

CHAPTER 13

UNITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF

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Lilly tried to force me to drink some brandy. I bit hard on the rim of the glass, seeing the ceiling light through the moist glass, spots overlapping spots, my dizziness got worse and I felt nauseated. . . . Lilly pushed the brandy glass between my teeth again. The warm liquid shook my tongue and slid down my throat. The ringing in my ears filled my whole head. . . . Sweat ran down my neck, and Lilly wiped the cold sweat for me.

This short passage from Ryū Murakami's novel *Almost Transparent Blue* can serve as an example of something all of us should be familiar with, namely the fact that experiences never occur in isolation, and that the stream of consciousness is an ensemble of experiences that is unified both at and over time, both synchronically and diachronically.

According to a classical view, we need to appeal to a self in order to account for this diachronic and synchronic unity. To think of a simultaneous or temporally dispersed plurality of objects is to think of myself being conscious of this plurality, and this requires an undivided, invariable, unchanging me. On such an account, the unity of self is taken to be something with explanatory power rather than something that itself is in need of an explanation. The classical term for this principle of organization and unification is *transcendental ego*.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, though, that not everybody has been willing to accept the existence of such a principle. As Thomas Wakley, long-time editor of the British medical journal *The Lancet* wrote in one of his editorials (25 March 1843):

From the fact that the philosophy of the human mind has been almost wholly uncultivated by those who are best fitted for its pursuit, the study has received a wrong direction, and become a subtle exercise for lawyers and casuists, and abstract reasoners, rather than a useful field of scientific observation. Accordingly, we find the views, even of the most able and clear-headed metaphysicians, coming into frequent collision with the known facts of physiology and pathology. For example, that 'consciousness is *single*' is an axiom among the mental philosophers, and the proof of *personal identity* is made by those gentlemen to rest chiefly on the supposed universality or certainty of that allegation. But what would they say to the case of a somnambulist who evinced what is regarded as double consciousness . . . (Quoted in Hacking 1995: 221)

Wakley is not the only one who has used psychopathological findings as an argument against the existence of a unitary and unifying self. A similar fascination with cases of double consciousness can be found in French intellectuals such as Hippolyte Taine and Théodule Ribot later in the nineteenth century. Both figures were opposed to the idea of an autonomous, persisting, freestanding self—something distinct from the diversity of transient sensations, memories, ideas, perceptions, conceptions—and took cases of double consciousness to disprove the existence of a transcendental ego. As Ribot, who held the chair of experimental and comparative psychology at the Collège de France, wrote in his book *Les Maladies de la mémoire*: 'To conceive of the self as an entity distinct from states of consciousness is a useless and contradictory hypothesis, which takes as simple that which appears simple, and which postulates instead of explaining' (Ribot 1883: 82–3).

If one moves forward in time and examines contemporary discussions of the relation between consciousness and self, one will also come across various references to neurological and psychiatric cases; just think of the frequent appeals to split-brain patients or to cases of schizophrenic thought-insertion.

Whether neuro- and psychopathological findings can serve to disprove philosophical claims regarding the nature of self is a question worthy of its own extensive treatment. It is, for instance, not clear whether pathological disturbances create new experiential phenomena, whether they are the exceptions that prove the rule, or whether they involve breakdowns of more complex functions thereby disclosing more primitive features of normal experience. But these are not issues I will focus on in this chapter. Rather I will address the relation between unity and self from a somewhat different angle. As I started out by indicating, one way to defend the existence of the self is by arguing that our mental life would collapse into unstructured chaos if it were not buttressed by the organizing and unifying function of a pure ego. Some critics however have accepted the underlying assumption, but have then gone on to argue that if the diachronic and synchronic unity of consciousness

were not conditioned by a distinct self, the latter would lose its *raison d'être*, and there would no longer be any reason to uphold the reality of the self.

In the following I will consider a few accounts of consciousness that all explicitly deny that the unity of consciousness is guaranteed or conditioned by a distinct self. The question I then want to discuss is what conclusion we should draw if we accept these arguments.

1. THE ILLUSORY SELF

My point of departure will be a recent book by Miri Albahari entitled *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self*. Drawing on literature from Western philosophy, neuroscience, and in particular Buddhism, Albahari's basic aim is to argue that the self is an illusion. What notion of self is she out to deny? She initially provides the following definition: the self should be understood as a unified, happiness-seeking, unbrokenly persisting, ontologically distinct conscious subject who is the owner of experiences, the thinker of thoughts, and the agent of actions. What is interesting about Albahari's proposal is that whereas many advocates of a so-called no-self doctrine have denied that consciousness is characterized by unity, unbrokenness, and invariability, and taken the denial of these features to amount to a denial of the reality of the self, Albahari considers all three to be real features of consciousness, but she nevertheless considers the self to be illusory (Albahari 2006: 3).

To get clearer on why she thinks this is the case let us look closer at a distinction she introduces between different forms of ownership, namely *possessive ownership*, *perspectival ownership*, and *personal ownership*. We can ignore possessive ownership, which in this context is of less interest, since it merely denotes the fact that certain objects (a car, a pair of trousers, etc.) can be regarded as mine by right of social convention. But what is the difference between personal ownership and perspectival ownership? Personal ownership is a question of identifying oneself as the personal owner of an experience, thought, action; it is a question of appropriating certain experiences, actions, thoughts etc. as one's own, that is, a question of either thinking of them as being *mine* or apprehending them as being part of *me* (and this is something that can occur either pre-reflectively or reflectively). By contrast, for a subject to own something in a perspectival sense is simply for the experience, thought, or action in question to present itself in a distinctive manner to the subject whose experience, thought, or action it is. So the reason I can be said to perspectivally own my thoughts or perceptions—if one will excuse this slightly awkward way of talking—is because they appear to me in a manner that is different from how they can appear to anybody else. When it comes to objects

external to the subject, what will be perspectively owned isn't the object, but the specific manner through which the object appears to the subject (Albahari 2006: 53).

