed intersubjective, only I have access to how my experiences are given to me and, similarly, others only have access to how their experiences are given to them. This is what the phenomenal mode of first-person givenness amounts to and entails, and what makes my experiences uniquely mine as opposed to those of others. Put in a different way, contrary to Zahavi’s contention, first-person givenness it is not a feature to mention when asked “what the object is like for the subject” (op. cit.), but, rather, when asked “what the access to the experience of the object is like for the subject”.\(^6\) This means that experiences given in first-person mode of presentation by definition are equipped with a built-in self-reference: i.e. an experiential quality of mineness, and hence of selfhood or self-reference of experience.\(^7\) Conversely, the experiences of someone lacking this awareness of its unique access to its own experiences cannot be said to be first-personal given for that someone.

The crucial distinction at stake here may be summarised thus: awareness of the phenomenal mode through which an object is made accessible (as seen, heard, tasted, remembered, imagined, etc.), is not comparable to, nor does it in or of itself entail awareness of the unique access to one’s experiences, and hence of subjectivity of experiences. In the first case we are dealing with phenomenal modes of access to objects, in the second with phenomenal mode of access to experiences.

In what follows I shall further elaborate on this distinction and try to clarify what it entails and requires for an individual to experience mineness and selfhood of experiences. During this discussion I shall argue that first-person givenness of experiences is not an intrinsic feature of experiences of phenomenal qualities or dimensions. That is, I shall try to argue against the view proposed by Zahavi that there can be no experiences of phenomenal qualities which lack this first-person ontology. Or, as Zahavi puts this view even stronger: “experiences must always be given from a first-person perspective, for otherwise they would not be experiences” (p. 125).

### 4. Conditions for mineness and first-personal givenness of experiences: a developmental psychological perspective

As the point of departure, I shall take Zahavi’s contention that the subjectivity and built-in self-reference of first-person given experiences is “a primitive experiential self-referentiality” (p. 122). Now, there would seem to be nothing primitive in the kind of self-reference and subjectivity, as characterised so far by Zahavi, nor in what this subjectivity of experiences entails and requires by way of e.g. awareness of the intersubjectivity of phenomenal modes of experiences and the apprehension of the epistemic asymmetry between one’s own experiences and those of others. Indeed, this kind of subjectivity requires the awareness of “points of view” of experiencing which, according to researchers within developmental psychology (cf. e.g. Asendorf, 2002; Butterworth, 2000; Povinelli, Landau, & Perilloux, 1996; Gopnik & Slaughter, 1991; Tomasello & Rakoczy, 2003), first begins to develop when a child is about 2 years old, and which is only fully developed at the age of 4 years, and hence when the child is already a language user. Before that age, there is no stable awareness at all about “points of views” being different for different persons, nor therefore any awareness of the subjectivity of one’s own experiences, i.e. no awareness that one’s experiences uniquely belong to oneself as mine as opposed to those of others (cf. also

\(^5\) We had better hope that the assumption of the intersubjectivity holds true in general—or we would be isolated in private experiential worlds with no possibility of determining the epistemic asymmetry between one’s own experiences and those of others. So, importantly, the apprehension of the intersubjectivity of phenomenal experiences is a prerequisite for the apprehension of mineness of experiences, i.e. for the apprehension of any distinction between what oneself experiences and what others experience and hence for the apprehension of subjectivity of experiences. For more elaborate arguments of this point see Praetorius (2000, 2004) & Hutto (2000).

\(^6\) Thus, mineness does not pertain to “what the object seem like to the perceiver”, but is “a property of the experience of the object”. The first, so we have been told, concerns a worldly property, the second an experiential property (cf. Zahavi’s distinction, op. cit.).

\(^7\) This account of what first-person givenness entails, I think, is akin to what Strawson describes as the early realisation, sometime in the childhood, “of the fact that one’s thoughts are unobservable by others, the experience of the profound sense in which one is alone in one’s head—these are among the very deepest facts about the character of human life, and found the sense of the mental self” (Strawson, 1997, p. 407).
the review and discussion of these studies by Welsh (2006). Indeed, according to Tomasello and Rakoczy, “the notion of reality, subjective beliefs, and intersubjective perspectives form a logical net that can only fully be grasped as a whole. Comprehending this net as a whole takes children, apparently, several years [i.e. the first 4–5 years of their lives] to accomplish”. (Tomasello & Rakoczy, 2003, p. 134). In order to comprehend this logically interwoven net, according to Tomasello and Rakoczy, the child must first learn to differentiate—in a way that 2 year old pre-linguistic infant cannot yet do—between the mental perspective of another individual, which is not the same as the child’s perspective of the moment, nor an intersubjectively shared perspective with another person (ibid.).

These observations notwithstanding, a one to two year old infant would seem to be perfectly capable of distinguishing between itself and other persons, and to distinguish between what belongs to itself and others, and thus must obviously already have a sense of itself as something distinct from “others”. For example, a pre-linguistic infant at this age can certainly be aware of the fact that this body, this finger, this nose, etc. is my body, my finger, my nose, etc. or that this teddy bear is my teddy bear, or that this person is my mother, and hence is capable of experiencing mineness and ownership of the things in question. However, if we are to believe the observations from research within developmental psychology (cf. references above), the infant’s apprehension of this mineness or ownership of its body and things in a publicly shared world, does not entail recognition by the infant that it is so apprehended from a first-person perspective, that is, it is not the kind of mineness and selfhood which, at a later time, is involved in and characterises first-person givenness of experiences. An infant that age may similarly be able to distinguish between different phenomenal modes of their “inner” states such as joy, contentment, anger, sadness, anxiety and shame, and to distinguish between different phenomenal modes of experiencing objects, i.e. seeing, hearing, smelling or feeling objects in the “outside” world, and thus, presumably, there must be something it is like for the infant to entertain those phenomenal modes of experiencing. However, the kind of mineness or ownership they may experience when it comes to “worldly” objects and, presumably, to the emotional states and perceptual experiences they may entertain and even begin to recognise in others, does not entail recognition by the infant that they are so entertained from a first-person perspective which is unique to him or her, i.e. in the sense: only accessible to him or herself (again, granted the result from research within developmental psychology). Indeed, neither entertaining nor experiencing any of the different phenomenal dimensions or modes of experiences does in or by itself entail the apprehension of subjectivity of experiences. Thus, however else it comes about, it is not until the child can apprehend that his or hers “point of view” may differ from that of others, does not entail recognition by the infant that it is so apprehended that makes any sense to ascribe to the child first-person givenness of experiences, and thus subjectivity of experiences with a built-in experiential self-reference.

