

# Chapter 1

## Vindicating Husserl's Primal I

Dan Zahavi

On Husserl's account, is self prior to the other, is the other prior to self, or are self and other equiprimordial? At first glance, this question might appear somewhat silly. After all, how could anyone doubt what Husserl's answer would be. Even if the standard criticism regarding Husserl's solipsism has long been rebutted, Husserl's declaration in § 41 of *Cartesianische Meditationen*, where he equates phenomenology with the systematic self-explication of the ego (1991a, p. 118), should make the issue foregone. As we will soon see, however, the fact of the matter is somewhat more complex.

### Self and Other in Merleau-Ponty

My point of departure will not be Husserl, however, but Merleau-Ponty. I wish to start out by considering the account defended by Merleau-Ponty in *Les relations avec autrui chez l'enfant*. This text is based on a lecture course on child psychology given by Merleau-Ponty at the *Sorbonne*, but contrary to what the title might indicate, Merleau-Ponty isn't primarily interested in various empirical findings pertaining to early forms of social interaction. Rather, he is raising and attempting to answer substantial philosophical questions concerning the relation between self and other. Indeed, his point of departure is precisely the alleged incapacity of classical psychology to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of how we relate to others; an incapacity that according to Merleau-Ponty is due to the fact that classical psychology bases its entire approach on certain unquestioned and unwarranted philosophical prejudices. First and foremost among these is the

---

D. Zahavi (✉)

Center for Subjectivity Research, University of Copenhagen, Njalsgade 140-142,  
5th floor, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark  
e-mail: [dza@hum.ku.dk](mailto:dza@hum.ku.dk)

fundamental assumption that experiential life is directly accessible to one person only, namely the individual who owns it (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 114), and that the only access one has to the psyche of another is indirect and mediated by his or her bodily appearance. I can *see* your facial expressions, gestures and actions, and on the basis of that I can *guess* what you think, feel or intend (1964a, pp. 113–114). Classical psychology has routinely explained the move from the visible exteriority to the invisible interiority by way of an argument from analogy, but Merleau-Ponty quickly points to a number of difficulties inherent in this strategy. The objections he raises are very similar to the ones raised by Scheler years earlier in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, but interesting as they are, I don't have time on this occasion to rehearse and assess these arguments (cf. Zahavi 2005, pp. 147–178). Suffice it to say, that Merleau-Ponty concludes his criticism by rejecting the idea that my experiential life is a sequence of internal states that are inaccessible to anyone but me. Rather, on his view, our experiential life is above all a relation to the world, and it is in this comportment toward the world that I will also be able to discover the consciousness of the other. As he writes, “The perspective on the other is opened to me from the moment I define him and myself as conducts at work in the world” (1964a, p. 117). Being a world-directed consciousness myself, I can encounter others who act, and their actions are meaningful to me, because they are also my possible actions. Merleau-Ponty consequently argues that we need to redefine our notion of psyche, as well as revise our understanding of the body. If it is my bodily experience, which can appropriate and understand the conduct of others, the former must be defined, not as a sum of sensations, but as a postural or corporeal schema (1964a, p. 117). Here is what Merleau-Ponty writes:

since at the same time the other who is to be perceived is himself not a ‘psyche’ closed in on himself, but rather a conduct, a system of behavior that aims at the world, he offers himself to my motor intentions and to that ‘intentional transgression’ (Husserl) by which I animate and pervade him. Husserl said that the perception of others is like a ‘phenomenon of coupling’. The term is anything but a metaphor. In perceiving the other, my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them. This conduct which I am able only to see, I live somehow from a distance. I make it mine; I recover it or comprehend it. Reciprocally I know that the gestures I make myself can be the objects of another’s intention. It is this transfer of my intentions to the other’s body and of his intentions to my own, my alienation of the other and his alienation of me, that makes possible the perception of others (1964a, p. 118).

