



Review of Dan Zahavi's *Subjectivity and Selfhood*

Greg Janzen
Department of Philosophy
University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB T2N 1N4, Canada
gajanzen@ucalgary.ca
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REVIEW OF: Dan Zahavi (2006). *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 280 pp., ISBN 0262240505.

In *Subjectivity and Selfhood* Dan Zahavi presents the fruits of his thinking on a nexus of issues regarding the experiential structure of consciousness and its relation to selfhood. The central theme of the book is that the “notion of self is crucial for a proper understanding of consciousness, and consequently it is indispensable to a variety of disciplines such as philosophy of mind, social philosophy, psychiatry, developmental psychology, and cognitive neuroscience” (p. 1). Proceeding, as in his previously published work (portions of which are liberally interspersed throughout the present work), on the assumption that the study of consciousness can benefit from insights to be found in phenomenology, Zahavi defends his thesis largely by way of an investigation of the work of an array of phenomenologists, including Heidegger, Sartre, and, most notably, Husserl. In what follows I will not comment on the full range of topics dealt with in *Subjectivity and Selfhood*—e.g., reflection and attention (ch. 4), self and other (ch. 6), theory of mind (ch. 7)—but will instead focus on two of the book’s more prominent strands of argument: (1) that all conscious states are tacitly self-aware, and (2) that the self is to be understood as an “experiential dimension.”

Zahavi lays the groundwork for his thesis in chapters 1 and 2, arguing, along with virtually every major figure in phenomenology, “that the experiential dimension is characterized by a tacit self-consciousness” (p. 11). In the course of spelling out what he deems to be the best way to construe the self-awareness at issue here, Zahavi rejects higher-theories of consciousness, according to which a mental state is self-aware – and hence conscious—in virtue of being an object of a numerically distinct second-order state. Higher-orderism fails, he argues, because it cannot “explain the distinction between *intentionality*, which is characterized by an epistemic *difference* between the subject and

the object of experience, and *self-consciousness*, which implies some form of *identity*” (p. 28). Only an intrinsic or “one-state” theory, according to which the self-awareness involved in conscious states is an intrinsic feature of those states, can explain this distinction.

But Zahavi also rejects Brentano’s early, Aristotle-inspired one-state alternative. Brentano’s theory, unlike higher-order theories, construes one’s tacit awareness of one’s conscious experience as an intrinsic component of that experience, in the sense that a conscious experience takes *itself* as a secondary object. In this way, one’s conscious experience and one’s tacit awareness of that experience form a single mental act. A number of contemporary philosophers have suggested that we should look to Brentano for a viable one-state alternative to higher-orderism, but Zahavi argues that Brentano’s theory, just like higher-order theories, erroneously construes self-awareness in terms of conscious states being objects to which subjects stand in a certain kind of relation. He claims that a more promising alternative to higher-orderism can be found in the work of, among others, Husserl and Sartre, who do not make this mistake. According to Sartre, for example, even though our conscious states themselves are always “given” or “manifested” in experience, they do not become *objects* of consciousness except during acts of reflection. Similarly, on Zahavi’s interpretation of Husserl (a very non-standard interpretation: Husserl is widely interpreted as espousing, even in his later work, a subject-object account of self-awareness that can be construed as a precursor to higher-orderism), Husserl held that our experiences are conscious not in virtue of being taken as secondary *objects*, but rather in virtue of being “lived through” (p. 41). Thus, Husserl and Sartre do not deny that consciousness involves self-awareness, but they deny that self-awareness can be accounted for on analogy with our consciousness of extra-mental objects, i.e. in terms of a subject-object relation.

The Husserlian/Sartrean non-object view of the nature of experiential givenness strikes this reviewer as fundamentally right; and Zahavi does a good job of defending it, drawing on classical analyses of first-personal self-reference found in the writings of Castañeda, Perry, Shoemaker and others to show that the self-awareness involved in conscious states cannot be construed along subject-object lines (pp. 27-9). He is perhaps a bit too hard on Brentano, especially in view of the fact that all of the phenomenologists on whose work he draws, including Husserl and Sartre, agree with the fundamental Aristotelian-Brentanian insight is that there’s a single token state involved in one’s seeing *x*, hearing *x*, etc. But this can be waived as a quibble.

So far so good: conscious experiences are themselves immediately and non-objectually manifested in experience. According to Zahavi, however, conscious experiences are more complex than this description suggests. In chapter 5, he defends the view that they also possess *egological* content, which, as a rough characterization, is first-person content or content that concerns *oneself*. Thus, my tacit awareness of a particular conscious experience includes, *ipso facto*, a tacit awareness of myself as subject of that experience. This means that a subject, in perceiving *x* (thinking about *x*, etc.), is tacitly aware of *herself* perceiving *x*.

As a prelude to his analysis of the egological structure of consciousness, Zahavi employs the philosophically popular “what-it-is-like” locution, arguing that “experiences have a subjective ‘feel’ to them, a certain (phenomenal) quality of ‘what it is like’ or what

it ‘feels’ like to have them” (p. 116). Unfortunately, however, Zahavi equates what-it-is-likeness with qualitative feels. It is accurate to affirm, as Zahavi does, that bodily sensations have distinctive feels, but he maintains that “this is also the case for perceptual experiences, as well as desires, feelings, moods, [and thoughts]” (p. 116), which is false. There is, to be sure, something it is like to perceive things (think about things, etc.), but this what-it-is-likeness does not consist in the having of “feels,” where this connotes the having of discrete mental episodes that correspond to the discrete properties of the objects of perceptual consciousness. When I see a tomato, I do not have a reddish visual feel; rather, I simply see the tomato, sans any sort of feel.

