

# Experience and self-consciousness

Joseph K. Schear

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**Abstract** Does all conscious experience essentially involve self-consciousness? In his *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person*, Dan Zahavi answers “yes”. I criticize three core arguments offered in support of this answer—a well-known regress argument, what I call the “interview argument,” and a phenomenological argument. Drawing on Sartre, I introduce a phenomenological contrast between plain experience and self-conscious experience. The contrast challenges the thesis that conscious experience entails self-consciousness.

**Keywords** Dan Zahavi · Phenomenology · Conscious experience · Self-consciousness · First-person thought · Post-Fichtean · Sartre · Shoemaker · Refrigerator light fallacy · Existential subjectivity

In his *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person*, Dan Zahavi at once puts forward a thesis in the philosophy of mind and develops an ambitious interpretive claim about the phenomenological tradition. The thesis is that all conscious experience involves self-consciousness.

The interpretive claim is that all of the major figures of the phenomenological tradition endorsed the thesis. In this paper, I will argue that Zahavi fails to establish the thesis, and I will conclude with a remark about Zahavi’s interpretive agenda.

## 1 All conscious experience is pre-reflective self-consciousness

I begin by introducing the central notion of Zahavi’s position, namely pre-reflective self-consciousness. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1934 essay *The Transcendence of the Ego*, he writes:

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J. K. Schear (✉)  
Christ Church, Oxford, Oxford OX1 1DP, UK  
e-mail: joseph.schear@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no *I*. There is consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken, etc. I am then plunged into the world of objects;...but *me*, I have disappeared...There is no place for me on this level. And this is not a matter of chance, due to a momentary lapse of attention, but happens because of the very structure of consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Sartre here suggests that ordinary consciousness is exhausted by its immersion in the world. To insist on the presence of self-consciousness at this level would be to distort the structure of conscious experience.

The form of self-consciousness that Sartre is keen here to deny is, on his view, only one form of self-consciousness, what he calls “reflective self-consciousness.” This is a form of consciousness in which one explicitly takes oneself, as opposed to something other than oneself, as one’s topic. A sample expression of this form of self-consciousness might be “I am contemplating the portrait.” It is not hard, then, to appreciate Sartre’s denial: in contemplating the portrait, my conscious experience is taken up by the portrait, and not at all directed at myself contemplating the portrait.

But Sartre wants likewise to insist on a distinct species of self-consciousness that *is* involved in all world-immersed consciousness. This is what eventually becomes the so-called “the pre-reflective cogito” introduced in §3 of *Being and Nothingness*. Pre-reflective self-consciousness is not a matter of conceptualizing oneself or even actively attending to oneself. Rather, it is a kind of implicit acquaintance with oneself, or background self-familiarity, somehow at work in all world-directed consciousness.

The central substantive claim of Zahavi’s book is thus a neo-Sartrean claim: all conscious experience essentially involves *pre-reflective* self-consciousness. Sartre may be famous for it, but once you have the eyes to see, according to Zahavi, the central claim turns up everywhere in the texts of the phenomenological tradition. We learn from Zahavi’s narrative that Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricouer, Michel Henry—indeed even Heidegger—all stand united in its endorsement. Moreover these writers, according to Zahavi, explore the pre-reflectively self-conscious character of experience in *complementary* ways. Narrations of phenomenology typically portray a tradition of philosophy marked by the most dramatic patricide in the history of philosophy, followed by a subsequent series of (less troubling) insurrections against the founding father. Zahavi subverts this standard narrative of betrayal and broken Husserlian dreams by performing a striking feat of what one might call “conflict resolution” therapy.

Zahavi’s central claim, then, is this: if someone is in a conscious state, then that person is thereby pre-reflectively conscious of herself as being in that state. In short: phenomenal consciousness entails pre-reflective self-consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Zahavi’s case for this ubiquitous and essential pre-reflective self-consciousness includes three central arguments. The first argument is a regress argument; the second argument is

<sup>1</sup> Sartre (1957, p. 49).

<sup>2</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 16).

what I will call the interview argument; the third argument is what I will call the phenomenological argument. Before turning to these arguments, it is worth first briefly identifying the phenomenon that Zahavi urges us to recognize.