But what about the mineness or ownership of things in the world, emotional states, and maybe even of the discriminable phenomenal qualities that an infant—or any other conscious individual—may actually experience prior to the awareness of the unique first-person givenness of its experience? Would it not be obvious to think that, somehow or other, there must be “something it is like” for the infant—or any conscious individual—to be the experiencer, i.e. the one to which these experiences are given, and hence to think that the infant or such individual may apprehend mineness, ownership or self-hood of its experiences? Indeed, for someone to be aware of and capable of discriminating between different phenomenal modes of experiences, would seem to require a “subjective point of view”, or at least a “point of view”, to which this awareness and discrimination refer back. And would it not be natural to think, therefore, that there must be something that having this common locus of experiences “is like” for that someone, and hence that there must be some kind of awareness of “itself” as being this common locus to which its experiences belong, i.e. as my experiences?

Here, I think it would be useful to introduce the distinction advocated by Baker (2000) between, one the one hand, first-person phenomena being perspectival, and, on the other, first-person phenomena being given from a first-person perspective. Thus, all sentient beings are subjects of experience, i.e. (are conscious), and the acts and psychological states of such beings—their experiences, beliefs, desires, etc.—are perspectival with the organism at the origin; hence, such states and acts all belong to the same individual, so to speak, by default (Baker, ibid. pp. 60–62). In this sense first-person phenomena of a sentient being are inevitably perspectival.

In contrast, for a conscious being to exhibits first-person phenomena from a first-person perspective requires not only that one acts and experiences from a perspective, but also that one is aware of having a perspective, which is different from other perspectives. And furthermore, it requires not only that one may distinguish between first person and third person, but also that one is able to think of oneself as oneself and of others being different from oneself. Thus, to have a first-person perspec-

9 The term “point of view” and “perspective” are metaphors taken from the domain of visual–spatial perception. Butterworth concludes his study of the beginnings of the infant’s awareness of this phenomena in it original sense thus: “One of the most striking phenomena we have discovered is the ability to look where someone else is looking in the first year of life is circumscribed by the boundaries of the infant’s own visual field”. Even after 12 month when the infant begins to comprehend manual pointing, it fails to search for the target beyond its own visual field when the mother looks and points behind the infant. These data suggest, according to Butterworth, “that the infant takes her own visual field to be held in common with others. […] Only after 18 months does the baby succeed in searching in the invisible space behind him or herself, when the adult looks [or points] there. […] Visual perception necessarily originates at a particular viewpoint, but the infant behaves as if others have a perspective on a common visual space” (Butterworth, 2000, pp. 32–33).

10 Experimental and observational studies (cf. Tomasello & Rakoczy, 2003) seem to suggest that the development of the child's capability between the age of 2–5 years to engage in linguistic discourse with other persons about the content of their (previous) discourse enable a developmental progression from the expression of one’s own perspective and the practical coordination of multiple perspectives to the explicit ascription of potentially different perspectives to oneself and other persons.
tive is not just to have a perspective or a point of view from which one acts and experiences—dogs and infants have perspectives—but it is to be able to think of one’s perspective as one’s own, and to think of others as having subjective points of view which are different from one’s own. Only sentient beings having first-person concepts of themselves—i.e. those with first-person perspectives—are fully self-conscious, according to Baker (Baker, pp. 60, 64 and 66).

Where does this leave us? Does the proposal that a first-person perspective is required to be fully self-aware mean that self-awareness and mineness of experiences may, after all, be a matter of degree? Is it possible that even sentient beings like dogs and pre-linguistic infants may enjoy some form of self-awareness and mineness of experiences—if only incompletely or rudimentarily? Surely, self-awareness or mineness of experiences does not emerge in a flash, but rather as the result of several intermediate developmental stages, each of which, presumably, is characterised by some or other “rudimentary” sense of mineness and ownership of experiences. Maybe, however, for an organism, say an infant, to experience mineness of phenomenal experiences—even in the most primitive and rudimentary form—would seem to require not only that there is something it is like for the infant to undergo these experiences, but also that there is something it is like for the infant to have experiences. That is, it would seem necessary to add to the requirements already proposed by Baker that the infant may apprehend its experiences as experiences and itself as an experiencer.11 Thus, it would seem that for an organism with a consciousness lacking this apprehension the issue of mineness or ownership of experiences could not, logically, arise—even less so could the otherness of the experiences of others.

Now, this apprehension of having experiences, is something which first begins to dawn on an infant at the age between 14 and 22 months of age, i.e. when it can begin to appreciate that what it experiences may differ from what others experience in a given situation, be it perceptual, emotional or sensory. Before that age there is nothing in the observable behaviour of the infant, i.e. in how it relates to itself, others and the world around it which indicate that the child is aware of having experiences in the sense that its experiences may be given for it as experiences, and thus is aware of itself as an experiencer.12

However, prior to this awareness and apprehension there would seem to be ample evidence that an infant may experience many different phenomenal qualities, and even that it may be able to distinguish between such qualities, i.e. distinguish between something being seen, heard, tasted, or felt, or between phenomenal qualities of their emotional states such as joy, anger or sadness. So, although there may indeed be “something it is like” for the infant to experience these phenomenal qualities, it does not also entail that there is something it is like for the infant to have experiences, nor that there is something it is like for the infant to be an experiencer.13 If so, it would hardly make sense to ascribe mineness or ownership of experiences to the infant i.e. to say that experiences are given for the infant as its own, i.e. as my experiences.