There is much that one could dwell on in this passage. It illustrates Merleau-Ponty’s substantial agreement with at least part of Husserl’s account and one crucial challenge would be to explain why the transference in question is not a form of projection (and by implication why the accounts we find in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty do not fit the mold of simulation theory) (Cf. Zahavi 2010). However, I want to focus on a different issue, namely something Merleau-Ponty writes in direct continuation of the quote just given. He observes that this account will remain unavailable if one presupposes that the ego and the other are in possession of an absolute consciousness of themselves, as if each were absolutely original vis-à-vis the other (1964a, p. 119). This is, of course, an idea that we also

encounter elsewhere in Merleau-Ponty writings, for instance in the famous passage in *Phénoménologie de la perception* where he declares that the “other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body in its wake” (2002, p. 410). However, in the present text, Merleau-Ponty is more interested in the second part of the claim. As he goes on to write, the perception of others becomes comprehensible if one assumes that there is an initial state of undifferentiation, and that the beginning of psychogenesis is precisely a state where the child is unaware of itself and the other as different beings. At this initial stage, we cannot say that there is any genuine communication—communication presupposes a distinction between the one who communicates and the one with whom he communicates. But referring to Scheler, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that there is a state of pre-communication, where the other’s intentions somehow play across my body, while my intentions play across his (1964a, p. 119). In this first phase, there is, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, consequently not one individual over against another, but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life (1964a, p. 119). As he would later formulate it in *Signes*,

The solitude from which we emerge to intersubjective life is not that of the monad. It is only the haze of an anonymous life that separates us from being; and the barrier between us and others is impalpable. If there is a break, it is not between me and the other person; it is between a primordial generality we are intermingled in and the precise system, myself-the others. What ‘precedes’ intersubjective life cannot be numerically distinguished from it, precisely because at this level there is neither individuation nor numerical distinction (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 174).

In *Les relations avec autrui chez l’enfant* Merleau-Ponty describes how the initial anonymous life gradually becomes differentiated. He describes how the child becomes aware of his own body as distinct from the bodies of others and in particular he highlights the importance of the child’s confrontation with his own specular image. Through this mirror-mediated self-objectification the child becomes aware of his own insularity and separation and correlatively aware of that of others (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 119). Merleau-Ponty argues that this view can be defended not only on phenomenological grounds, but that similar insights have been reached by gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis. Merleau-Ponty refers, for instance, to the work of Wallon, who argued that there is an initial confusion between me and the other, and that the differentiation of the two is crucially dependent upon the subsequent objectification of the body (1964a, p. 120).

When saying that the me is initially entirely unaware both of itself and of others, and that consciousness of oneself and of others as unique individuals only comes later, there is an ambiguity in the claim that makes it difficult to assess. Is Merleau-Ponty simply claiming that the child only becomes explicitly aware of the difference between itself and others at a relatively late stage (a late realization that is perfectly compatible with there being a self-other differentiation from the start), or is he defending the more radical claim that the very distinction between self and other is derived and rooted in a common anonymity?

There are passages in both the Sorbonne lectures and in *Signes* that support the latter more radical view.

## Husserl on Self and Other

If we now turn to Husserl, and more specifically to *Krisis*, we find Husserl arguing that it holds a priori that “self-consciousness and consciousness of others are inseparable” (1976, p. 256) or as he puts it a bit later in the same text: “Experiencing—in general, living as an ego (thinking, valuing, acting)—I am necessarily an ‘I’ that has its ‘thou,’ its ‘we,’ its ‘you’—the ‘I’ of the personal pronouns” (1976, p. 270). More generally speaking, Husserl ascribes a *relative mode of being* to the personal I (1991b, p. 319). As he puts it on several occasions, if there were no thou, there would also be no I in contrast to it (1973a, p. 6), that is, the I is only constituted in contrast to the thou (Husserl 1973a, p. 247, cf. 1973c, p. 603). Indeed as Husserl wrote in a famous quote, that Merleau-Ponty was later to discuss in detail: “subjectivity is what it is—an ego functioning constitutively—only within inter-subjectivity” (Husserl 1976, p. 175).

Husserl consequently holds that the personal I has its origin in social life. Persons have abilities, dispositions, habits, interests, character traits and convictions, but persons do not exist in a social vacuum. To exist as a person is to exist socialized into a communal horizon, where one’s bearing to oneself is appropriated from the others. As Husserl writes in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität II*,

*The origin of personality* lies in empathy and in the *social acts* which are rooted in the latter. To acquire a personality it is not enough that the subject becomes aware of itself as the center of its acts: personality is rather constituted only when the subject establishes social relations with others (1973b, p. 175).