Albahari argues that there is a close link between having a sense of personal ownership and having a sense of self. When the subject identifies certain items as being itself or being part of itself, it will harbor a sense of personal ownership towards the items in question. But this very process of identification generates the sense of a self–other distinction. It constitutes a felt boundary between what belongs to self and what doesn't. Thereby the self is cast as a unified and ontologically distinct entity—one that stands apart from other things (Albahari 2006: 73, 90). In this way, the subject understood as a mere point of view is turned into a substantial personalized entity (ibid. 94). To put it differently, for Albahari, there is more to being a self than being a point of view, than having perspectival ownership.

One way to bring out the difference between perspectival and personal ownership is to point to possible dissociations between the two. Pathology seems to provide some examples. In cases of depersonalization, we can come across thoughts, feelings, etc. which are perspectively owned, that is, which continue to present themselves in a unique manner to the subject, without however being felt as the subject's own (Albahari 2006: 55). Thus on Albahari's reading, the process of identification fails in depersonalization, and as a consequence, no sense of personal ownership regarding the experience in question will be generated (ibid. 61).

Let us now consider Albahari's self-skepticism. What does it mean for the self to lack reality? What does it mean for the self to be illusory? On Albahari's account, an illusion involves a conflict between appearance and reality. *X* is illusory if *x* does not have any appearance-independent reality, but nevertheless purports to have such reality, that is, we are dealing with an illusion if *x* purports through its appearance to exist in a particular manner without really doing so (ibid. 122). One obvious problem, however, with such a definition is whether it at all makes sense to apply it to the self. Does the self really purport to exist outside of its own appearance, or is the reality of the self rather subjective or experiential? This consideration leads Albahari to redefine the notion of illusion slightly. If the self purports to be what she calls unconstructed, that is, independent from the experiences and objects it is the subject of, and if it should turn out that it in reality depends, even if only partially, on perspectively ownable objects (including various experiential episodes), then the self must be regarded as being illusory (ibid. 130).

Albahari also emphasizes the need for a distinction between self and sense of self. To have a sense of *x* doesn't necessarily entail that *x* exists. Indeed whereas Albahari takes the sense of self to exist and to be real, she considers the self itself to be illusory (2006: 17). Contrary to expectations, our sense of self is not underpinned by an actually existing ontological independent self-entity. Rather, all that really exists is the manifold of thoughts, emotions, perceptions, etc. as well as a pure

locus of apprehension, which Albahari terms *witness-consciousness*. It is the experiential flow in conjunction with this locus of apprehension that generates the sense of self. But if this is so, the self lacks an essential property of selfhood, namely ontological independence (ibid. 72). In short, the illusory status of the self is due to the fact that the self does not have the ontological status it purports to have. Thoughts appear to be owned and initiated by an independently existing unified self, but rather than preceding the experiences, rather than thinking the thoughts, it is in reality the other way around. It is not the self that unifies our thoughts and experiences, they do so themselves with some help from the accompanying witness-consciousness (ibid. 130–2). To repeat, although it might seem to the subject as if there is a pre-existing self which identifies with various intentional states, the reality of the matter is that the self is created and constructed through these repeated acts of identification (ibid. 58).

As I mentioned in the beginning, an interesting aspect of Albahari's proposal is that she considers many of the features traditionally ascribed to the self to be real, it is just that they—in her view—become distorted and illusory if taken to be features of the self (2006: 74). For instance, Albahari takes our conscious life to be characterized by an intrinsic but elusive sense of subjective presence; one that is common to all modalities of awareness, that is, one that is common to seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, introspecting, etc. (ibid. 112, 144, 156). What does this subjective presence amount to? It includes the experience of being the perspectival owner of various experiences. It also includes diachronic and synchronic unity. Although we experience various objects, although the objects we experience might change from one moment to the next, there still appears to be an unbroken consciousness that observes the change without itself changing (ibid. 155). Indeed, while from a first-person perspective it certainly makes sense to say that I have various experiences, we automatically feel them to belong to one and the same consciousness. For Albahari, all these features are properly ascribed to the witness-consciousness, and she is adamant that we have to distinguish witness-consciousness from self. Whereas the latter on her definition involves felt boundaries between self and non-self, the former doesn't.¹

Let me recapitulate. For Albahari, one can be aware without being presented to oneself as an ontologically unique subject with personalized boundaries that distinguish a me from the rest of the world. One can be aware without being aware of oneself as a personal owner, a thinker of thoughts, an agent of actions. Examples that come to mind are cases of pathology. Albahari asks us to consider both the real-life case of epileptic automatism and the hypothetical case of global

¹ I think one can find various defenders of self, who would dispute its bounded nature, and for instance deny that there is always a clear division to be made between self and environment. As a case in point, consider Neisser's notion of ecological self. I will, however, postpone a more extensive criticism of the notion of bounded self to some later occasion.

depersonalization. In both cases, the person or patient would be awake and responsive to the environment, so there would be awareness present. But there would be no sense of a bounded individual self, there would be a complete lack of personal ownership, there would be no sense of me or mine (Albahari 2006: 171, 177). Albahari suggests that such a state of mind might not only be encountered in pathologies, but also in newborn infants, and in primitive organisms. And as she then points out in the conclusion of her book, and this is of course where her Buddhist orientation becomes evident, if we were to attain enlightenment, we would move from consciousness-plus-self-illusion to consciousness-*sans*-self-illusion, and the latter condition, although strictly speaking not identical with global depersonalization—after all, it correlates with highly advanced cognitive capacities—might nevertheless be compared to it (ibid. 161, 207).

2. PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Having discussed Albahari's position in some detail, let me now turn to two other thinkers who have also questioned the unifying role of the self, but whose theoretical orientation and affiliation differ somewhat from hers.

Husserl

In the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl explicitly denied that the unity intrinsic to our experiential life was conditioned or guaranteed by any ego. Indeed, on his view whatever synthesizing contribution the ego could have made would be *superfluous* since the unification had already taken place in accordance with intra-experiential laws. To put it differently, on Husserl's early view, the stream of consciousness is self-unifying, and in order to understand its unity, we do not have to look at anything above, beyond, or external to the stream itself. In fact, since the ego, properly speaking, is the result of this unification, it couldn't be something that preceded or conditioned it (Husserl 1984: 364).

Husserl's early reasoning was partly motivated by his aversion to any kind of ego-metaphysics. As he wrote in a letter to Hans Cornelius in 1906: 'The phenomenological investigation is not at all interested in egos or in states, experiences, developments belonging to or occurring in egos' (Husserl 1994: 27). However, Husserl's general view on the ego was subsequently to change. In *Cartesian Meditations* for instance, Husserl claimed that the phenomenological task of explicating the monadic ego ultimately included all constitutional problems, and

that the phenomenology of self-constitution coincided with phenomenology as a whole (Husserl 1950: 103). It would lead too far afield to explain precisely what Husserl meant by these statements. Rather, for our purposes the point of interest is that, even at this late stage, Husserl still held onto some of the claims he had originally made in *Logical Investigations*.

Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, Husserl did not overlook the problem of passivity in his phenomenological investigations. On the contrary, he dedicated numerous analyses to this important issue. Although our starting-point might be conscious episodes that involve an active position-taking by the subject, that is, acts in which the subject is comparing, differentiating, judging, valuing, wishing, or willing something, Husserl was quick to point out that whenever the subject is active, it is also passive, since to be active is to react to something (Husserl 1952: 213, 337). And as he ultimately would say, every kind of active position-taking, indeed every activity of the ego, presupposes a preceding *affection*, an affection by something that escapes the control of the ego, an affection by something foreign to the ego (ibid. 336). Indeed, for Husserl, intentional activity is founded upon and conditioned by an obscure and blind passivity, by drives and associations. Husserl considered the most fundamental constitutive synthesis of them all, the very process of temporalization, to be a synthesis taking place in pure passivity. He took it to be regulated by strict and rigid laws and he repeatedly denied that it was initiated, influenced, or controlled by the ego (Husserl 1966: 72, 235, 323; 1950: 125). If we look at the painstaking analysis of its structure that we find in the famous *Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* we will find no reference to the ego as the ultimate unifying or synthesizing agent. In fact, Husserl occasionally suggested that an in-depth investigation of temporality would lead to a pre-egological level, that is, to a level of egoless streaming. As he wrote in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*:

The analysis of the structure of the primal present (the persisting living streaming) leads us to the ego-structure and to the continual substratum of the *egoless streaming* that founds it, and thereby, through a consistently carried out regressive inquiry (*Rückfrage*), back to that which makes even this sedimented activity possible and which this sedimented activity presupposes: the radically pre-egoic. (Husserl 1973: 598)

So although Husserl is frequently considered an ardent defender of an egological account of consciousness, he obviously did not envisage the ego or self as the big unifier. But what is the implication of this? That the ego is ultimately illusory? Husserl would never have drawn that conclusion. If we take a closer look at Husserl's analysis, we will somewhat surprisingly also find him stating that the ego is present *everywhere* in the living present, and that even the anonymous stream of consciousness would be unthinkable without an original ego-pole as the center of action and affection (Husserl 1973: 350). Husserl's simultaneous reference to the egoless and egological character of the stream of consciousness makes it clear that some

equivocation is at play. My proposal is as follows. When Husserl speaks of an egoless streaming, the term 'egoless' does not refer to the absence of self, rather the term 'pre-egological' is meant to indicate that the ego is not participating in or contributing to the (self-)constitution of this fundamental process in any *active* way. Thus, Husserl is mainly referring to the passivity of the streaming, which is beyond the influence of the ego (Husserl 1974: 293). It is not the ego which unifies the experiences. This is taken care of by the very process of temporalization. But although the passive syntheses are not initiated by me, they still happen to me, not to somebody else or to nobody.