When I contemplate a portrait, the portrait presents itself in some way *to* me. If there is “something it is like” to see a portrait (as it is said), than it is like that *for* me. Thus my conscious experience of the portrait, it seems plausible to say, involves some form of awareness of *my* seeing of the portrait. The conscious experience is distinctively *mine* in that it is *me*, not you, who is having the experience. Call the phenomenon at issue the “mineness” of experience. Such is the “thin,” “minimal,” indeed “primitive” sense of self-consciousness Zahavi submits is integral to conscious experience as such.

## 2 How to be post-Fichtean: Sartre versus Shoemaker

How are we to understand this minimal self-consciousness always allegedly at work in our experience of the world? A well-known argument purports to show that the self-consciousness cannot be reflective in character. Revealing this impossibility, in Zahavi’s account, is supposed to usher in the only other alternative, namely a self-consciousness that is pre-reflective.

Here is the argument: Suppose the self-consciousness at issue is a matter of thematically *taking* oneself to see the portrait. This would be to imagine the original experience of the portrait, absent the reflective act, as lacking any self-consciousness. The original experience so imagined would then be *made to be* self-conscious in character by a second-order act of taking oneself to be seeing the portrait. But if the second-order act is to do its assigned work of introducing self-consciousness into the original experience of the portrait, that second-order act itself must be self-conscious. So, a third-order act of reflection will be required, according to the original supposition, and so on *ad infinitum*. Therefore, Zahavi claims, the self-consciousness at work in world-directed experience must be, in order to avoid the regress, “pre-reflective.”

This argument has a very long history in German philosophy. Fichte offered a version of it in Jena in the late 18th century, and it has been revived and much pursued more recently by Dieter Henrich and the so-called “Heidelberg school.” But is it really all that convincing? I want to suggest that it is less than conclusive. To identify the vulnerability I’ll advert briefly to a form of the argument as it is offered by Shoemaker (1968) in the context of the problem of self-reference.<sup>3</sup> Zahavi himself relies quite heavily on Shoemaker’s views in this area at various points in his brief for pre-reflective self-consciousness. I claim that appreciating Shoemaker’s handling of the regress argument, far from supporting the idea of pre-reflective self-consciousness, has the effect of shedding doubt on it.

Shoemaker asks us to assume that an awareness of oneself as visually conscious of a canary, expressed by the sentence ‘I see a canary’, amounts to picking out an object, the one seeing the canary, and then identifying it as oneself. To identify an

<sup>3</sup> Sydney Shoemaker (1968).

object as oneself, however, one must hold something true of the object that one already knows to be true of oneself. Either this latter piece of self-knowledge is not based on another identification, in which case there would be a form of immediate self-reference without having to identify the object as indeed oneself. Or this latter piece of self-knowledge is based on another identification, which leads to a regress, rendering reference to oneself *as oneself* a seemingly impossible feat. Either way, a conception of self-reference according to which the self-relation is always mediated by identification is vitiated.

Shoemaker's topic here, it is worth stressing, is a variation of Sartrean reflective self-consciousness: a consciousness of oneself *as oneself* in a particular experiential condition expressed by the use of the first-person pronoun. Shoemaker uses the specter of a regress (within a broader dilemma argument) to reduce to absurdity a particular conception of such reflective self-consciousness. The conception targeted is one that does not allow the self-reference component of reflective self-consciousness to be immediate and automatic. The well-known (and hotly contested) positive moral Shoemaker draws from his discussion is that self-reference in distinctively first-person thought and speech exhibits the semantic peculiarity of being "immune to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun." Zahavi, by contrast, uses the very same threat of regress, following Sartre, to argue for a turn away from reflective self-consciousness, as a tactic in an indirect argument for a distinct species of self-consciousness, namely pre-reflective self-consciousness.

But the regress argument contributes to a case for pre-reflective self-consciousness only if a certain conception of reflective self-consciousness is *left intact*. According to the conception left intact, there is always a possible gap or distance between the subject and her conscious states such that the question can keep arising whether those are states are *hers*. So to capture the phenomenon of mineness, Zahavi contends, we need pre-reflective self-consciousness. But the specter of a regress more plausibly reduces the original conception of reflective self-consciousness to absurdity, rather than leaving it in place and thereby forcing a turn to something else, namely a distinct species of self-consciousness. Insisting on pre-reflective self-consciousness is not a mandatory conclusion in the face of the regress; dropping the misguided conception of reflective self-consciousness that threatens a regress, following Shoemaker, is the attractive alternative.