My being as a person is consequently not my own achievement; rather for Husserl it is a result of my “communicative intertwining” with others (1973c, p. 603, cf. 1973c, p. 50). In some of his texts, Husserl calls attention to a special and highly significant form of self-consciousness that comes about by adopting the perspective of the other on oneself. It is only when I apprehend the other as apprehending me and take myself as other to the other that I apprehend myself in the same way that I apprehend them and become aware of the same entity that they are aware of, namely, myself as a person (Husserl 1976, p. 256, 1973b, p. 78). It is no wonder that Husserl often asserts that this type of self-apprehension, where I am reflected through others, is characterized by a complex and indirect intentional structure. But as he also makes clear, it is only then that I am, for the first time and in the proper sense, an I over against an other and thereby in a position to say “we” (1991b, p. 242 & 250).

At first glance, it seems as if there is quite some agreement between Husserl’s position and Merleau-Ponty’s. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to say that on Husserl’s account as well, the I and the thou constitute a common system. As Husserl puts it in *Ideen II*:

According to our presentation, the concepts I and we are relative: the I requires the thou, the we, and the ‘other.’ And furthermore, the Ego (the Ego as person) requires a relation to a world which engages it. Therefore, I, we and world belong together (1991b, p. 288).

Indeed, rather than saying that the I is prior, or that the I and the thou are simply equiprimordial, on some occasions, Husserl even seems to assign priority to the other. For instance in the following well known quote from *Husserliana 14*, where he says, "The other is the first human being, not I" (1973b, p. 418).

## The Primal I

As should be well known, there is a slight catch with the presentation in the preceding section. Husserl operates with several complementary notions of I, and what I have been discussing so far, is not the most fundamental notion. When Husserl writes that the I is transformed into a personal I through the I-thou relation (1973b, p. 171), and when he writes that what distinguish human beings from animals is that although the latter have an I-structure, only human beings have a personal I (1973c, p. 177), he is clearly indicating that the personal I is a founded I. But what then constitutes the deepest and most fundamental dimension of I according to Husserl, and what is the relation between this I and others? The reply (to the first part of the question) is that Husserl's name for the most fundamental dimension of I is *Ur-Ich* or *primal ego*. Let us take a look at a few quotes that address this dimension of I:

...it was wrong, methodically, to jump immediately into transcendental intersubjectivity and to leap over the primal 'I,' the ego of my epoché, which can never lose its uniqueness and personal indeclinability (Husserl 1976, p. 188).

I am not *an* ego, who still has his *you*, his *we*, his total community of cosubjects in natural validity (1976, p. 188).

The 'I' that I attain in the epoché [...] is actually called 'I' only by equivocation (1976, p. 188).

The absolute I—which in utterly unbroken constancy is prior to every existent and bears every existent within itself, which in its own 'concretion' is prior to all concretions—this absolute bearing each and every conceivable existent within itself is the first '*ego*' of the reduction—an *ego* that is wrongly so called, since for it an *alter ego* makes no sense (1973c, p. 586).

Two issues are highlighted in these quotes. One is that the I in question differs from our ordinary notion of I. The other is that this I isn't dependent upon or relative to others in the same way as the personal I. Whereas Husserl in regard to the latter writes that if there were no thou, there would be no I either, since the I is only an I in contrast to a thou (1973a, p. 6 & 247), in regard to the former he writes that the absolute I of the reduction is unique in a way that rules out multiplication as meaningless, for which reason it cannot be *an* ego (among many) (1973c, pp. 589–90).

The urgent question we are now faced with concerns what precisely this primal I amounts to. Can the notion be defended, and is Husserl right in insisting upon its uniqueness and indeclinability? Another question to ask is whether this reliance on and reference to a primal I doesn't jeopardize Husserl's phenomenological analysis

of intersubjectivity. Obviously, the answer to the second question will depend on the answer to the first.

To throw some light on these issues, let me revisit a line of argumentation that I originally presented 15 years ago in my doctoral dissertation.<sup>1</sup> This revisit is not only warranted by the fact that my discussion back then was precisely addressing the questions now facing us, it is also motivated by the fact that my contribution has in recent years been subjected to some criticism from younger Husserl scholars.