Sartre

Let us next turn to France, and to Sartre's early work *The Transcendence of the Ego*. As Sartre pointed out at the beginning of the text, many philosophers have considered the ego a formal principle of unification. Many have argued that our consciousness is unified because the 'I think' might accompany each of my thoughts. It is because I can say *my* consciousness that my consciousness is different from those of others (Sartre 1936: 16, 20). But is this really true, or is it rather the 'I think' which is made possible by the synthetic unity of our thoughts? To put it differently, is the ego an expression rather than a condition of unified consciousness? Sartre's own view is clear. On his account, the nature of the stream of consciousness does not need an exterior principle of individuation, since it is *per se* individuated. Nor is consciousness in need of any transcendent principle of unification, since it is, as such, a flowing unity. Thus, a correct account of time-consciousness will show that the contribution of a transcendental ego is unnecessary and it consequently loses its *raison d'être* (Sartre 1936: 21–3).

In addition, Sartre argued that a correct phenomenological description of lived consciousness will simply not find any ego, whether understood as an inhabitant in or possessor of consciousness. As long as we are absorbed in the experience, *living* it, no ego will be present. The ego emerges only when we adopt a distancing and objectifying attitude to the experience in question, that is, when we *reflect* upon it. Even then, however, we are not dealing with an I-consciousness, since the reflecting pole remains non-egological, but merely with a consciousness *of* I. As Sartre put it, the appearing ego is the object and not the subject of reflection.

However, whereas Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego* characterized pre-reflective consciousness as *impersonal*, he described this view as mistaken in both *Being and Nothingness* and in his important 1948 article 'Consciousness of Self and Knowledge of Self'. Why did he change his mind?

Sartre famously argued that intentional consciousness is *for-itself* (*pour-soi*), that is, self-conscious. An experience does not simply exist, it exists for it-self, that is, it is given for itself, and this self-givenness is not simply a quality added to the

experience, a mere varnish; rather for Sartre it constitutes the very *mode of being* of consciousness (Sartre 1948). When speaking of self-consciousness as a permanent feature of consciousness, Sartre was however not referring to what we might call reflective self-consciousness. Reflection (or higher order representation) is the process whereby consciousness directs its intentional aim at itself, thereby taking itself as its own object. By contrast, Sartre considered the self-consciousness in question to be pre-reflective. It is not an addendum to, but a constitutive moment of the original intentional experience.

Although no ego exists on the pre-reflective level, Sartre eventually came to realize that consciousness far from being impersonal and anonymous must be said to possess a basic dimension of selfhood—which Sartre termed *ipseity* (from the Latin term for self *ipse*)—precisely because of its ubiquitous self-giveness. As he wrote, ‘pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness’ (Sartre 1943: 114).

3. SUBJECTIVITY AND THE EXPERIENTIAL SELF

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It is time to return to Albahari’s arguments for the illusory nature of the self. As we have seen, Albahari considers invariability, unbrokenness, and subjective presence to be real features of consciousness. What she is opposed to is the notion of an ontologically independent self-entity. On Albahari’s view, the self purports to be ontologically independent, independent from the experiences and objects it is the subject of, and since it doesn’t really possess this status, since it consequently lacks what she consider to be an essential property of selfhood, it must ultimately be regarded as illusory (Albahari 2006: 72).

How should we appraise this argument? Frankly, I don’t find it convincing. I think Albahari is committing the same mistake that I take Metzinger to have made in his *Being No One*. In that book, Metzinger took the self to be a process-independent ontological substance that might exist all by itself, that is, in isolation from the rest of the world (Metzinger 2003: 577, 626), and since he denied the existence of such an entity he concluded that no such things as selves exist. But the only reason to accept his and Albahari’s conclusion would be if their respective notions of self were the only ones available, and that is precisely what I would deny. To put it differently, my worry is that many self-skeptics are implicitly endorsing a very traditional reified understanding of what a self is. They seem committed to the view that a self—if it exists—must be some kind of ontologically independent invariant *principle of identity* that stands apart from and above the stream of

changing experiences. But such a view of the self has by and large been abandoned, not only by most empirical researchers currently interested in the development, structure, function, and pathology of selves, but certainly also by most figures in twentieth-century French and German philosophy. Consider for instance Ricoeur's notion of *narrative self*. He has occasionally presented this notion as an alternative to the traditional dilemma of having to choose between the Cartesian notion of the self as a principle of identity that remains the same throughout the diversity of its different states and the positions of Hume and Nietzsche, who held an identical subject to be nothing but a substantialist illusion (Ricoeur 1985: 443). Ricoeur suggests that we can avoid this dilemma if we replace the notion of identity that they respectively defend and reject with the concept of narrative identity. As he writes, the identity of the narrative self can include changes and mutations within the cohesion of a lifetime. Indeed, Ricoeur explicitly rejects the attempt to account for and define the self in terms of what he calls *idem-identity*, that is, the identity of the same.

But let me postpone a further discussion of Ricoeur's position for some other occasion, and instead return to Husserl and Sartre. The reason why I chose to spend some time presenting their respective views was not only in order to show that one can find thinkers who maintain a belief in the reality of the self while denying that it possesses the unifying role it traditionally is ascribed.² The point was also to show that both operate with a notion of self which is very different from the one employed by Albahari, but which, as we shall see, nevertheless bears a striking resemblance to a dimension of consciousness the reality of which she is prepared to accept and defend.

For both Husserl and Sartre, an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa. In other words, their claim would be that the investigations of self and experience have to be integrated if both are to be understood. Indeed for both of them the self referred to is not something standing beyond or opposed to the stream of experiences but is rather a crucial aspect of our experiential life. To quote the central passage from Sartre once again: 'pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness.'