This suggests an alternative understanding of the phenomenon that initially leads Zahavi to the very idea of pre-reflective self-consciousness. That phenomenon, recall, was the seeming presence of a form of self-consciousness at work in all world-directed experience. The alternative understanding: Being possessed of the first-person conceptual capacity always, or at least for the most part, puts one in a *position* to know immediately about one's own conscious mental life *as one's own*. This "privileged" position is exploited if and when the capacity for reflective self-consciousness is exercised. But it does not follow from the ever present *availability* of taking up a distinctively first-personal relation to one's own conscious experience that there is an *actual* consciousness of oneself that, *experientially*, always accompanies one's conscious experience of the world. And since the *capacity* for first-person thought well captures the "mineness" of mature conscious experience, the alleged need for a notion of *pre-reflective* self-consciousness to account for the

phenomenon is hardly compelling. One of Zahavi's overarching morals in the book, marked by its subtitle, is that we should "take the first-person perspective seriously."<sup>4</sup> Why does the alternative understanding of "mineness" I am proposing lack the requisite seriousness?

Whatever the merits of this proposal, my main point in this section is that the regress argument Zahavi believes compels us to recognize pre-reflective self-consciousness is better understood as inviting a reconception of reflective self-consciousness. If there is something to this line of thought, one might proceed to charge that Zahavi's commitment to pre-reflective self-consciousness amounts to a category mistake. By this I mean the mistake of construing the presence of a *capacity* for self-consciousness as the *actualization* of that capacity *in* our experience of the world beyond ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if Sartre is right about consciousness and its objects in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, the consequence of this mistake is phenomenological distortion. After all, our consciousness is immersed in the world, fully taken in by its objects. Accordingly, self-consciousness is more justly construed, on phenomenological grounds, as a potentiality—generally unactualized, but always actualizable—of the world-immersed experience of someone capable of first-person thought.

### 3 Explaining first-person knowledge: the interview argument

A natural rejoinder on behalf of Zahavi's thesis is to begin where we have just left off. Our conscious experience is automatically and immediately available to first-person thought, he can happily grant. But this is so *because* we are pre-reflectively self-conscious. Reflective self-consciousness, that is, rests *on the basis* of a pre-reflective self-consciousness. How else could we knowingly report on our own conscious experience with such immediacy? So all conscious experience must pre-reflectively self-conscious after all.

Like Zahavi's first argument, this second argument is not straightforwardly phenomenological in character. Pre-reflective self-consciousness is not demonstrated by a perspicuous description of how self-consciousness figures in our experience. Rather, like the regress argument, the pre-reflectively self-conscious character of experience is presented as something we are forced into recognizing—only this time not as the alleged moral of a *reductio*, but rather to meet a pressing explanatory demand. Pre-reflective self-consciousness *must* be in place to account for something else, namely, the first-person knowledge of our own mental lives we enjoy when exercising the capacity for reflective self-consciousness.

Zahavi seems to have precisely this kind of argument in mind at one point:

If I am engaged in some conscious activity, such as the reading of a story, my attention is neither on myself nor on my activity of reading, but on the story. If my reading is interrupted by someone asking me what I am doing, I

<sup>4</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 127).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Hubert Dreyfus's recent charge against John McDowell in their exchange in the pages of *Inquiry*. See Dreyfus (2007, p. 372).

immediately reply that I am (and have for some time been) reading; the self-consciousness *on the basis* of which I answer the question is not something acquired at just that moment, but a consciousness of myself that has been present all along. To put it differently, *it is because* I am pre-reflectively conscious of my experiences that I am usually able to respond immediately, that is, without inference or observation, if somebody asks me what I have been doing, or thinking, or seeing, or feeling immediately prior to the question.<sup>6</sup>

Call the argument presented in this passage “the interview argument.” The interview argument is as seductive as it is simple. But is it truly compelling? There is, I submit, reason for doubt.

The key move of the interview argument is an appeal to a moment of reflective self-consciousness in action to demonstrate the existence of distinct type of self-consciousness, namely pre-reflective self-consciousness. Take, then, the reading case. I successfully report what I am up to in response to a question about what I am doing. Does this success imply a prior pre-reflective self-consciousness? Am I always already enjoying an implicit self-experience that enables me to pass the interview test?