In my dissertation I suggested that the manuscript B I 14 contains some of the answers we are looking for. In this manuscript, Husserl writes that ‘I’ does not admit of any plural as long as the word is used in its original sense. Others do experience themselves as I, but I can only experience myself, and not them, as I (Ms. B I 14 127a). Thus, I do not have a second exemplar alongside myself of which I could say, “das bin ich.” Accordingly, I cannot speak of *an* I when “I” means precisely *I*. This “I” is absolutely unique and individual (Ms. B I 14 138a). In my dissertation, I went on to argue that when Husserl speaks of the radical singularity of the primal I, and denies that it can be pluralized, he is not at all talking of the substantial or metaphysical uniqueness and indeclinability of the primal I, but rather pointing to its indexical nature. And indeed, in a central passage in the B I 14 manuscript Husserl makes it clear that his focus on the uniqueness of the primal I in no way rules out a multiplicity of similarly unique primal I’s. He writes: “The unique I—the transcendental. In its uniqueness it posits ‘other’ unique transcendental I’s—as ‘others’ who themselves posit others in uniqueness once again” (Ms. B I 14 138b). Finally, I went on to stress that the reference to indexicality wasn’t meant to reduce the issue at hand to a contingent linguistic fact, but that it concerned the very problem of individuation.

In his 2006 book, *Das Problem des ‘Ur-Ich’ bei Edmund Husserl: Die Frage nach der selbstverständlichen, Nähe ‘des Selbst*, Taguchi takes issue with some of these claims. He points out that it remains unsatisfactory to speak of the uniqueness of the I and of a subjectivity that always remains *je-meinig* as long as the very declinability of the I is in question. I don’t have time to rehearse Taguchi’s very careful and meticulous argumentation, but let me just state that I basically agree with his appraisal. I also agree that the reference to indexicality was misleading. Something that James Hart actually pointed out quite a while ago. As the argument goes, indexicals are defined in relation to each other, and a reference to the indexicality of ‘I’ is consequently not really appropriate when it comes to explaining what Husserl was getting at when talking of the primal I.

On closer consideration, however, I don’t really think there is any substantial difference between Taguchi’s view and the one I defended years ago. If one looks in my 1999 book *Self-awareness and alterity* where I again briefly returned to manuscript B I 14, I already then avoided the reference to indexicality and instead formulated Husserl’s point in terms of the unique self-giveness of consciousness.

---

<sup>1</sup> It was while working on this dissertation that in the fall of 1993 I had the pleasure of spending a semester studying under Richard Cobb-Stevens.

As I wrote in attempting to explain Husserl's point, "I can only be self-aware of myself and can never be self-aware of anybody else." Thus, as I understand Husserl, and as I sought to explain it back then, Husserl's emphasis on the primal I is precisely an attempt to point to the intrinsic and "absolute individuation" of consciousness (Husserl 1991b, p. 97); an individuation that the subject does precisely *not* first acquire through a confrontation and interaction with others. As Husserl writes in *Ideen II*, "The pure Ego of any given cogitatio already has absolute individuation, and the cogitatio itself is something absolutely individual in itself. [. . .] The lived experiences in the flux of consciousness have an essence that is absolutely their own; they bear their individuation in themselves" (1991b, p. 299–300, cf. Husserl 2006, p. 386).

According to Husserl, it is quite legitimate to conduct a formal analysis of the relation between selfhood, experiential self-givenness, and the structures of the stream of consciousness without introducing others into the analysis. In fact, as Husserl writes, when it comes to the peculiar mineness (*Meinheit*) characterizing experiential life, this aspect can be understood without any contrasting others (1973c, p. 351).

The advantage of this reading is that it allows us to connect Husserl's late and rather infrequent talk of primal I with his persisting preoccupation with the issue of self-consciousness. Throughout his writings, Husserl argued that self-consciousness, rather than being something that only occurs during exceptional circumstances, namely whenever we pay attention to our conscious life, is a feature characterizing the experiential dimension as such, no matter what worldly entities we might otherwise be intentionally directed at (1965, p. 189 & 412, 1973b, p. 316). Husserl emphasized the ubiquitous presence of self-consciousness in experiential life, and on repeated occasions equated (1) the first-personal mode of givenness, (2) a primitive form of self-consciousness, and (3) a certain basic sense of selfhood. As he wrote in a research manuscript dating from 1922, "The consciousness in which I am conscious of my own is my consciousness, and my consciousness of myself and I myself are concretely considered identical. To be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself" (1973b, p. 151).