² I would reject the view—and so would Husserl and Sartre—that it is the self or ego which unifies the stream of consciousness. Does this rejection entail a rejection of the notion of a transcendental ego? This is how Sartre would reason, though it is crucial to understand that he upholds the belief in the existence of a constituting transcendental consciousness. His point is merely that the transcendental dimension is pre-personal and non-egological (Sartre 1936: 18–19). But in fact, I don't think we need to reason like him. Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, the notion of a transcendental ego is not bound up with an idea of an autonomous sovereign free-standing ego. To defend the existence of a transcendental ego is to be committed to the view that the first-person perspective is a necessary condition of possibility for manifestation. It neither commits one to the idea that it is a sufficient condition of possibility, nor does it necessarily involve a failure to recognize the role of passivity.

Or as Michel Henry would later put it, the most basic form of selfhood is the one constituted by the very self-manifestation of experience (Henry 1963: 581; 1965: 53).

To better understand the guiding idea,³ consider the following example:

I have climbed the spire of Our Saviour's Church together with my oldest son. Holding onto the railing, I see Copenhagen spread out before me. I can hear the distant noise from the traffic beneath me and feel the wind blow against my face. Far away, I can see an airship. My attention is drawn to something that is written on its side, but despite repeated attempts to decipher the text, I cannot read it. My concentration is suddenly interrupted by a pull in my hand. My son asks me when we are supposed to meet his mother and brother for cake and hot chocolate. I look at my watch and embarrassingly realize that we are already too late for our appointment. I decide to start the descent immediately, but when rushing down the stairways, I stumble over an iron rod and feel pain blossom up my shin.

A careful analysis of this episode will reveal many differences. If we compare perceptual experiences, voluntary movements, passivity experiences, social emotions, the experience of pain, effortful concentration or decision-making etc., we will not only encounter a phenomenal complexity, but also a diversity of qualitatively different experiences of self. There is for instance a vivid difference between the kind of self-experience we find in embarrassment and the kind of self-experience we have when our body is moved by external forces. Despite these differences, however, there is also something that the manifold of experiences has in common. Whatever their character, whatever their object, all experiences are subjective in the sense that they feel like something *for somebody*. They are subjective in the sense that there is a distinctive way they present themselves to the subject or self whose episodes they are.

Some might object that there is no property common to all my experiences, no stamp or label that clearly identifies them as mine. But this objection seems misplaced in that it looks for the commonality in the wrong place. When consciously seeing the moon, imagining Santa Claus, desiring a hot shower, anticipating a forthcoming film festival, or remembering a recent holiday in Sicily, all of these experiences present me with different intentional objects. These objects are there *for me* in different experiential modes of givenness (as seen, imagined, desired, anticipated, recollected, etc.).⁴ This *for-me-ness* or *mineness*, which seems inescapably required by the experiential presence of intentional objects and which is the feature that really makes it appropriate to speak of the *subjectivity* of experience, is obviously not a quality like green, sweet, or hard. It doesn't refer to a specific experiential content, to a specific *what*, nor does it refer to the diachronic or synchronic sum of such content, or to some other relation that might obtain between the contents in question. Rather, it refers to the distinct givenness or *how*

³ For a more extensive discussion see Zahavi 1999, 2005.

⁴ Pace various representationalist approaches to phenomenality it makes little sense to claim that this aspect of experience is simply a property of the represented object.

of experience. It refers to the first-personal presence of experience. It refers to what Albahari calls *perspectival ownership*. It refers to the fact that the experiences I am living through are given differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anybody else. It could consequently be claimed that anybody who denies the for-me-ness or mineness⁵ of experience simply fails to recognize an essential constitutive aspect of experience. Such a denial would be tantamount to a denial of the first-person perspective. It would entail the view that my own mind is either not given to me at all—I would be mind- or self-blind—or present to me in exactly the same way as the minds of others.⁶

But who or what is this self that has or lives through the experiences? The account I favor denies that the self under consideration—and let us just call it the experiential core self—is a separately existing entity, but it would also deny that the self is simply reducible to any specific experience or (sub)set of experiences. If we shift the focus from a narrow investigation of a single experience and instead consider a diachronic sequence of experiences, it should be obvious that each successive experience doesn't have its own unique for-me-ness or mineness—as if the difference between one experience and the next experience was as absolute as the difference between my current experience and the current experience of somebody else—but that the for-me-ness or mineness can on the contrary preserve its identity in the flux of changing experiences. If I compare two experiences, say a perception of a blackbird and a recollection of a summer holiday, I can focus on the differences between the two, namely their respective object and mode of presentation, but I can also attend to that which remains the same, namely the first-personal self-givenness of both experiences. To put it differently, we can distinguish the plurality of changing experiences from the abiding *dative of manifestation*. The latter has a certain transcendence *vis-à-vis* the former. The self does not exist in separation from the experiences, but nor can it simply be reduced to the sum of or connection between the experiences. An informative way of describing it is consequently as a *ubiquitous* dimension of first-personal self-givenness in the multitude of changing experiences. This way of presenting matters tallies well with Husserl's observation that the ego cannot simply be identified with our experiences, since the former preserves its identity, whereas the latter arise and perish in the stream of consciousness, replacing each other in a permanent flux (Husserl 1952: 98; 1974: 363). But as Husserl then goes on to emphasize, although the ego must be distinguished from the experiences in which it lives and functions, it cannot in

⁵ And whereas the dative suggests a structural feature, the genitive suggest a qualitative feature—both aspects are important.