Now, the apprehension of having experiences and being an experiencer which begins to develop between the age of 14–22 months, would seem to indicate that the infant may now begin to take its own experiences and those of others as objects—and hence it is an apprehension which makes self-reference and self-awareness possible, i.e. a self-reference and self-awareness which—albeit still in a primitive and non-linguistic form—is nevertheless explicitly given for the child. Indeed, an organism with a consciousness for which there is thus something it is like to have experiences and to be an experiencer, is an organism and a consciousness which—by definition—is self-reflective. Conversely, it cannot be claimed without contradiction that such a consciousness is pre-reflective.14

This form of a first, primitive self-awareness of experiences, in its turn, would seem crucial for the later apprehension of the child of having a perspective, i.e. a perspective which may be different from those of others, and hence for the appreciation of the fact—i.e. around the age of 4 years—that different perspectives make for differences of experiences. It is at this stage, i.e. when the child is already a language user, capable of linguistically, thematic self-awareness, that it makes sense to ascribe to them first-person givenness of experiences, and hence to say that experiences are first-person given for the child, 

(cf. the apt characterisation of what this stage entails by Tomasello and Rakoczy (op. cit.)).

In the course of the discussion in this section, I have argued that it is indeed possible for an organism, say an infant, to have phenomenal experiences without those experiences being given in first-person mode of presentation for the organism. Conversely, I have argued that subjectivity, mineness and first-person givenness of experiences, i.e. that one’s experiences are uniquely ones own and unsharable by other, (cf. Zahavi’s description of the epistemic asymmetry between

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11 Just as, say, to experience mineness or self-agency of one’s bodily acts requires that there is something it is like to be an agent carrying out bodily acts.
12 It is worth repeating that an infant long before that age may realise that it is an agent who may carry out (deliberate) bodily acts, and hence may experience agency and mineness of these acts. However, there is no evidence to suggest—or any logical reason why—the infant’s experience of being an agent, carrying out bodily acts which are its own, is comparable to, let alone also gives rise to the apprehension of being an experiencer, having experiences which are its own. Nor is there any compelling reason why self-agency of one’s bodily acts and self-awareness of one’s conscious experiences should be epistemic isomorphic, or structurally identical.
13 And thus, does not entail “a difference between consciousness of a foreign object and consciousness of one’s own subjectivity”, (Zahavi, 2002, p. 16). Equally importantly, nor does it entail a difference between one’s own experiences and the experiences of others, of fundamental importance for the consciousness of one’s own subjectivity—indeed for having an “experiential life of one’s own”.
14 An anonymous reviewer rightly notes that “if self-awareness is defined in linguistic terms, then infants can clearly not be said to be self-aware. If it is defined in non-linguistic (or not necessarily linguistic) terms, then the idea that infants may be self-aware becomes much less strange”. This may well be. However, as to the existence and precise definitions of even earlier and even more primitive pre-linguistic “senses of self” than the ones outlined here, the jury is still out. For example, do such senses or forms have such features in common with our later acquired form of self-awareness of experiences as to be recognizable (by us, i.e. persons for whom experiences are given from a first-person perspective) as self-awareness? We do not know. However, the phenomenon of infantile amnesia (i.e. the fact that we have no memories of events, or indeed of ourselves, prior to 2 years of age) might suggest that they do not. Put differently, it seems that (cognitive) changes begin to occur in our awareness of ourselves, others and the world around us at about the age of 2 years, which are so radical as to literally eradicate memories of earlier forms and modes of experiencing oneself, others and the world.
Mary’s and John’s perception of the same cherry, op. cit.) can only occur and so be given for someone who is already comfortably positioned at a reflective level. If this is not immediately obvious, then just consider whether these constituting features of subjectivity and first-person givenness of experiences would also be applicable to Mary and John, had they been toddlers.

The section which follows presents Zahavi’s arguments for the existence of a primitive, pre-reflective self-awareness and a minimal core self, i.e. a core self for whom experiences are tacitly given in the first-personal mode of presentation. This pre-reflective, minimal self-awareness and core self, so he argues, must be foundational in the sense of a necessary ontological precursor for the existence of the explicit, thematic “I” consciousness and self-awareness of a “full-blown” person, as well as for its ontogenetic development. Indeed, it must be considered universally given for any consciousness in possession of experiential phenomena. Thus he writes: “if an organism is in possession of phenomenal consciousness, then it must also be in possession of both a primitive form of self-consciousness and a core self” (p. 236).

5. Introducing the pre-reflective mineness and the minimal core sense of self

Zahavi begins his account of what he calls a primitive, minimal core self by proposing (once again) that although various phenomenal modes of givenness may differ in their experiential properties, they also share certain features, one of them being the quality of mineness, (p. 124). Indeed, so Zahavi goes on, the fact that the experiences are characterised by first-person givenness immediately [i.e. non-inferentially and non-critically] reveals them as one’s own (ibid.). As he also puts it: “Whether a certain experience is experienced as mine or not [...] depends not on something apart from the experience, but precisely on the mode of givenness of the experience. If the experience is given in first-person mode of presentation, it is experienced as my experience, otherwise not”. Indeed, “the particular first-personal givenness of the experience makes it mine and distinguishes it for me from whatever experiences others might have” (ibid., italics added).

Well, so far there would seem to be nothing new or surprising in Zahavi’s proposal, nor would it seem to add anything to how first-person givenness was characterised previously i.e. in his example of Mary’s and John’s experiences of “the exact same cherry” On the contrary, it would seem that if an experience is given in the first-personal mode for someone, it would automatically and by definition entail phenomenal mineness. What is new, however, is that Zahavi now (and without further ado) proposes that the mineness in question is pre-reflective (p. 125), a mineness which we are not aware of, or which is not attended to, but which “simply figures as a subtle background presence” (p. 124). However, according to Zahavi, this “ego-centricity” must be distinguished from any explicit “I”-consciousness. We are, as he puts it, “not (yet) confronted with a thematic or explicit awareness of the experience being owned by or belonging to myself”—and thus, by extension, confronted with a thematic and explicit “I” or “self” experiencing this ownership. Indeed, at this pre-reflective level, we are told, there is no thematic self-reference, nor any “explicit awareness of the experience being mine” (p. 127, italics added).

Here, I think, it would be relevant to repeat the arguments from the previous section as to what is entailed in this “particular first-personal givenness of the experience [which] makes it mine and distinguishes it for me from whatever experiences others might have” (op. cit.).