In addition, interpreting the notion of primal I in this way also allows one to establish a link between this notion and Husserl's earlier notion of *Urbewusstsein* or *primal consciousness* (a connection that, as far as I can see, isn't made by Taguchi). The notion of primal consciousness, which Husserl already used in his early lecture course *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie* from 1906 to 1907 doesn't denote a particular intentional experience. Rather, the term designates the pervasive dimension of pre-reflective and non-objectifying self-consciousness that is part and parcel of any occurring experience (Husserl 1985, pp. 245–247). Indeed, but again this would lead too far to rehearse in detail here, I would take Husserl's notion of primal consciousness to point to the same dimension that Husserl sought to analyze in his account of inner consciousness and inner time-consciousness. It surely is no

coincidence that the term primal consciousness occurs at central places in Husserl's lectures on the phenomenology of inner time-consciousness (Husserl 1969, p. 89 & 118–120).<sup>2</sup>

Would Taguchi disagree with this general approach? Given that he himself distances himself from any metaphysical interpretation of the primal I and instead writes that the notion is supposed to designate “the I in its immediate present life-evidence from which I can never distance myself” (Taguchi 2006, p. 115), I see a basic agreement. I would also agree with Taguchi's point that we need to make a clear distinction between Husserl's notion of primal I and his notion of *Vor-Ich* or *pre-ego*. Whereas the latter notion refers to something we can reconstruct, namely the earliest stage in the development of what ultimately becomes a person, the primal I refers to that which I always already am and continues to be independently of any reconstruction.

Given what has been said so far, it should be clear, I hope, why Husserl's emphasis on the primal I doesn't jeopardize his analysis of intersubjectivity. Quite on the contrary, in fact, since we shouldn't forget that Husserl's approach to intersubjectivity is phenomenological. Intersubjectivity is for Husserl not something objectively existing that can be scrutinized from a detached view from nowhere. Intersubjectivity is first and foremost a relation between subjects, or more correctly put, it is first and foremost a relation between me and the other or others. Without a careful and judicious account of the first-person perspective involved, the whole enterprise will fail. As I already argued in my dissertation, this is why Husserl occasionally alludes to the ambiguity of the reduction to transcendental subjectivity (Husserl 1973c, p. 73). The complete reduction leads us both to transcendental subjectivity and to transcendental intersubjectivity. Neither can be thought in isolation: transcendental intersubjectivity is precisely the nexus of transcendental subjects, and when considered as world-constituting transcendental subjectivity is determined a priori by its relation to others (Husserl 1991a, p. 166).

When I in a recent paper entitled “Is the self a social construct?” defend a multi-dimensional account of self, and argue that whereas there are certain aspects of selfhood that are socially constructed, the very for-me-ness of experience isn't constitutively dependent upon others, I not only take myself to be defending a broadly Husserlian outlook. I also think my recent persistent defence of a minimal notion of self, which is directly tied to the subjectivity of our experiential life, can be related to Husserl's notion of primal I. Correctly understood this notion doesn't amount to an obsolete metaphysical doctrine, but is an attempt to do justice to the first-personal character of consciousness. This is what I tried to say already back in my dissertation, though the reference to indexicality might have been inappropriate.

---

<sup>2</sup>This observation doesn't address the intricate question concerning the role of the I in the process of temporalization. For some reflections on this topic, cf. Zahavi 2011.

And for that very reason, I find it somewhat puzzling to see that Micali in his 2008 book *Überschüsse der Erfahrung* claims that I belong to a group of scholars who in attempting to counteract the traditional reading of Husserl as a solipsist has overemphasized the intersubjective aspects of his phenomenology to such an extent that it represents a distortion of his thinking (2008, p. 101). Thus, on Micali's reading, I am supposed to have denied the primacy of the ego (2008, p. 121), and to have claimed that Husserl in the last phase of his thinking came to consider intersubjectivity as the ultimate foundation of validity (2008, p. 115).

I find it hard to understand how anybody who has read my two books *Husserl und die transzendente intersubjektivität* and *Self-awareness and Alterity* (and Micali refers to both books) can come to such a conclusion. After all, one of the principal aims of the latter book was to highlight the phenomenological importance of self-manifestation, but already in my dissertation I explicitly argued that Husserl considers the most fundamental constitutive performance of them all, namely the very process of temporalization, to be one that the subject accomplishes on its own independently of others (Zahavi 1996, p. 68). As I also wrote:

Hence Husserl is in no way defending the thesis that socialization is the source of every type of self-consciousness, subjective identity, and individuation. Quite to the contrary, he would even claim that every concrete relation between subjects presupposes a prior plurality of different (i.e., individual) streams of consciousness (1996, pp. 155–56).