⁶ I wouldn't consider the latter option a successful way of addressing the problem of other minds. It wouldn't solve the problem; it would dissolve it by failing to recognize the difference between our experience of self and our experience of others.

any way exist independently of them. It is a transcendence, but in Husserl's famous phrase: *a transcendence in the immanence* (Husserl 1976: 123–4).⁷

Let me stress that although the self in question can be described as an ubiquitous dimension of first-personal self-giveness, this is not meant to imply that genuine self-experience requires the experience of something invariant or identical, as if one had necessarily to be conscious of one's overarching identity as the subject of different experiences in order to be self-conscious. We certainly need to distinguish the case where I reflect on myself as the one who in turn deliberates, resolves, acts, and suffers and the case where I simply consciously perceive a table, but even the latter is an experience of something for someone, even that experience entails a pre-reflective sense of self.⁸

On this view, there is no pure experience-independent self. The self is the very subjectivity of experience and not something that exists independently of the experiential flow. Moreover, the experiences in question are world-directed experiences. They present the world in a certain way, but at the same time they also involve self-presence and hence a subjective point of view. In short, they are of something other than the subject and they are like something for the subject. If we want to study the self, we should consequently not turn the gaze inwards; rather we should look at our intentional experiences. I experience myself in what I do and suffer, in what confronts me and in what I accomplish, in my concerns and disregards. I am acquainted with myself when I am captured and captivated by the world. Just as the self is what it is in its worldly relations, self-acquaintance is not something that takes place or occurs in separation from our living in a world. On the contrary, self-experience is the self-experience of a world-immersed self, or to put it differently, our experiential life is world-related, and there is a presence of self when we are worldly engaged.

On the present account, there is obviously no experiential self, no self as defined from the first-person perspective, when we are non-conscious. But this does not necessarily imply that the diachronic unity of self is threatened by alleged interruptions

⁷ For comparison consider the relation between an object and its profiles. The object is not merely the sum of its profiles—had that been the case, we would never see the object as long as we merely saw one of its profiles, but only part of the object, and that doesn't seem right—but rather an identity in and across the manifold of profiles. This doesn't mean that the object stands in opposition to or is independent of its profiles.

⁸ One might add though that experiences never occur in isolation, and that there will always be a tacit experience of synchronic and diachronic unity. But even if we grant that, the tacitly experienced unity will differ from the identity we disclose when we explicitly compare different experiences in order to isolate that which remains the same. Moreover, this also confronts us with the tricky issue of how to individuate experiences. When does an experience stop and a new one start? When are we dealing with a complex experience and when with a set of distinct experiences? If our gaze wanders over our desk by taking in, one after the other, the computer, the keyboard, the books and papers, the empty coffee cups, are we then confronted with one complex perceptual experience or with a multiplicity of perceptual experiences, each with its own distinct object?

of the stream of consciousness (such as dreamless sleep, coma, etc.), since the identity of the self is defined in terms of givenness rather than in terms of temporal continuity. Whether two temporally distinct experiences are mine or not depends on whether they are characterized by the same first-personal self-givenness, it is not a question of whether they are part of an uninterrupted stream of consciousness. In that sense, it is a category mistake to liken the relationship between my present and my past experience to the relation between two different beads on one and the same string of pearls, since the two beads would be part of the same necklace only if they were in fact joined by an uninterrupted string.

Given what has been said so far, it could be argued that there is indeed some relation between self and unity after all. The self doesn't actively unite disparate bits of experience, nor is the self an extra element that must be added to the stream of consciousness in order to ensure its unification. The point is rather that all experiences that share the same primary presence or first-personal self-givenness are mine. To put it differently, experiential (diachronic and synchronic) unity is constituted by first-personal self-givenness.⁹

Hopefully, it should by now have become clear that the notion of self defended by Husserl and Sartre is very similar to the invariable but elusive subjective presence that Albahari also wants to retain and defend. Albahari takes ontological independence—or to use one of her own technical terms 'unconstructedness'—to be an essential property of selfhood, and since she denies the reality of this feature, she claims that the self is illusory.¹⁰ As I have tried to show, many other thinkers

⁹ At the same time, however, it should also be obvious that there are clear limitations to what this notion of self can explain and account for. Consider for instance the case of a man who early in life makes a decision that proves formative for his subsequent life and career. The episode in question is however subsequently forgotten by the person. He no longer enjoys first-person access to it. If we restrict ourselves to what can be accounted for by means of the experiential core self, we cannot speak of the decision as being his, as being one he made. Or take the case where we might wish to ascribe responsibility for past actions to an individual who no longer remembers them. By doing that we postulate an identity between the past offender and the present subject, but the identity in question is again not one that can be accounted for in terms of the experiential core self. However, on the account I favour, we need to realize that the self is so multifaceted a phenomenon that various complementary accounts must be integrated if we are to do justice to its complexity. In short, we ultimately need to adopt a multilayered account of self. We are more than experiential core selves, we are for instance also narratively configured socialized persons. And we continue to remain so even when non-conscious. So even if there is no experiential self (no self as defined from the first-person perspective) when we are non-conscious, there are various other aspects of our self that remain, and which makes it perfectly legitimate to say that *we* are non-conscious, i.e. that we can persist even when non-conscious.

