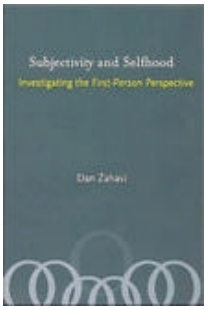
PsycCRITIQUES
Contemporary Psychology: APA Review of Books
American Psychological Asso

Is There a Knife That Can Cut Itself?

A review of



Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective
by Dan Zahavi

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 280 pp. ISBN 0-262-24050-5. $36.00

Reviewed by
William A. Adams

Have you ever become confused when you reached to pick up a pencil because you suddenly could not tell the difference between yourself and the pencil? Of course not. But why not? You are a physical object, and so is the pencil. Why does it matter which one you are? It matters because experience has a personal, subjective feel to it, or, as philosophers say, “there is something it is like” to have experience.

The sense that you are the owner of your experience is what makes your thoughts yours. Psychiatrists sometimes call that *ipseity,* or personal identity (Sass, 2000), and its failure is a characteristic of schizophrenia. What would it be like if you had thoughts that did not seem like they were yours? It would be exactly like hearing voices.

Insights such as that can be won from Dan Zahavi's difficult book, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. The book is difficult because the questions are difficult. What is subjectivity? What makes us self-aware? What is the self?

Zahavi takes the reader carefully, patiently through these questions, gradually converging on a set of answers that may have practical usefulness for personality theory, clinical and developmental psychology, consciousness studies, and philosophy of mind.

Psychologists do not usually study subjectivity. We are all about objectivity, as a result of a history of behaviorism and functionalism and because of our commitment to scientific methodology. Zahavi does not criticize science, but he reminds us that subjectivity is not an object. The subject is the knower, not the known—the lived experience, not the thing experienced. Without an account of subjectivity, he writes, we cannot understand what a self is, and if we cannot understand that, we will not be able to consider that some pathologies, such as schizophrenia and autism, are comprehensible as disorders of the self. I add that without understanding subjectivity and selfhood, we would never fully understand development, personality, psychopathology, or cognitive psychology.

Subjectivity and Self-Awareness

Zahavi begins his analysis by pointing out that each of us enjoys immediate self-awareness of our own consciousness. That is the only reason a book on subjectivity and selfhood can be written and read. There is no clue anywhere in the physical world that consciousness exists. Self-awareness alone reveals it. But how does that work? Zahavi sides with Jean-Paul Sartre, saying that self-awareness is a built-in, immediate, and noncognitive feature of consciousness, prior even to any introspection. That conclusion is not very illuminating, but what else can be said about the plain fact that we are aware that we have experience?

What is the role of subjectivity in

consciousness? Could there be conscious experience that lacked an aspect of subjectivity? Zahavi argues that experience always has a subjective aspect. There is no free-floating experience out there on its own. Every experience is somebody's experience, so subjectivity must be intrinsic to consciousness. It follows, then, that subjectivity must be inherently self-aware, albeit in a prereflective, noncognitive, nonintrospective way.

Zahavi's arguments for this chain of reasoning are not strong. The examples using the analysis of musical experience, from the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, are flawed, but he never criticizes Husserl, only various interpretations or translations of his writing. Despite that, I agree for other reasons—for example, the assertion by G. W. F. Hegel (1807/1967), whom Zahavi does not mention, that subjectivity is inherently aware of its own existence in a prereflective way.

Introspection

We could only come to know about prereflective, intrinsic self-awareness through introspection. But how does deliberate reflection on experience reveal prereflective subjectivity? Zahavi acknowledges that “we will never be able to grasp our subjectivity simply by improving and refining our forward-looking object-investigation, just as no matter how much we sharpen a knife, it will remain unable to cut itself” (p. 75). This is the key difficulty for Zahavi's entire project and, indeed, for the first-person, phenomenological method he uses. To know something, anything at all, requires separation of subject and object, the knower and the known. But how is it logically possible to know about the subject, not the object? How can subjectivity know itself if it is not an object? And if it were an object, who would do the knowing?

Zahavi reaches out to Martin Heidegger for

a solution, but I am not convinced he gets one. Heidegger offers the quasi-Buddhistic idea that life is simply experienced prior to subjectivity and objectivity, and that, furthermore, “I am always somehow acquainted with myself” (p. 80). This is enough for Zahavi to assert that

> we should examine factic life-experience and what we will then find is the co-givenness of self and world. Life is, as Heidegger said, world-related; it is always already living in the world and does not have to seek it out. (pp. 81-82)

Is that a good enough answer to the question of how introspection reveals subjectivity? If one disregards the fact that the original question was about subjectivity, not life, and that subjectivity has somehow morphed into an unqualified self in Zahavi's explanation, there is also the problem that Heidegger's answer either is tautological (i.e., I am self-aware because I am acquainted with myself) or commits the performative error (i.e., if living experience is prior to language, nothing can be said about it).

Zahavi seems to realize that Heidegger's answer is inadequate, although he does not explicitly admit it, and moves on to another possible explanation, that subjectivity is fractured within itself, fragmented or cracked just enough to create a thin shadow of self-alienation, the tiniest precursor of the epistemological subject-object divide. That is enough for subjectivity to get a look at itself. Strange as that sounds, Zahavi desperately needs this concept, for without it, “as Husserl wrote, I cannot grasp my own functioning subjectivity because I am it” (p. 92).