That Mary’s experience of the cherry may be given for her in this particular first-personal mode would seem both to entail and require the apprehension by Mary that, although intersubjectively sharable, her experience of the cherry is uniquely hers—and John’s experience of the cherry is uniquely his—i.e. entail and require that she may apprehend the epistemic asymmetry between her own experiences and those of others—and vice versa for others. That is, this particular first-person givenness of her experience of the cherry requires, inevitably, that she be able to take as object not only her own experiences but also those of others in a way which is only possible for someone with a thematic “I” consciousness and self-awareness; that is to say, someone who may not merely be aware of experiencing a cherry, but who may also be self-reflectively aware that I am experiencing the cherry (cf. Zahavi, p. 149).

Nonetheless, one of the advantages of positing a pre-reflective minimal mineness and self-awareness of first-personal given experiences is, says Zahavi, that “one does not need to conceive of a self as something standing apart from or above experiences, nor does one need to conceive of the relation between self and experiences as an external relation of ownership” [as “the self-sceptics are claiming”, according to Zahavi (p. 125)]. Rather, this proposal offers the possibility of identifying “the pre-reflective sense of mineness with a minimal, core, sense of self” (p. 125). That is, with a basic sense of self—indeed the most basic sense of self—which, in the words of Henry (1963, p. 581; 1965, p. 53, quoted in Zahavi, ibid.), “is constituted by the very self-givenness of experience”.

Now, the idea of positing a pre-reflective sense of mineness and a primitive or basic core, sense of self, none of which we are explicitly aware of, is, according to Zahavi, to “link an experiential sense of self to the particular first-personal givenness that characterises our experiential life”. Thus, this self “is not something which stands opposed to the stream of consciousness, but is, rather, immersed in conscious life; is an integral part of its structure” (ibid.). The idea is, furthermore, to make it clear that “self-awareness is not to be understood as an awareness of an isolated worldless self”, nor does self-awareness imply “interrupting the experiential interaction with the world in order to turning the gaze inwards”. On the contrary, to be self-aware “is always the self-awareness of a world-immersed self” (ibid.).

These advantages notwithstanding, it is not clear how or why positing a pre-reflective sense of mineness and a primitive basic core, sense of self in any new or different way provides a link or unity between self, experiences and the worldly objects any more than what is already firmly established in the very characterisation of the phenomenal qualities being given for the
experiencer in the first-personal mode of presentation. Nor is it clear what the advantage is of positing the existence of such minimal mineness and core self, which, anyway, aspect by aspect duplicate the mineness and self-awareness of the thematic “I” consciousness of a “full-blown person—albeit in a so-called pre-reflective version. Rather, it would seem that this proposal raises quite a number of questions.

How, for example, do we go about being acquainted with and characterising this pre-reflective mineness and minimal core, sense of self, which allegedly exist prior to the thematic, explicit “I” consciousness and self-awareness, if there is no awareness of them? And how can such characterisation be made—save on reflection, and hence at a level which already entails the awareness of a thematic and explicit “I” consciousness and self-awareness? Indeed, there would seem to be no compelling reason why, upon reflection, an experience should reveal or validate its already pre-reflective mineness or selfhood—it could equally well be the other way round, namely, that the mineness and selfhood of experience being revealed or validated is given as a result of reflection (see also Kauffmann, 2000, 2001). Even more so if we take seriously that the mineness of experience being revealed or validated is such that it distinguishes one's experiences from whatever experiences others may have. For then we are, as already argued, dealing with a mineness that can only be so given for a reflective, thematic “I” consciousness and self-awareness. For the same reasons, the mineness of experiences and the experiential core self with which it is identified, and which allegedly “figure as a subtle background presence”, can only be a mineness and selfhood of someone already in possession of reflective, thematic “I” consciousness and self-awareness.

Put in a different way, it would seem that the pre-reflective experiential mineness and experiential core-self being revealed, i.e. at a level on which we may be aware of, attend to and account for it, necessarily must be similar to the mineness and self-hood of a reflective, thematic “I” consciousness. Otherwise, i.e. if it were different, it would be un-recognisable for the thematic, reflective “I” consciousness as the mineness of experiences and selfhood of which it may be aware. If so, the notion of a pre-reflective minimal mineness and experiential core-self is redundant and what it refers to without any explanatory force or foundational role for the reflective, thematic “I” consciousness and selfhood.

Now, there is of course the possibility that the pre-reflective mineness and experiential core self—which figures as a subtle background presence and of which we are not explicitly aware—is something of which we cannot be aware “in its purity” (p. 130), and also that it is something so sufficiently different from the mineness and selfhood of experiences of the reflective, thematic “I” consciousness as to be (claimed) foundational for the mineness and self-hood of which we may be aware. However, in that case we would not be able to characterise this foundational pre-reflective mineness and experiential core self; indeed it would be something of which no account could be given. On either interpretation the notion of a pre-reflective mineness and experiential core self seem to be devoid of explanatory force.

This puzzle aside, how can the minimal sense of mineness and the minimal, core, sense of self by which it is identified be said to be pre-reflective, or be said to belong to a pre-reflective level, given, as held by Sartre and Henry and accepted by Zahavi, “consciousness is, at bottom, characterised by a fundamental self-givenness or self-referentiality” and “consciousness is characterised, as such, by self-awareness” (p. 115). Indeed, how could any part or type of consciousness experiencing be said to be pre-reflective, or even stronger: fail to be of a reflective nature, i.e. given that self-reference and self-awareness are fundamental features of consciousness? Furthermore, given that it is precisely these fundamental self-referring features and self-awareness of consciousness which constitutes the minimal sense of mineness and core, sense of self, how then can it be maintained that these “senses” occur at a pre-reflective level? Last but not least, in view of the amount of self-reflection and self-awareness entailed in “the particular first-person givenness of experience [which] makes it mine and distinguishes it for me from whatever experiences others might have” (p. 124) then neither this givenness nor mineness can possibly be said to be pre-reflective—irrespective of whether or not we happen to attend to or are thematically and explicitly aware of it.