¹⁰ It is by the way remarkable that Albahari although denying unconstructedness to self ascribes it to witness-consciousness. As she puts it at one point, 'awareness must be shown to exist in the manner it purports to exist. Awareness purports to exist as a witnessing presence that is unified, unbroken and yet elusive to direct observation. As something whose phenomenology purports to be unborrowed from objects of consciousness, awareness, if it exists, must exist as *completely unconstructed* by the content of any perspectively ownable objects such as thoughts, emotions or perceptions. If *apparent awareness* . . . turned out to owe its existence to such object-content rather than to (unconstructed) *awareness itself*, then that would render awareness constructed and illusory and hence lacking in

would refute this definition of self. They would insist that selfhood, rather than being something that stands apart from and above the stream of consciousness, is on the contrary a crucial aspect of its givenness, and therefore something that in no way could exist in separation from our experiential life. As a consequence, they would in no way feel compelled to draw the same conclusion as Albahari does regarding the illusory character of self.

4. OWNERSHIP AND IDENTIFICATION

Let me end by considering an obvious rejoinder. It could be argued that the contentious issue rather than being metaphysical is a semantic one. When is it appropriate to call something a self? Albahari might very well agree with a strong emphasis on first-personal self-givenness, but might simply deny that first-personal self-givenness, that is, the subjectivity of experience, equals a minimal form of self. In short, she might insist that the minimal notion of experiential core self I wish to defend is too deflationary and revisionary.¹¹ Another way to press this objection is as follows. It could be argued that there is something like subjectivity of experience, but that too much focus on this trivial truth will belittle a significant difference, namely the one existing between experiences that so to speak are mere happenings in the history of my mental life and experiences that are my own in a much more profound sense. To put it differently, it could be argued that, although it is undeniably true that an experience, that is, a conscious thought, desire, passion, etc., cannot occur without an experiencer (see Chapter 10 above), since every experience is necessarily an experience for someone, this truism will mask crucial distinctions. Consider, for instance, thoughts that willy-nilly run through our heads, thoughts that strikes us out of the blue, consider passions and desires that are felt, from the first-person perspective, as intrusive—as when somebody says that, when he was possessed by anger, he was not in possession of himself—or take experiences that are induced in us through hypnosis or drugs, and then compare these cases with experiences, thoughts, and desires that we welcome or accept at the time of their occurrence. As Frankfurt argues, although the former class might indeed be conscious events that occur in us, although they are events in the history of a person's mind, they are not that person's desire, experience, or

independent reality' (2006: 162). This seems to commit one to viewing awareness as an ontological independent region. It is not clear to me why one would want to uphold such a view of consciousness in the first place.

¹¹ In fact, this is a rejoinder that Albahari has made in personal correspondence. I am grateful to her for several helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

thought (Frankfurt 1988: 59–61). According to Frankfurt, a person is not simply to be identified with whatever goes on in his mind. On the contrary, conscious states or episodes that we disapprove of when they occur might not be ours in the full sense of the word (ibid. 63). To disapprove of or reject passions or desires means to withdraw or distance oneself from them. To accept passions or desires, to see them as having a natural place in one's experience, means to identify with them (ibid. 68). Frankfurt concedes that it is difficult to articulate the notion of identification at stake in a satisfactory manner, but ultimately he suggests that when a person decides something without reservations,

the decision determines what the person really wants by making the desire on which he decides fully his own. To this extent the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, *constitutes himself*. The pertinent desire is no longer in any way external to him. It is not a desire that he 'has' merely as a subject in whose history it happens to occur, as a person may 'have' an involuntary spasm that happens to occur in the history of his body. It comes to be a desire that is incorporated into him by virtue of the fact that he has it *by his own will*. . . . Even if the person is not responsible for the fact that the desire *occurs*, there is an important sense in which he takes responsibility for the fact of having the desire—the fact that the desire is in the fullest sense his, that it constitutes what he really wants—when he identifies himself with it. (Ibid. 170)

Frankfurt's basic point, that the identification in question amounts to a specific form of ownership which is constitutive of self, fits neatly with Albahari's notion of personal ownership (though of course, there is nothing to suggest that Frankfurt would agree with Albahari's metaphysical conclusion, her self-skepticism), and also with her suggestion that the constitution of a sense of self is closely linked to the issue of emotional investment. Not only do emotions such as guilt, fear, and disappointment help constitute our sense of being a temporally extended numerically identical self (Albahari 2006: 141), but according to Albahari, emotions generally involve boundaries between self and desired/undesired scenarios and thereby help construct a bounded self. Indeed on her account emotional concern for one's own welfare is a major contributor to the construction of a sense of self (ibid. 171, 178–9). Frankfurt's point also tallies rather well with points made by Ricoeur and Taylor. For Ricoeur, to be a self is a question of adopting certain norms as binding; to be bound by obligation or loyalty. It is to remain true to oneself in promise keeping. It is to be somebody others can count on. It is to assume responsibility for one's past actions and for the future consequences of one's present actions (Ricoeur 1990: 341–2). As Ricoeur already pointed out back in his 1950 *Philosophie de la volonté*:

I form the consciousness of being the author of my acts in the world and, more generally, the author of my acts of thought, principally on the occasion of my contacts with an other, in a social context. Someone asks, who did that? I rise and reply, I did. Response-responsibility. To be responsible means to be ready to respond to such a question. (Ricoeur 1950: 55)

As for Taylor, he has argued that the self is a kind of being that can only exist within a normative space, that being a self is to stand in a interpretative and evaluative relation to oneself, and he therefore claims that any attempt to define selfhood through some minimal or formal form of self-awareness must fail, since such a self is either non-existent or insignificant (Taylor 1989: 49). Again, let me stress that Frankfurt, Ricoeur, and Taylor would distance themselves from the metaphysical conclusions drawn by Albahari, but they all share the view that the mere subjectivity of experience is insufficient for selfhood.