Again, I think Zahavi's intuition is correct but unwarranted by his arguments. I agree that subjectivity, at its core, is self-alienated and unstable. That instability is what allows subjectivity to be revealed to itself in

deliberate reflection. Subjectivity is, then, the knife that can cut itself. Despite the central importance of that conclusion to Zahavi's essay, it is left as an implication of an argument that just ends as if its battery went dead. The conclusion should have been stated in boldface, uppercase letters, but Zahavi is not prone to bold statements. He prefers to let evidence speak for itself, staying personally out of the picture. That style makes the book more difficult to read.

Multiple Selves Knowing Each Other

Having posited the self as a core, minimal, self-aware subjectivity, Zahavi considers the opposing idea that the self is a socially constructed narrative, a conceptual and linguistic artifact of social living. That self, he writes, is a narration about the experienced, subjective self. This is in flat contradiction to the assertions of narrative self theorists such as Daniel Dennett (1991), who explicitly state that the narrative self is not about anything; it is just a common theme among various stories of experience. Nevertheless, Zahavi asserts, in a rare explicit opinion, that both kinds of self are valid, with the cognitive, linguistic, socially conditioned, reflective ego presupposing the core, experiential self. Thus, each person has two selves.

Zahavi next takes up the question of intersubjectivity, the problem of how people know each other's mind. You say “ouch” when you bang your thumb and that is what I would say, so you must have feelings like I do. Zahavi convincingly shows that analogy is not how we know each other. How about plain empathy, then? But if I were completely empathic with you, I would lose myself in you. There must be boundaries to empathy so I can maintain my individuality. Zahavi sidles to a multidimensional position, empathy constrained by individuality.

Then he can take up the problem of how people come to know each other's mind. In a classic demonstration, two dolls are shown to a child. The Sally doll has a box, and the Anne doll has a basket. A marble is put in Sally's box, and then Sally leaves the room. The experimenter, in plain sight of the child, moves the marble to Anne's basket, then asks, “When Sally comes back, where will she look for the marble?” Children younger than four years old say she will look in the basket, because that is where the marble is. They do not realize that Sally would not know that. Children over four years old answer correctly because, one can presume, they have a theory of mind—they understand that other people can have a point of view different from their own.

Zahavi then uses this idea to discuss autism. It is interesting that even older people with autism do not pass the Sally-Anne test. Do they not understand other people's minds? Do they lack intersubjectivity? Do they lack conscious experience altogether? Nonautistic children with other developmental disorders pass the test, so it isolates an important feature of autism, but what feature?

Zahavi reviews empirical studies, philosophical arguments, and clinical interpretations before arriving cautiously at his insightful conclusion that autism, like schizophrenia, can be seen as a disorder of the narrative self but not of the core, experiential self. The theory of mind criterion is too broad and does not get at the realities of subjectivity and selfhood; thus, it is not helpful in explaining autism. This is a fascinating and potentially useful inference.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Zahavi's goal in this book is to investigate subjectivity and selfhood using a first-person approach rather than a review of empirical studies. He points out that even the attempt to

"naturalize" consciousness (explain it in terms of natural science), requires first "a detailed analysis and description of the experiential aspects of consciousness" (p. 4). That justifies the first-person, phenomenological approach he takes.

This is not a book about the phenomenological method, however. Zahavi's arguments appeal to scientific findings, philosophical sources, logic, and intuition to support ideas that one presumes come from phenomenological analysis. But phenomenology is not a well-defined epistemological method like science, so there are no criteria for judging the validity of its output. The book is thus a set of arguments that aims to be persuasive, not a presentation of consensus findings. Personally, I was persuaded and enriched in the process.

Zahavi's main method of argument is exegesis of Husserl's writings, on which he is a well-known expert. He also explicates passages from Heidegger, Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and other phenomenologists. He deserves high praise for making Husserl's turgid writing accessible, going beyond even the published sources to provide his own translations of posthumous letters and notes. Yet for all Zahavi's scholarship, this book suffers from a bit too much Husserl and not enough Zahavi. Time and again, struggling with difficult ideas, I looked to the author for direction, only to find another set of arguments from Husserl. Remarkable for a book endorsing a first-person perspective, there is little of it apparent.

This is an exciting book, though, rich in ideas, with practical implications, on perhaps the most important topics a psychologist ever confronts: subjectivity and selfhood. It is suitable for those interested in development, personality, or abnormal psychology, and for professionals in philosophy of mind and

phenomenology. It is probably too difficult for classroom use, although I would love to challenge a graduate seminar in personality theory with it.

References

Dennett, D. (1991). *Consciousness explained.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1967). *The phenomenology of mind* (J. B. Baillie, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row Torchbooks. (Original work published 1807)

Sass, L. (2000). Schizophrenia, self-experience, and the so-called "negative symptoms." In D. Zahavi (Ed.), *Exploring the self: Philosophical and psychopathological perspectives on self-experience* (pp. 149-181). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

PsycCRITIQUES September 20, 2006 Vol. 51 (38), Article 18

1554-0138