However this may be, Zahavi also considers this so-called pre-reflective sense of mineness and minimal core, sense of self to be foundational, both in the sense of being a necessary ontological condition and a necessary ontogenetic precursor for the development of a thematic, explicit “I” consciousness and self-awareness of a full-blown self-reflective person. Indeed, as will be clear in the section which follows, this minimal mineness and core sense of self is, according to Zahavi, an integral part of our experiential life right from the start, i.e. from birth. The notion of an experiential core self has even found resonance in empirical sciences as a condition, among others, for developing a narrative or autobiographical self (ibid.). For this reason Zahavi sees no grounds for questioning the reality and foundational significance of such a pre-reflective mineness and minimal experiential core self.

15 However, this is not the only puzzle. For, according to Zahavi, (1) we cannot be aware of an object unless we are aware of the [phenomenal modes of the] experience through which the object is made to appear (p. 121) and (2) the quality of mineness is a common feature of various phenomenal modes, however it is a quality we do not attend to, and of which we are not explicitly aware (p. 124). Now, if awareness of the phenomenal modes of experiences is indispensable for there to be any experience of anything at all, it would be obvious to think that this includes awareness of their features, among them the quality of mineness. If not it needs to be explained what makes awareness of this feature dispensable.

16 The sciences referred to in the present context are neurology and psychiatry. In a later chapter, which I shall return to in the next section, he refers to developmental psychology.
6. The ontogenetically foundational role of the pre-reflective minimal core self

The contention of the minimal mineness and minimal core, sense of self as being ontogenetically foundational, i.e. a fore-runner existing at the pre-reflective level of a child or infant, and on which is built our later, explicit and thematic self-awareness and our explicit “I” experiences, is attempted substantiated by Zahavi in a later chapter in his book. In this chapter he discusses the studies within developmental psychology concerning the very earliest stages of self-awareness. Although he does not use the words “minimal self” or “minimal core, sense of self” in this context, but rather “a primitive type of self-awareness”, he quotes “influential developmental psychologists” for reaching the same conclusion as Bermüdes, namely that non-conceptual and pre-linguistic forms of self-awareness exist that are “logically and ontogenetically more primitive than the higher forms of self-consciousness that are usually the focus of philosophical debate” (Bermüdes, 1998, p. 274). Indeed, so these developmental psychologists are claimed to argue, the infant is in possession of self-awareness right from birth (p. 198). This view, according to Zahavi, is in line with the insistence of phenomenologists “that we have an innate and non-inferential access to our own experiential life” (p. 197)—and thus “it is legitimate to speak of a primitive type of self-experience or self-awareness whenever we are phenomenally conscious” (ibid.). If this view is correct, so Zahavi contends, it has obvious consequences for the ascription of self-awareness to infants as well.

But how, for example, would we go about establishing that such a primitive type of (non-conceptual and pre-reflective) self-awareness actually exists in infants at the pre-reflective level? What is the observational evidence on which to assume (or posit) not only its existence, but also its phenomenal properties and characteristics? Arguably, we do not have any access to the pre-reflective experiences of an infant—or can we claim such access from a second-person perspective. All we have are observations from a strictly third-person perspective, i.e. in the form of the very simple behavioural data recorded by developmental psychologists, such as the onset of sucking-reflexes, tongue protrusion, turning of head and eyes following the presentation to the child of various sorts of very simple stimuli. From these observations the existence of some kinds of phenomenal experiences of mineness and selfhood of experiences are inferred. However, as Zahavi rightly points out, “in order for a creature to be in possession of self-experience, it is not sufficient that the creature in question behaves in a certain way. It must also be in possession of *phenomenal consciousness* and behave as it does because it has the experience it has”. Regrettably, Zahavi is just as silent as to what behaviour would validate this possession of phenomenal consciousness as are the developmental psychologists he quotes. What he does contend, however, is that “any reasonable ascription of self-experience cannot bypass a discussion of the relationship between phenomenal consciousnesses and self-experience—and, he then claims, “this is precisely what the phenomenological tradition can provide” (p. 204). Indeed, so he contends, “the phenomenological defence of a one-level account of consciousness can provide strong support for the existence of pre-linguistic forms of self-experience” (ibid.). Thus, the primitive self-awareness entailed in phenomenal consciousness is independent of language and “conceptual sophistications”, according to Zahavi; it does not concern the specific content of an experience, but (merely) its unique mode of givenness. This, says Zahavi, “is why the infant, even prior to any conceptual discrimination between self and world or self and other, can be self-aware. It is a self-awareness rooted in the first-personal givenness of its experiences, in the intrinsic self-manifesting character of its life” (pp. 204–205).

Now, it may well be that some primitive sense of mineness or selfhood might exist as a phenomenal aspects of the experiencing of an infant at the pre-reflective level—indeed nobody would be in a position to deny it. But nor would anybody be


19 Let me quote Daniel S. Stern on this point: “The observed infant is a special construct, a description of capacities that can be observed directly”. However, these observations, says Stern, reveal little about what the “felt” quality of their experiences is like, and little about the higher organisational structures that would make the observed infant more than a growing list of capacities. And he adds: “As soon as we try to make inferences about the actual experiences of the real infant—that is, to build in qualities of subjective experiences such as a sense of self—we are thrown back to our own subjective experiences as the main source of inspiration” (Stern, 1985, p. 17). These words of caution do not prevent Stern, or philosophers referring to his research, from inferring from the extremely limited list of observed capabilities of neonates that they are equipped with “a rudimentary sense of self and self-awareness”.

20 Alongside some developmental psychologists, Zahavi and other philosophers within the phenomenological traditions (cf. e.g. Gallagher, 2000 & Thompson, 2001), use Meltzoff’s and Moore’s investigation of so-called imitation by neonates of tongue protrusion, mouth opening, etc. as evidence for the existence of an innate primitive sense of self and self-awareness—indeed a “sense of self which allow neonates to detect similarities between self and others, and thus to discriminate self from others”, etc. (Zahavi, pp. 209–210). However, Meltzoff and Moore’s original study (Meltzoff & Moore, 1983) and of later replications of these studies by Meltzoff as well as by others show that the evidence for neonate imitation is highly questionable, indeed, there is no evidence for its existence. If so, these studies can hardly be used in support of theoretical arguments for infantile self-awareness (Anisfeld (1996), Anisfeld, Turkewitz, & Rose (2001)). Let me quote from the philosopher Talia Welsh’s conclusion of her thorough review and discussion of the use by philosophers of imitation studies: “I have increasingly come across the use of neonatal imitation as a defense in philosophical papers and conference proceedings for various kinds of claims about the self. [However] I find that philosophers sometimes simply pick and choose what empirical data supports their pre-existing claims and do not ask whether or not alternative or contradictory explanations could be provided for the same data. (…) Not only does contradictory research exist, but contradictory interpretations of the existing research on neonatal imitation exist too” (Welsh, 2006, pp. 234–235). For alternative interpretations of data involving so-called neonatal imitation, cf. e.g. Jones (1996), Gergely (1995), Gergely & Watson (1996), Gergely (2004), Maratos (1998), McGregor (2001).