How might one respond to this criticism? There are several moves available. One possibility would be to say that subjectivity of experience although being insufficient for selfhood is nevertheless a necessary condition for selfhood, there is no self without it, and that it consequently is something that any plausible theory of self must consider and account for. To put it differently, any account of self which disregards the fundamental structures and features of our experiential life is a non-starter, and a correct description and account of the experiential dimension must necessarily do justice to the first-person perspective and to the primitive form of self-reference that it entails. Moreover, to claim that the subjectivity of experience is trivial and banal in the sense that it doesn't call for further examination and clarification would be to commit a serious mistake. Not only would it disregard many of the recent insights concerning the function of first-person indexicals (the fact that 'I', 'me', 'my', 'mine' cannot without loss be replaced by definite descriptions) and ascriptionless self-reference (the fact that one can be self-conscious without identifying oneself via specific properties), but it would also discount the laborious attempt to spell out the microstructure of lived subjective presence that we find in Husserl's writings on time. As Husserl would argue, given the temporal character of the stream of consciousness, even something as apparently synchronic as the subjective givenness of a present experience is not comprehensible without taking the innermost structures of time-consciousness into account. Indeed, Husserl's investigation of inner time-consciousness was precisely motivated by his interest in the question of how consciousness manifests itself to itself. His analysis of the interplay between protention, primal impression, and retention is consequently to be understood as a contribution to a better understanding of the relationship between selfhood, self-experience, and temporality.

Another possibility would be to maintain that the subjectivity of experience amounts to more than merely an indispensable and necessary prerequisite for any true notion of self, but that it rather in and of itself is a minimal form of self. Ultimately, however, the distinction between these two options (considering subjectivity of experience as a necessary but insufficient vs. necessary and sufficient condition for selfhood) might be less relevant than one should initially assume, since we—with the possible exception of certain severe pathologies, say, the final stages of Alzheimer's disease—will never encounter the experiential core self in its purity. It will always already be embedded in an environmental and temporal

horizon. It will be intertwined with, shaped, and contextualized by memories, expressive behaviour, and social interaction, by passively acquired habits, inclinations, associations, etc. In that sense, a narrow focus on the experiential self might indeed be said to involve an abstraction. Nevertheless, and this would be my own view, although one must concede that such a minimal notion is unable to accommodate or capture all ordinary senses of the term 'self', and although it certainly doesn't provide an exhaustive understanding of what it means to be a self, the very fact that we employ notions like *first-person* perspective, *for-me*-ness, and *mineness* in order to describe our experiential life, the fact that it is characterized by a basic and pervasive reflexivity and pre-reflective self-consciousness, is ultimately sufficient to warrant the use of the term 'self'.

It is intriguing that Frankfurt, while defending the importance of identification and commitment for the constitution of self, at the same time accepts that consciousness does entail a basic form of self-consciousness. As he writes:

what would it be like to be conscious of something without being aware of this consciousness? It would mean having an experience with no awareness whatever of its occurrence. This would be, precisely, a case of unconscious experience. It appears, then, that being conscious is identical with being self-conscious. Consciousness *is* self-consciousness. (Frankfurt 1988: 1612)

As Frankfurt makes clear this claim is not meant to suggest that he endorses some version of a higher order theory of consciousness. The idea is not that consciousness is invariably dual in the sense that every instance of it involves both a primary awareness and another instance of consciousness which is somehow distinct and separable from the first and which has the first as its object. Rather, and this constitutes a clear affinity with a perspective found in phenomenology,

the self-consciousness in question is a sort of *immanent reflexivity* by virtue of which every instance of being conscious grasps not only that of which it is an awareness but also the awareness of it. It is like a source of light which, in addition to illuminating whatever other things fall within its scope, renders itself visible as well. (Ibid. 162)

For Frankfurt, however, self-consciousness doesn't amount to consciousness of a self. Rather, the reflexivity in question is merely consciousness's awareness of itself (ibid.). Couldn't this be the fall-back option of the self-skeptics? Just as they might concede that there is a subjectivity of experience without thereby accepting the existence of self, they might accept that consciousness is characterized by a fundamental reflexivity without thereby seeing themselves as being committed to the reality of self.

On the face of it, it is quite true that self-consciousness doesn't have to be understood as a consciousness of a separate and distinct *self*; it might simply refer to the awareness which a specific experience has of *itself* (cf. Gurwitsch 1941). It is a mistake, however, to suggest that we in the latter case would be dealing with a

non-egological type of self-consciousness, one lacking any sense of self. The very distinction between egological and non-egological types of (self-)consciousness is ultimately too crude and fuelled by a too narrow definition of what a self amounts to. As I have argued above, there is subjectivity of experience and a minimal sense of self, not only when I realize that *I* am perceiving a candle, but whenever there is perspectival ownership, whenever there is first-personal presence or manifestation of experience. It is this pre-reflective sense of self which provides the experiential grounding for any subsequent self-ascription, reflective appropriation, and thematic self-identification. Had our experiences been completely anonymous when originally lived through, any such subsequent appropriation would become inexplicable.

Thus, rather than saying that the self does not exist, I think the self-skeptics should settle for a more modest claim. They should qualify their statement and instead deny the existence of a special kind of self.

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