The answer to this question, I want to suggest, is no. Let me broach that answer by first reporting that my recent polling suggests that a non-negligible amount of people are reluctant to go along with the “no” answer. I must also confess that there are times when I find myself going along with the interview argument. There seems to be a relatively widespread and (often admitted to be) vague sense of there in fact being an experiential self-presence underlying first-personal judgments of reflective self-consciousness. Now, one handy diagnostic hypothesis about this widespread but vague sense of self-presence is that it springs from the following truism: it is not exactly *news* to me that I am reading. When asked what I am doing, and then responding, I did not *discover* something. I did not discover that it is *me* that is reading, nor did I discover that I am *reading*. I already knew what I was doing, in some ordinary colloquial sense of verb ‘to know’. While this diagnostic hypothesis may help explain the widespread but vague sense of pre-reflective self-presence, it does not help the interview argument much. After all, that I know what I am doing is one thing; a pervasive and omnipresent awareness of myself figuring in my *experience* of doing what I am doing is quite another thing.<sup>7</sup>

Compare the following scenario to bring out this difference. As I am reading a novel, suppose someone asks me “Is the world more than 5 minutes old?”, to which I reply at once “Of course it is.” Are we to conclude from my success at this interview that I was enjoying a pervasive pre-reflective conscious experience, subtly present in the background of my reading, of the world’s being more than 5 minutes old? It seems clear that the answer in this case is a straightforward “no”. So appealing to success, however effortless, at an interview question about *x*, is not sufficient to serve as unproblematic evidence for conscious experience of *x*. Put back into the

<sup>6</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 21), my italics.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Charles Siewert’s discussion of the ‘conscious-of’ trap in Siewert (1998).

context of self-awareness issue: the move from an epistemological self-relation (knowing what I am doing in doing what I am doing) to a phenomenological self-relation (experiencing myself doing what I am doing in doing what I am doing) is a *move*, and it is not an *obvious* move to make. That is, it stands in need of support. Zahavi's second argument (the interview argument), I conclude, fails to establish his central thesis, that all conscious experience involves pre-reflective self-consciousness.

Now, about the reading case, it is surely much more phenomenologically apt to say the following. The interview question, when put, prompts the exercise of the capacity for first-personal thought, and therewith *emerges* an occurrent consciousness of one's experience *as* one's own. It is by virtue of being capable of first person thought (answering the question) that consciousness of oneself *as* (just then) reading (consciously, of course) was so much as able to emerge. This manifestly does *not* imply that the "stream" of reading-experience was an impersonal stream before answering the question. Rather, because that stream is the stream *of* someone capable of first-person thought, it is available to being taken up immediately, first-personally, within the purview of that person's thought. Once conscious experience and activity are informed by this ability to think of oneself first-personally, conscious experience and activity are always already, one might say, *personal*—that is, not the experiential life of no-one in particular, but rather one *I* live through, and take up in thought and conversation when the occasion arises.

If something along these lines is right, the question again arises: why the felt need to read the *potentiality* of self-consciousness back into the experiential *reality* of being absorbed by a good book? Why does Zahavi seemingly refuse to recognize that that the interview question might bring on a transformation of conscious experience—a shift of mental posture—rather than merely trigger the revelation of what had always been at work?

One possible diagnosis is the ever-present danger of the so-called refrigerator light fallacy. This is fallacy, perhaps committed by a technologically naïve person, of thinking the light is always on in the refrigerator because whenever he opens the refrigerator the light is on. We can see how the fallacy applies to the domain of self-consciousness. We start with a point about what's immediately knowable, hence reportable, if asked. The query ("what are you doing?") is, metaphorically, the opening of the refrigerator. But just as it doesn't follow from the light being on when we open the refrigerator that the light is always on, so it doesn't follow from our being able to report knowingly on our conscious lives when asked that our conscious lives always includes self-consciousness. The fallacy is particularly inviting when we engage in phenomenological reflection. After all, to reflect on the structure and character of our *own* experience is an intensely self-conscious enterprise. As soon as we've set off on the investigation, we've "opened the refrigerator." Unsurprisingly, self-consciousness turns up wherever we look. And then we proceed to call it "pre-reflective" to ease the pangs of our guilty phenomenological conscience.

Whether or not this diagnosis applies to Zahavi, the dangers of the refrigerator light fallacy raise pressing methodological questions. How is pre-reflective self-consciousness to be described, if it must be recognized? What kind of evidence can

serve to demonstrate its existence? Appealing to a moment of reflective self-consciousness is doubtfully a promising route for those of us who need convincing.