21 According to Zahavi, “the newborn does not have to master the words and concepts “pain”, “hunger”, “frustration” and “mine” in order to feel the mineness of the pain, the hunger and the frustration”. And, he continues: “the question of self-awareness is not primarily a question of a specific what, but of a unique how (ibid.). Well, whereas there need be no doubt that the newborn may be aware of some very unpleasant states when being hungry or enduring pain, just as, say, a cat may be, it is not at all obvious that mere access to such states inevitably entail self-awareness, or awareness of those states being “one’s own”. If all that came down to was mere awareness and awareness of the phenomenal qualities of experiences, i.e. what they feel like, then, arguably, every enjoying conscious experiences would also be self-aware. If so, the very notion of “self-awareness” would be reduced to a triviality. I shall come back to this point later.
in position to claim access to empirical, scientific evidence that might prove it. But this is not all. It seems to be taken for granted by Zahavi that the primitive mineness and selfhood of the experiences of an infant at the pre-conceptual and pre-reflective level is more or less akin to the kind of so-called pre-reflective, primitive sense of mineness and minimal core, sense of self of full-blown persons, which during our normal everyday activity and experiences “figure as a subtle background presence”, but of which we are not explicitly aware. Indeed, it is taken for granted by Zahavi and phenomenology at large as a matter of definition of experiencing that self-awareness (however primitive, rudimentary or minimal) is “rooted” in the first-person givenness of experiences and by virtue of the “intrinsic self-manifesting character” of experiential life (op. cit.).

However, whatever may be the phenomenal sense of selfhood or mineness of experiences of a pre-reflective infant or indeed of a neonate, having no concepts or notions of “self”, “mine” and “others”, etc. we have, as argued in a previous section, no grounds at all for assuming that the phenomenal experiences of a pre-reflective infant or neonate are first-personal given for the infant or neonate—with all this givenness entails. That is, the ability to apprehend one’s experiences as experiences and oneself as an experiencer and, furthermore, the ability to distinguish one’s own experiences from the experiences of others and, hence, apprehending the uniqueness of one’s experiences, etc. On the contrary, it is highly unlikely.

So why does Zahavi, nevertheless, insists that the phenomenal experiences of an infant, indeed of a neonate, must be given for the infant or neonate in first-personal mode of givenness, indeed why does he—on a par with other phenomenologists—insist that, generally, there can be no phenomenal experiences without self-awareness and hence of apprehension of ownership of such experiences?

One of the reasons advocated by Zahavi throughout the present book as well as in his previous publications is, that without “a sense of self” of experiences, and hence that experiences are experienced as one’s own, then experiences would be ownerless and anonymous, indeed, undifferentiated and indistinguishable (i.e. from those of others)—and hence would be irrelevant for the experiencer. Now, the vast majority of developmental psychologist (and, I think, mothers) would willingly grant a neonate a variety of experiences such as hunger and pain and emotional states such as blissful contentment, distress, discomfort, and, a couple of months later, happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, and excitement. Whereas it would be natural to assume, therefore, that there is something it is like for the infant to experience these states and emotions, and thus that the infant’s experiences are de facto owned by the infant—and not at all “irrelevant” for the infant—it is much more doubtful that they are also given for the infant as its own. Take happiness, for example—is that experienced by the baby as simply “being in a universe of happiness”, that happiness, so to speak, is “all over”—or does the baby experience that it is itself, who is happy—and not others? We do not know. However, if the latter is assumed, then it would also have to be assumed, inevitably, that the infant may apprehend that it has experiences—i.e. may apprehend its experiences as experiences and itself as an experiencer. Otherwise the issue of whether or not its experiences are its own—and not others—could not, logically, arise for the infant. Now, this apprehension does arise for an infant, as noted in a previous section, but at a much later stage.

However, the central issue at stake here is whether or not it is correct to conclude, as insisted by phenomenologists, that because “we have an innate and non-inferential access to our own experiential life”, then “it is legitimate to speak of a primitive type of self-experience or self-awareness whenever we are phenomenally conscious” (op. cit.). In a previous publication Zahavi arrives at the same conclusion by way of the following “syllogism” which clearly shows why this conclusion is unwarranted. It goes thus: “In so far there is something it is like for the subject to have experiences, there must also be some awareness of the experience itself, in short, there must be some minimal form of self-awareness” (Zahavi, 2002, p. 14). Now, if we exemplify the “syllogism” in this way: “in so far there is something it is like for the subject to have experiences, say of pain, there must also be some awareness of the experience itself, i.e. pain”—then it is clear that the conclusion, “there must be some minimal form of self-awareness”, is invalid—indeed, the premises on which this conclusion is based do not even get us halfway to any form of self-awareness. However, had he instead put the syllogism thus: “in so far there is something it is like for the subject to have experiences and there is also some awareness of the experience itself, then it would, as I have tried to argue, take us all the way to the conclusion that then there must in fact be some minimal form of self-awareness. Put differently, merely having access to one’s own experiential life is not comparable to knowing or apprehending that one is having an experiential life of one’s own to which one’s phenomenal experiences belong.

However, if it may be assume that infants have all sorts of phenomenal experiences before that stage, it must also be assumed that whatever their phenomenal qualities, these experiences and qualities may indeed be given for the infant without the particular self-reference and self-awareness involved in first-person ontology. Conversely, it would not make sense to say of an infant that it can undergo phenomenal experiences, however, there is nothing that these experiences are like for the infant before it can begin to apprehend that what it experiences may be different from what others experience, and hence can begin to apprehend that it has an experiential life of its own. But this is, as far as I can see, precisely what is maintained in the claim by Zahavi and other phenomenologists that first-person givenness is an intrinsic feature of experiences of phenomenal qualities or dimensions, and that “experiences must always be given from a first-person perspective, for otherwise they would not be experiences” (p. 125).