Thus one must not succumb to the abstraction according to which one could speak exclusively of the totality of monads and of generative intersubjectivity, without simultaneously taking into consideration the transcendental primal I as the place where they are unfolded and displayed (1996, p. 81).

In my dissertation I emphasized that the preservation of such an autonomous sphere of subjectivity must be considered a presupposition for any coherent theory of intersubjectivity (1996, p. 68). A line of argumentation I then went on to employ against Habermas and Apel.

Let me return to Husserl himself, however. One important methodological issue that is highlighted in his discussion of the primal I concerns the potentially misleading character of ordinary language when it comes to describing this dimension. As Husserl wrote in the central passage from *Krisis* that I only quoted in part earlier:

The 'I' that I attain in the epoché [...] is actually called 'I' only by equivocation—though it is an essential equivocation since, when I name it in reflection, I can say nothing other than: it is I who practice the epoché (1976, p. 188).

What Husserl is stressing here is that the notion of primal I obviously departs from the ordinary everyday concept of 'I', and that the labeling of the primal I as 'I' can lead to misunderstandings if the usual connotations are retained. At the same time, Husserl also emphasizes that the continuing use of the term 'I' is necessary and unavoidable. Not only do we lack a better term, but Husserl obviously also wishes to retain the experiential meaning of the term. He is pointing to something that all of

us are thoroughly familiar with—namely the fundamental first-personal character of consciousness—although we in ordinary life fail to understand its proper significance. As Husserl remarks apropos the task of phenomenology and this is echoed in similar remarks found in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: “From the beginning the phenomenologist lives in the paradox of having to look upon the obvious as questionable, as enigmatic” (1976, p. 184).

Husserl’s reflections regarding the equivocation of the term ‘I’ when used to designate the basic level of self-experience can a fortiori be transferred to notions such as first-person perspective and mineness (notions I have frequently used in my own books). Not surprisingly, some have objected to the use of the term ‘mineness,’ since they have claimed that the primary meaning of ‘mine’ developmentally speaking is ‘not yours’. And similarly, it has been argued that it makes little sense to speak of a first-person perspective, unless in contrast to a second- and third-person perspective. Thus, on this line of reasoning, both terms are contrastive terms, terms whose meaning is relative to and dependent upon others. But just like Husserl, I have been using the terms in order to refer to the basic self-presentational character of experience. I can see why the terms might generate confusion, but I don’t see any real alternatives.

Before moving on, let me emphasize once again that the use of the notion of primal I rather than denoting a specific entity is an attempt to pinpoint a certain dimension of experience. Furthermore, it must also be stressed that Husserl’s emphasis on the autonomy of the primal I, his insistence that it is not co-constituted by others, does not entail that the primal I is somehow worldless and self-sufficient.<sup>3</sup>

## Empathy and *Fremderfahrung*

As I have suggested above, I see no conflict between Husserl’s highlighting of the uniqueness of the primal I and his accentuation of both the transcendence of the other and more generally of the constitutive importance of intersubjectivity. However, this still leaves the question concerning the role of the primal I in our experience of others unanswered. I am not going to attempt to solve that problem

---

<sup>3</sup> As a central quote has it: “The constitution of entities on various levels, of worlds, of times, has two primal presuppositions, two primal sources that—temporally speaking (in each of these temporalities)—continually ‘lie at the basis of’ such constitution: (1) my primordial I as an operatively functioning primal I in its affections and actions, with all its essential structures in the modes pertaining to them; (2) my primordial non-I as a primordial stream of temporalization, and even as the primal form of temporalization, constituting a temporal field—that of primal concrete materiality [*Ur-Sachlichkeit*]. But both primal foundations are inseparably one, and thus are abstract if regarded on their own” (Husserl 2006, p. 199, emphasis added). See also Zahavi 2009.

here, but I just want to point to a certain ambiguity in Husserl's considerations. Needless to say, we have to distinguish a view that takes the primal I to be a necessary condition of possibility for the experience of others from a view that considers the primal I to be a sufficient condition of possibility. The intelligibility of the latter view is questionable. In addition, we also have to distinguish between the view that self-experience is a precondition for other-experience, i.e., the claim that there would be no other-experience without self-experience, and the view that self-experience somehow serves as a model for other-experience, i.e., the claim that interpersonal understanding is basically a question of projecting oneself into the other. My worry about the latter suggestion, which Husserl's occasional reference to a transfer of sense from self to other might seem to support, is that it brings Husserl dangerously close to some version of simulationism, and therefore to a view which de facto denies the possibility of other-experience (cf. Zahavi 2008, 2009). Again, this is not an issue that I can treat adequately in this context, but I just want to call attention to a few places where Husserl clearly expresses his endorsement of the view that we *are* able to experience others.