But this, too, can be waived as a quibble. Although it is customary to define what-it-is-likeness in terms of feels, nothing about the expression “what it is like” makes associating it with these putative feels compulsory. In other words, one can deny that ordinary perceptions (thoughts, etc.) have distinctive feels, and yet affirm that there is something it is like for the subject of the perception to have it. Zahavi’s point in making use of the “what-it-is-like” locution is that “the various modes of givenness (perceptual, imaginative, recollective, etc.) differ in their experiential properties” (p. 124). What it is like to see a chair, for example, is different from what it is like to see a sofa. But this point isn’t vitiated by the claim that it’s misconceived to suppose that seeing a chair *feels* different from seeing a sofa.

That the various modes of givenness differ in their experiential properties seems plausible enough, but whence the egological component of our experiential lives? Zahavi thinks that it’s necessary to introduce the notion of a self to account for the quality of *mineness* that these different modes of givenness share. When I have a conscious experience, he argues, it is “given immediately, noninferentially and noncritically as *mine*” (p. 124). Otherwise put, in consciously seeing *x* (hearing *x*, thinking about *x*, etc.) I am tacitly aware of *my* seeing *x*. Importantly, Zahavi isn’t claiming that a conscious experience is something one *possesses*, like an automobile or a toothbrush, and that, in having a conscious experience, one is tacitly aware of experience ownership. On the contrary, he takes tacit awareness of mineness to be a means of elucidating the claim that, in being conscious of *x*, one is tacitly aware of *oneself* as being conscious of *x*. Indeed, he *identifies* this “pre-reflective sense of mineness with a minimal, or core, sense of self” (p. 125). “The idea,” he claims, “is to link an experiential sense of self to the particular first-personal givenness that characterizes our experiential life; it is this first-personal givenness that constitutes the *mineness* or *ipseity* of experience” (ibid.).

On Zahavi’s view, then, all conscious states involve *self*-awareness, though this is not awareness of a “self” in any sense of the word Descartes espoused: the “self” is not something that “exists apart from, or above, the experience and, for that reason, is something that might be encountered in separation from the experience” (p. 126). Rather, we have a *sense* of self, and this sense of self is an integral and ubiquitous part of our experiential life. Indeed, there is no experiential dimension whatever without this sense of self.

A notable advantage of Zahavi’s view is that it has the resources to deflect the various difficulties that bedevil theories of consciousness that are mired in the object-consciousness paradigm. No regress threatens, for example, if conscious states aren’t construed as secondary objects; and if self-awareness is an intrinsic feature of those states

that possess it, there is no need (as there is for the higher-order theorist) to make ad hoc manoeuvres to account for the intuitive immediacy of conscious states.

Still, a suspicion may linger, especially among those who seek to naturalize consciousness or explain it reductively, that Zahavi's "account" of consciousness is undesirably elusive. According to Zahavi, a mental state is conscious only if it is "lived through" in such a way that the subject is immediately and non-objectually acquainted with it as hers. But it might be objected that it is altogether unclear how a subject can become acquainted with a mental state in the appropriate way if not by virtue of having a higher-order thought or perception about it.

This is an imaginary difficulty. It confuses an account of the experiential structure of conscious states (which Zahavi's is) with an account of the underlying mechanisms that subserve that structure (which Zahavi's is not). The onus is not on a phenomenologist like Zahavi to articulate the sub-personal – presumably neural – mechanisms that underlie consciousness. As a phenomenologist who believes that consciousness is best understood as involving a non-objectifying self-givenness, all he is required to do is give plausible grounds for supposing that consciousness does indeed have such a structure; he need not articulate the precise mechanisms that subserve that structure.

Some comments will be desirable regarding more practical matters. Zahavi tends to belabour his main themes somewhat (mineness; that tacit self-awareness is non-reflective; that consciousness is non-objectual; etc.), and so the book is somewhat repetitive. It could have done with some pruning in general. Although Zahavi is well aware that one of phenomenology's "greatest weaknesses [is] its preoccupation with exegesis" (p. 6), he often fails to heed his own warning. Some exposition of others' views is well nigh inevitable in any longish work of philosophy, but *Subjectivity and Selfhood* occasionally gets bogged down in needless exegesis. Zahavi spends too much time interpreting Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger, etc.; rejecting others' interpretations of these philosophers; telling us about Husserl on Brentano, about Heidegger on Natorp, etc.; and not enough time simply telling us what he thinks about the issues in question. His stated aim is to provide a phenomenological investigation of the general experiential structure of consciousness, and to apply the results attained thereby to various issues in cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychology. But whether, say, Husserl is interpreted correctly—Zahavi sheds sizeable pools of ink on Husserl—is irrelevant to whether this task can be carried out successfully. It is no objection to Zahavi's argument to say that he has Husserl wrong.

These (very minor) complaints aside, this is a rich and complex book that any philosopher of mind who is interested in consciousness will find indispensable. Zahavi is a master of incorporating into his arguments insights from both analytic philosophy and phenomenology, and so the book will appeal to philosophers from both traditions.