Another reason why Zahavi insists that experiences, as well as consciousness in general, comes equipped with self-reference and self-awareness from the start, so to speak, is that it has proved impossible to explain “the origin of self-awareness as such” by something more fundamental, which does not imply self-awareness. Thus, as argued repeatedly by Zahavi and other phenomenologists against e.g. the so-called higher-order theories of consciousness, such attempt—“by a secondary
act”—to explain self-awareness inevitably ends in an infinite regress. Let me quote this argument as it is summarised by Zahavi in a previous publication.

The criticism directed against the attempt to understand phenomenal consciousness as a result of a higher-order representation is not meant to imply that such a higher-order representation is impossible, or that consciousness cannot direct its intentional “gaze” at itself and thereby take itself as its own object. Rather, the point is that this reflective self-awareness (or higher-order representation) is derivative, and that it always presupposes the existence of a prior un thematic, non-objectifying pre-reflective self-awareness as its condition of possibility. The first-order mental state must already be tacitly self-conscious, since it is the fact of its being already mine, already being given in the first-personal mode of presentation that allows me to thematise it in reflection. And the second-order mental state must also already be pre-reflective self-consciousness, since it is this that permits it to recognise the first-order state as belonging to the same subjectivity as itself.

And, he continues,

If we are to avoid an infinite regress, this primitive pre-reflective self-awareness cannot be due to a secondary act or reflex but must be a constitutive aspect of the experience itself, [i.e.] an experience is conscious of itself at the time of its occurrence (Zahavi, 2002, p. 17)

Now, from the above arguments it would seem to follow logically that self-awareness or self-reference must be presupposed to be intrinsic to or a constitutive aspect of phenomenal consciousness. There is of course nothing wrong in so presupposing. However, if what is presupposed is the extensive set of self-reflective capabilities involved in the minimal mineness and self-awareness of the so-called pre-reflective, first-personal given experiences, as outlined by Zahavi, then it would seem that one ends up presupposing just about everything that one sets out to account for.

Equally seriously, if it is assumed that self-awareness and self “is, in fact, identified with the very first-personal givenness of the experiential phenomena” (op. cit.), then it is hard to see how there could be any distinction what so ever between the self and first-personal given experiences, let alone between self and phenomenal experiences of which it is a feature. This leads us to the issues being discussed in the section which follows, i.e. Zahavi’s explanation of how a self evolves which is “act-transcendent”, i.e. a self which may apprehended itself as the common subjects of its changing phenomenal experiences.

7. How the self as an experiential dimension explains the unity and identity of self

So, let us proceed to how Zahavi addresses the problem of how the self preserves its unity and identity, and how, in particular, the proposal of a pre-reflective sense of mineness and an experiential core self inherent in the first-personal givenness of experiencing, may account for the identity of the self through time “without actually having to posit the self as a separate entity [i.e. identity-pole] over and above the stream of consciousness” (p. 130).

Now, the self which retains its identity through changing experiences is different from and must be distinguished from the built-in self-awareness of occurrent experiences. For, in the words of Brook (1994, quoted in Zahavi, 2000, p. 67), “when one is in possession of apperceptive self-awareness one is not merely aware of being the subject of a single experience but also aware of oneself as being the common subject of other psychological states”. So, how do we become aware of or acquainted with this self or ego, and when does our self-awareness contain a reference to an act-transcendent identity, i.e. something which is given as the same despite the change in experiences?

To illustrate how this comes about, Zahavi first take a detour to a notion introduced by Husserl of an act-transcendent ego, i.e. “the self considered as an identity-pole, a principle of focus, shared by all experiences belonging to the same stream of consciousness” (p. 130). This notion introduces a differentiation between self and the experience, which, as Zahavi notes, “seems warranted the moment we pass beyond a narrow investigation of the self-givenness of a single experience and consider the plurality of experiences” (p. 131). Thus, it is possible to be aware of one’s toothache and to be simultaneously aware of oneself as the common subject of a manifold of simultaneous experiences, just as it is possible to be self-aware across temporal distance and recall a past experience as one’s own. In these cases, according to Husserl, “it is necessary to distinguish the self from any single experience, as the self can preserve its identity, whereas experiences arise and perish in the stream of consciousness, replacing one other in a permanent flux” (p. 131). Thus, whereas the self-givenness or mineness of a single experience is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient condition for an over-arching self-awareness, i.e. an

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22 This statement would seem to borders on redundancy. For how could any “me” thematis in reflection any mental states unless they belonged to oneself? Indeed, how could any “I” or “me” be said to thematis in reflection a mental state without knowing that it belonged to oneself?

23 Properly unpacked this statement reads: the second-order mental state (that is, the thematising in reflection by a “me” of its mental states), must also be pre-reflective self-conscious, since it is this which permits it to recognise the first-order state as belonging to itself. This statement would seem just as redundant; unless, of course, it may be assumed that a reflective second order mental state could exist without any first-order mental states belonging to the same subjectivity as itself.

24 Obviously, this is not the only possibility; self-awareness may come about as a result of ontogenetical development, as indicated in a previous section.
act-transcendent identity. For, the latter “entails more than a single and immediate self-awareness; it also entails a difference or distance that is bridged, that is, it involves a synthesis” (ibid.). Indeed, the self cannot be given as an act-transcendent entity in a single experience—it is only by comparing several experiences that we can encounter something that retains its identity through changing experiences, according to Husserl (p. 131).