Already in *Logische Untersuchungen* Husserl wrote that common speech credits us with percepts of other people's inner experiences, we so to speak *see* their anger or pain. As he then went on to say, such talk is to some extent correct. When a hearer perceives a speaker give expression to certain inner experiences, he also perceives these experiences themselves, but as Husserl then adds, the hearer doesn't have an inner but only an outer perception of them (1984, p. 40). So on the one hand, Husserl argues that my experience of others has a quasi-perceptual character in the sense that it grasps the other him- or herself (1973a, p. 24). On the other hand, Husserl also says that although the body of the other is intuitively given to me *in propria persona*, this is not the case with the other's experiences. They can never be given to me in the same original fashion as my own experiences; they are not accessible to me through inner consciousness. Rather they are apperceived through a special form of apperception, or to use a different terminology, they are co-intended and characterized by a certain co-presence (Husserl 1973a, p. 27). This does not preclude them from being experientially given, however. As Husserl wrote in *Ideen II*:

... each has lived experiences which are exclusively his own. Only he experiences these in their very self-presence, utterly originally. In a certain way, I also experience (and there is a self-givenness here) the other's lived experiences; i.e., to the extent that the empathy (*comprehensio*) accomplished as one with the originary experience of the body is indeed a kind of presentification, one that nevertheless serves to ground the character of *co-existence* in the flesh. To that extent, what we have here is thus experience, perception. But this co-existence [...] does not, in principle, allow itself to be transformed into immediate originary existence (primal presence) (1991b, p. 198).

Empathy is not a mediate experience in the sense that the other would be experienced as a psychophysical annex to his corporeal body but is instead an immediate experience of others (1991b, p. 375).

We 'see' the other and not merely the body of the other; he is there for us not merely as a body, but, instead, his spirit is self-presentified too. He is there 'in person' (1991b, p. 375).

## Conclusion

I started out by discussing Merleau-Ponty's position on the self-other relation as it is articulated in one of his Sorbonne lectures. As I pointed out, there is a certain ambiguity in his view. When saying that the me is initially entirely unaware both of itself and of others, and that consciousness of oneself and of others as unique individuals only comes later, is Merleau-Ponty simply claiming that the child only becomes explicitly aware of the difference between himself and others at a relatively late stage, or is he defending the more radical claim that the very distinction between self and other is derived and rooted in a common anonymity? There are certainly passages that can be interpreted in support of the latter view. If this is indeed Merleau-Ponty's position, we are dealing with a noticeable and marked departure from Husserl's view.

However, let me in conclusion briefly consider another central text by Merleau-Ponty, namely the chapter "Other selves and the human world" in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. As Merleau-Ponty writes, the perception of other people is problematic only for adults. The child has no awareness of himself or of others as private subjectivities. As he continues, this infantile experience must remain as an indispensable acquisition even in later life, if something like an intersubjective world is to be possible. Prior to any struggle for recognition, prior to any understanding of the alien presence of the other, there must be a common ground. We must all remain—at some level—mindful of our peaceful co-existence in the world of childhood (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 414). But as Merleau-Ponty then asks, will this model really work. Isn't it basically an attempt to solve the problem of intersubjectivity by doing away with the individuality of perspectives, by doing away with both ego and alter-ego? If the perceiving subject is anonymous, so is the perceived other, and to try to reintroduce a plurality of subjects into this anonymous collectivity is hopeless. Even if I perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or hands, even if I understand the other without recourse to any 'inner' experience of suffering or anger, the grief and the anger of the other will never quite have the same significance for me as they have for him. For me these situations are displayed, for him they are lived through (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 415). Merleau-Ponty consequently goes on to talk of an insurmountable solipsism that is rooted in lived experience (2002, p. 417). Although I am outrun on all sides by my own acts, and submerged in generality, the fact remains that I am the one by whom they are experienced. In the end, Merleau-Ponty even refers to the *indeclinable I* (2002, p. 417). This brings Merleau-Ponty's position far closer to Husserl's. It could of course be objected that the Sorbonne lectures are later, and that they might represent Merleau-Ponty's more developed view. But interestingly enough, in those very lectures, we also find passages where Merleau-Ponty claims that Scheler, in order to make the experience of others possible, ended up defending a kind of panpsychism that led to a denial of the individuation of consciousness and thereby also to a destruction of the very distinction between I and other (1988, p. 44). This is a result that Merleau-Ponty finds unacceptable. I happen to