Before moving to the third and last argument I wish to discuss, it is worth pausing to mention a separate explanatory project to which the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness might be put to use. It is not hard to get into a frame of mind in which the first-personal knowledge we have of our conscious life shows up as a remarkable thing. What accounts for it? How does it work? What does it take to have it? Rather than rest satisfied with a deflationary appeal to the possession of a first-person conceptual capacity (and register its semantic peculiarities), first-personal knowledge of our own conscious lives is not something we should presuppose. Rather, we should explain it by appeal to something more basic. Pre-reflective self-consciousness, accordingly, ought to figure in those basic materials.<sup>8</sup>

This explanatory project is devoted not to accounting for particular exercises of the first-person conceptual capacity (as in the interview argument), but rather to accounting for the first-person conceptual capacity as such. Zahavi's endorsement of Sartre's construal of pre-reflective self-consciousness as "non-cognitive" and "autonomous" suggests that Zahavi might be envisaging such an explanation. While pre-reflective self-consciousness is, accordingly, not sufficient for self-knowledge, its non-cognitive character makes room for the key claim of explanatory: without pre-reflective self-consciousness in place, no first personal knowledge would be possible.

However, it is not all clear how the appeal to pre-reflective self-consciousness is at all explanatory. The phenomenon of mineness pre-reflective self-consciousness is supposed to capture is repeatedly characterized by Zahavi as "intrinsic" or "integral" to conscious experience. At one point, it is dubbed a "sui generis phenomenon."<sup>9</sup> The worry naturally arises: Why is this characterization any more explanatory than saying mineness is "intrinsic" to the capacity for first-person thought? When it comes to deciding what is "intrinsic" to what, why are we to believe, as Zahavi urges, that the explanatory locus of mineness is conscious experience as opposed to possession of the first-personal conceptual capacity?

#### 4 The phenomenology of self-consciousness

More promising, on the face of it, is Zahavi's third argument for the claim that all conscious experience involves pre-reflective self-consciousness. Zahavi argues that careful attention to our conscious experience reveals that there is a "mineness" or "for-me-ness" internal to the experience (pre-reflectively). Zahavi here approaches conscious experience head-on, rather than by indirect argument, and the result is that he discovers himself wherever and whenever he looks. The implication is that we will all arrive at the same result, if we concentrate hard and without prejudice on

<sup>8</sup> Shaun Gallagher says on the back of Zahavi's book: "Zahavi delivers a critical phenomenological account of the subjectivity of experience that shows how phenomenology is not just a description but an analysis that can contribute to *explanations* of consciousness, self, and intersubjectivity."

<sup>9</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 69).



our own conscious experience. “The best argument to be found” for pre-reflective self-consciousness, Zahavi urges, is a “correct phenomenological description of our conscious life.”<sup>10</sup>

But Zahavi leaves it quite vague, at least to this reader, what precisely the correct phenomenological description of our conscious life *is* such that it must include appeal to pre-reflective self-consciousness. There can be no doubt that pre-reflective self-consciousness, according to Zahavi, is *not* a form of object-consciousness. However, when it comes time to offer a positive description of this form of consciousness, we are told, for example, that it is a “subtle background presence.”<sup>11</sup>

One familiar descriptive strategy here would be to accentuate the distinctive character of this subtle background presence by describing cases of conscious experience that *lack* pre-reflective self-consciousness. This would be to make its purported presence conspicuous by its absence. One might look (say) to cases of meditative trance or peak-level athletic performance in which people report a complete loss of any sense of self whatsoever, even a tacit or implicit one. Faithful and effective descriptions of these forms of “self-less” conscious experience would move the reader to recognize and appreciate the more normal case in which conscious experience purportedly comes wrapped up with the pre-reflective sense of self. Indeed, it may very well be that we do not even need to call on exceptional or *outré* cases to draw the relevant contrast. Return to Zahavi’s favored reading case, and consider Sartre’s effort to capture the experience of reading:

I was absorbed...in my reading. I am going to try and remember the circumstances of my reading, my attitude, the lines I was reading. I am thus going to revive not only these external details but a certain depth of unreflected consciousness since the objects could only have been perceived by that consciousness and since they remain relative to it...I must direct my attention to the revived objects, but without losing sight of the unreflected consciousness, by joining in a sort of conspiracy with it and by drawing up an inventory of its content... There is no doubt about the result: while I was reading, there was consciousness of the book, of the heroes of the novel, but...there was no I in the unreflected consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Contrast the above experience of reading a novel with experiencing *oneself* reading a novel. Once again we can turn to Sartre, as he offers a good case of this in the “Body” section late in *Being and Nothingness*. Imagine it is late, you’ve been reading a novel all evening and you are getting tired; the words on the page start to tremble and quiver; discerning their meaning requires a bit more effort than before. You press on as you are wrapped up in the story, but some of the words on the page begin to be given to you, for example, “as-to-be-re-read.” Here is a case that is aptly described as reading a book self-consciously. You are apparent to yourself as a reader as you are reading, and unlike the fully absorbed case, in this case there *is* an I to be found in the “unreflected consciousness.”

<sup>10</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 24).

<sup>11</sup> Zahavi (2006, p. 124).

<sup>12</sup> Sartre (1957, p. 46).

So we have drawn, with help from Sartre, a phenomenological contrast between two kinds of reading experience. (Compare the difference between the experience of dancing fluidly with a familiar partner and the experience of dancing at the junior high school dance.) Appreciating the absence of self in the absorbed reading case helps render conspicuous the subtle background presence to self in the tired late night reading case. It might be objected that in this latter case the self-consciousness present in the experience is not genuinely pre-reflective (or “non-thetic”). However, as I have described the case, you are still wrapped up in the story. The foreground theme of your conscious experience while reading remains “the heroes of the novel,” and so on. You sustain the “thesis”, if you will, only now that thetic consciousness is accompanied by a background non-thetic self-consciousness of your own reading activity.

While this contrastive strategy might sound promising to some, at least as a start in the phenomenology of pre-reflective self-consciousness, the strategy is presumably not available to Zahavi. After all, to recognize the existence of, and proceed to describe, cases of conscious experience unaccompanied by pre-reflective self-consciousness would be to refute Zahavi’s central thesis. This thesis, recall, is a claim of phenomenological necessity, that conscious experience as such *entails* pre-reflective self-consciousness, i.e., that *all* conscious experience involves pre-reflective self-consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Assuming that such a refutation is an unwelcome result, we find ourselves left with the following question, in response to Zahavi’s claim that phenomenological description is “the best argument to be found”: what exactly is the correct phenomenological description of pre-reflective self-consciousness?

## 5 Concluding remark

Let me conclude with a remark on Zahavi’s rich and erudite readings of the phenomenological tradition. I find myself convinced by Zahavi and by my own study of these texts that all the major figures of the tradition endorsed and pursued something like the thesis that all consciousness essentially involves pre-reflective self-consciousness, or in less controversial terms, that all intentional relatedness to the world essentially involves some form of pre-reflective self-relatedness. This self-relatedness, very explicitly for Sartre and Heidegger, is cast as definitive of the very being of subjectivity. But the problem of subjectivity for Sartre and Heidegger, and arguably for Husserl, is always linked to the claim that this ubiquitous and essential self-relatedness is constitutively prone to defective and distorted forms of expression—in Sartre, “bad faith,” in Heidegger, *das Man-selbst* of everydayness. Sartre’s paradoxical formulations in his ontology of subjectivity are well known. To quote one of Heidegger’s more paradoxical formulations from *Being and Time*: “The not-I is by no means tantamount to an entity which lacks I-hood, but is rather a determinate mode of being which the ‘I’ possesses, such as having lost itself.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Uriel Kriegel (2007) for the philosophical modesty of what he calls the “method of contrast.”

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger (1986), p. 152.

This is to say that for Sartre and Heidegger, and arguably for Husserl, subjectivity is superficially understood if cast primarily as a phenomenal quality of conscious experience rather than, at the most basic level, a kind of ongoing existential task—almost as if being a subject, as opposed to being merely an object, is to be able to fail at being a subject. Zahavi's intensive focus on phenomenal consciousness risks neglecting this existential dimension of the problem of subjectivity in the phenomenological tradition. In what sense could phenomenal consciousness constitutively involve the possibility of bad faith or existential disorientation?

No contemporary philosopher has been as resolute as Zahavi in detecting the ways in which thought about subjectivity (philosophical or otherwise) tends to slip into the categories we use to think about mere objects. Perhaps mining the more existential-ontological strands of the theory of subjectivity in the phenomenological tradition might help us to understand how and why this slippage so stubbornly persists.<sup>15</sup>

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