How does this Husserlian view fare with Zahavi’s so far presented, and its attempt to abolish a distinction between self and experience? Very well, according to Zahavi. For, according to Husserl’s theory it is legitimate to insist on the difference between our singular and transitory experience and the abiding dimension of first-personal experiencing (ibid.). That is, “the moment we expand the focus to include more than a single experience, it becomes not only legitimate, but also highly appropriate to distinguish the strict singularity of the field of first-personal givenness from the plurality of changing experiences” (p. 132, italics added). In other words, although the act-transcendent identity of the self is revealed only in acts of synthesis, it does not arise out of the blue, but, according to Zahavi, out of the pervasive and invariant dimension of first-personal givenness throughout the multitude of changing experiences (ibid.). Thus, what makes two experiences part of the same subjectivity or self is their shared manner of givenness. As Zahavi also puts it in an earlier publication: “Granted that it is their exposure in the same field of first-personal givenness which makes different experiences belong to one and the same self, it is possible to explains how self-awareness can be established across numerical different acts, and more specifically how self-awareness can bridge the temporal distance and allow me to remember a former experience as mine.” Thus, “if an experience is reflectively assessable to me in recollection, it is automatically given as my past experience (“Zahavi, 2000, pp. 67–68”).

But how, one may ask, is the act-transcendent synthesis and comparing of the multitude of experiences accomplished, and how does the field of first-personal givenness of experiencing come into existence in the first place as a multitude of distinguishable experiences? Indeed, who or what is discriminating the phenomenal qualities of different experiences, i.e. the “how is it like” of the experiences and their modes of access, and who or what is doing the comparing and acts of synthesis? For one thing, at the level or “field” of pre-reflective mineness and the minimal sense of self—and, presumably, it is this level we are talking about—we are, as stressed by Zahavi earlier in the present work (Zahavi, 2005, Chap. 3), dealing with a non-relational type of “manifestation”, which means, among others, that at this level there is no subject–object dichotomy, nor therefore any differentiation between the subject and the objects of experiences. If so, presumably, neither is there any “difference between consciousness of a foreign object and consciousness of one’s own subjectivity” (Zahavi, 2002, p. 16). In effect, at this level, there can be no “sense of self”, however minimal, nor any invariant field of first-personal givenness of experiences for the subject. Indeed, among the defining features of pre-reflective self-awareness is its “immediate, implicit, non-objectifying and passive nature” (p. 71).

Well, this would seem to mean that at this pre-reflective level, there is nothing which may “expand its focus to include more than a single experience” or “distance” itself from and take as object any experiences, nothing which may carry out acts of discriminating, comparing, bridging or synthesising experiences. Indeed, there would be nothing to apprehend the invariance of the field of first-personal givenness of experiences, nor to differentiate this field from the plurality of changing experiences. In short, it would seem that at this level, irrespective of how numerous and varied the experiences, there is nothing to apprehend and carry out this discriminating or comparing, let alone acts of synthesis.

This would seem to have quite serious consequences in itself. However secondly, if the so-called pre-reflective self is an experiential dimension, and “is, in fact, identified which the first-personal givenness of the experiential phenomenal” (op. cit.), how could there be any distinction what so ever between the self and the experiential phenomena? For there to be a manifold of different experiences for this self it may well suffice that experiences are discriminated according to their different phenomenal modes or qualities, i.e. as perceptions, sensations, imaginations, memories, thoughts, beliefs, etc. However, for there to be an invariant field of first-personal given experiences for the pre-reflective self being discriminable from the manifold of the phenomenal experiences, requires that this self be not just part and parcel of, or indistinguishably identified with this manifold of experiential phenomena. That is to say, it requires a self with capabilities very much like an act-transcendental ego, i.e. something which may distance itself from and remain the same through the manifold of different experiences. Without such a self, no acts of synthesis are possible. So, if it is true that the act-transcendental unity and identity of the self or ego, which is revealed to us only in acts of synthses, arises out of and is grounded in the pervasive dimension or field of mineness of first-personal given experiences, it must equally be true that the existence of such a field of experiences on which acts of syntheses may be carried out, relies on, indeed, is itself constituted in virtue of some or other act-transcend-
dent and reflective ego or self. If so, we seem either to be going in circles or, even worse, to be heading towards an infinite regress of act-transcendent ego.27

Either way, to say that the act-transcendent “self” does “not arise out of the blue, but is grounded in the pervasive dimension of first-person experiences” does not, really, amount to an explanation of how, let alone why it arises. Conversely, granted that a pre-reflective minimal self-awareness and core self, as described by Zahavi, is assumed to be foundational and universally given for any phenomenal consciousness,28 it would be hard to explain why not all organisms in possession of phenomenal consciousness develop act-transcendent selves and explicit, thematic self-awareness.

8. Conclusion

Zahavi’s defense of the phenomenological proposal of the self as an experiential dimension seems to rest on an unwar- ranted assumption. This is the assumption that awareness of phenomenal modes of access to objects (i.e. as seen, smelled, tasted, heard, remembered, imagined, etc.), is comparable with, indeed, entails awareness of first-person mode of access to experiences (i.e. subjectivity of experience with a built-in self-reference and mineness of experience). In the words of Zahavi, the mistake consist in assuming that first-personal experiences and their quality of mineness are, just, features shared by and intrinsic to various phenomenal modes of experiences.

This confusion of phenomenal modes of experiences of objects with first-personal access to experiences is carried over in the characterisation of the so-called pre-reflective core self as well—and hence in Zahavi’s attempt phenomenologically to underpin its existence. This is the notion of an ontologically and ontogenetically foundational “primitive” self, i.e. foundational for the development and apprehension of the explicit, reflective “I” consciousness and “self-awareness” of a “full-blown” person, and which—due to the above confusion—is a self which, nevertheless, comes equipped with first-personal experiences, and with it all the features of a reflective “I” consciousness and self-awareness—albeit in a “primitive” form.

Due to both the confusion as to what counts as first-person givenness of experiences, and to overlooking the conditions for the existence for someone of a field of discriminative first-person experiences, Zahavi’s explanation of how the unity and identity of the self comes about, runs into problems of circularity or, even worse, an infinite regress of selves.29

References


27 Thanks to Dan Zahavi, Daniel Hutto, Talia Welsh, Laurits Lauritsen and Simo Køppe for their informed criticism and comments on an earlier draft which helped me to focus and clarify my arguments.

28 Az the case that “if an organism is in possession of phenomenal consciousness, then it must also be in possession of both a primitive form of self-consciousness and a core self” (p. 236).

29 Thanks to Dan Zahavi, Daniel Hutto, Talia Welsh, Laurits Lauritsen and Simo Køppe for their informed criticism and comments on an earlier draft which helped me to focus and clarify my arguments.