think that Merleau-Ponty is misinterpreting Scheler, though I cannot show that here,<sup>4</sup> but the criticism indicates that Merleau-Ponty even in those later lectures favored the less radical view or at least remained undecided or simply unclear about how far he wanted to go.

Some have claimed that the only way to solve the problem of intersubjectivity and avoid a threatening solipsism is by conceiving of the difference between self and other as a founded and derived difference, a difference arising out of an undifferentiated anonymous life. However, as should have become clear by now, I don't think this solution solves the problem of intersubjectivity, it rather dissolves it. To speak of a fundamental anonymity prior to any distinction between self and other obscures that which has to be clarified, namely intersubjectivity understood as the relation between subjectivities. On the level of this fundamental anonymity there is neither individuation nor selfhood, but nor is there any differentiation, alterity, or transcendence, and there is consequently room for neither subjectivity nor intersubjectivity. To put it differently, the fundamental anonymity thesis threatens not only our concept of a self-given subject. It also threatens our concept of the transcendent and irreducible other. I consequently think that it is more than doubtful whether the notion of a fundamental anonymity can help us understand the possibility of intersubjectivity. On the contrary, it seems to present us with one of those cases where the medicine turns out to be part of the sickness it was supposed to cure and in the end just as deadly. On that background, I think Husserl's proposal remains pertinent. So what is my take home message? I think it is time to vindicate Husserl's notion of primal I.

## References

- Husserl, E. 1965. *Erste Philosophie (1923–1924): Zweiter Teil: Theorie der Phänomenologischen Reduktion*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1969. *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893–1917)*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1973a. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Erster Teil*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1973b. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Zweiter Teil*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1973c. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität: Dritter Teil*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1976. *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1984. *Logische Untersuchungen: Zweiter Band*. Dordrecht: Springer.

---

<sup>4</sup> Although Scheler does at one point write that we can take the existence of emotional identification (*Einsfühlung*)—a limit case of emotional contagion—as an indication of the metaphysical unity of all organic life (Scheler 2008, pp. 73–74), Merleau-Ponty's criticism is nevertheless unjustified, since Scheler is adamant in insisting that the existence of a unity on the level of organic life in no way rules out the *absolute difference* between individual persons (Scheler 2008, p. 65 & 121). Indeed, one of the central findings of Scheler's analysis of empathy was precisely that the latter presupposes the difference between self and other.

- Husserl, E. 1985. *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie Vorlesungen 1906/07*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1991a. *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 1991b. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Philosophie, zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, E. 2006. *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution (1929–1934): Die C-Manuskripte*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964a. *The primacy of perception*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964b. *Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1988. *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne: résumé de cours, 1949–1952*. Grenoble: Cynara.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 2002. *The phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge.
- Micali, S. 2008. *Überschüsse der Erfahrung: Grenzdimensionen des Ich nach Husserl*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Scheler, M. 2008. *The nature of sympathy*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers.
- Taguchi, S. 2006. *Das Problem des 'Ur-Ich' bei Edmund Husserl: Die Frage nach der selbstverständlichen ‚Nähe‘ des Selbst*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Zahavi, D. 1996. *Husserl und die transzendente Intersubjektivität. Eine Antwort auf die sprachpragmatische Kritik*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Zahavi, D. 1999. *Self-awareness and alterity: A phenomenological investigation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Zahavi, D. 2005. *Subjectivity and selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Zahavi, D. 2008. Simulation projection and empathy. *Consciousness and Cognition* 17: 514–522.
- Zahavi, D. 2009. Is the self a social construct? *Inquiry* 52(6): 551–573.
- Zahavi, D. 2010. Empathy, embodiment and interpersonal understanding: From Lipps to Schutz. *Inquiry* 53(3): 285–306.
- Zahavi, D. 2011. Unity of consciousness and the problem of self. In *Oxford handbook of the self*, ed. S. Gallagher. Oxford: Oxford University Press.