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Authors(s)	O'Shea, James
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‘Kantian Reflections on the Givenness of Zahavi’s Minimal Experiential Self’ (2015)

James R. O’Shea, *University College Dublin* (jim.oshea@ucd.ie)

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ABSTRACT: At the core of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was a decisive break with certain fundamental Cartesian assumptions or claims about consciousness and self-consciousness, claims that have nonetheless remained perennially tempting, from a phenomenological perspective, independently of any further questions concerning the metaphysics of mind and its place in nature. The core of this philosophical problem has recently been helpfully exposed and insightfully probed in Dan Zahavi’s book, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (OUP, 2014). In these remarks I suggest that Zahavi’s view of what he calls “The Experiential Self” defends precisely the sorts of claims to which a Kantian account of consciousness is fundamentally opposed, and while assessing the overall merits of the two contrasting outlooks is no easy matter, I side with the Kantian view.

KEYWORDS: Kant, Zahavi, self-consciousness, inner sense, apperception, the self.

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At the core of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, on one way of reading it, was a decisive break with certain fundamental Cartesian assumptions or claims about consciousness and self-consciousness that have remained perennially tempting, from a phenomenological perspective, independently of any further questions concerning the metaphysics of mind and its place in nature. The heart of this philosophical problem has recently been helpfully exposed and insightfully probed in relation to an impressively wide range of historical and contemporary sources, both in philosophy and in other disciplines, and in both the analytic and phenomenological philosophical traditions, in Dan Zahavi’s book, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford University Press, 2014). In these short remarks I am going to focus on Zahavi’s view of what he calls “The Experiential Self,” the title of Part I of the book. I will suggest that this foundational part of the book ably defends precisely the sorts of claims to which a Kantian account of consciousness, on my reading, is fundamentally opposed, but that assessing the overall merits of the two contrasting yet closely related outlooks is no easy matter.

Part II of Zahavi’s book treats of “Empathic Understanding” and tackles issues concerning the relationship between the intrinsically *self-revealing* character of all conscious experiences (considered phenomenologically, from the first-person perspective) that is defended in Part I, and *intersubjectivity*, here conceived phenomenologically in terms of a “direct access” enabled by “empathy as a distinct other-directed form of intentionality, one that allows the other’s experiences to disclose themselves as other” (xiii). Part III then extends the account to a consideration of reciprocal recognition and the social aspects of selfhood and subjectivity, for example in research on facial self-recognition (in empirical mirror mark tests, for instance), in phenomena pertaining to shame, and in relation to “we-intentionality” in general. A distinctive feature of Zahavi’s analysis throughout the book, however, is his contention that not only the other-directed and

intersubjective aspects of selfhood treated in Parts II and III, but also a variety of sceptical positions concerning the existence of a 'self' in general, all *presuppose* the "more minimalist experience-based notion of selfhood" defended in Part I, which Zahavi argues, for example, is "a necessary precondition for any socially constructed self" (11).

Zahavi attributes his more basic experience-based notion of selfhood to a long line of distinguished thinkers, and stresses "how thin and basic a notion of self-consciousness" he is employing, one for which there is a "constitutive link between self-consciousness and phenomenal consciousness" (30):

In line with a long and venerable tradition in philosophy, I am using the term 'self-consciousness' to designate instances where consciousness has access to or is acquainted with itself. For many thinkers (and this includes Aristotle, Descartes, Arnauld, Locke, Brentano, Husserl, Sartre, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty, Henry, and Henrich) self-consciousness in this specific sense of the term is an integral part of experience; it is something that is possessed by all conscious mental states since all conscious states are necessarily experientially manifest, or, to phrase it differently a mental state lacking this kind of self-consciousness would be a non-conscious state. (30)

(Some interpretations of Kant would also place him on this list as well, mistakenly in my view.) Each conscious mental state, *qua* state of *consciousness* – as "an intrinsic feature of the experience" (11) – is thus self-manifesting or self-revealing both in the sense of intrinsically manifesting its own conscious, perspectival nature, and in the sense that the *self* is thereby "pre-reflectively" (Sartre) or reflexively revealed in that very occurrence, i.e. in each such state of conscious awareness whatever the intentional content or object of that conscious state might be.

It is not without reason that this sort of appeal to the "first-personal givenness" of a "pre-reflective self-consciousness" has a venerable history, particularly when our concern here is to investigate the nature of the self as it is revealed to ourselves in experience. Zahavi's various appeals to the "self-givenness of experience" have an intuitive plausibility: "For every possible experience we have, each of us can say: whatever it is like for me to have this experience, it is *for me* that it is like that to have it. What-it-is-like-ness is properly speaking what-it-is-like-*for-me*-ness" (19). When throughout the book Zahavi surveys the landscape of traditional and contemporary approaches to the nature and existence (or non-existence) of the self, he finds that they typically target aspects of the self or commitments concerning what it takes to be a self that, on his view, either presuppose or in some other way go beyond the minimal yet indispensable experiential *for-me-ness* that he argues is already given with each and every first-order experiential state as such. For instance, accounts of selfhood in terms of narrative identity, social construction, or endorsed practical-normative projects; 'higher-order' representation theories of introspective self-consciousness; mutual recognition and developmental 'theory theory' accounts that in different ways derive subjective self-conceptions from developing awareness of intersubjective relations: when these views do pick out important aspects of the self, as Zahavi throughout the book stresses they often do, they typically overlook the minimally but crucially self-revealing character of the ground-level experiences that such theories either target or presuppose or are built upon. For instance, "the very idea that intersubjectivity should give rise to subjectivity must be rejected as conceptually confused. Intersubjectivity designates a relation between subject(ivities), and the former consequently cannot precede the latter" (30).

The opposed Kantian outlook I have in mind shares much in common with both Zahavi's phenomenological method and his contention that there is a fundamental constitutive relationship between self-consciousness and our consciousness of objects. At one point Zahavi mentions in passing P. F. Strawson's "view that one cannot be said to have a subjective perspective unless one

possesses a certain understanding of the objectivity condition, an understanding that environmental objects persist independently of the experiential perspective we bring to bear on them” (29). “The obvious question to ask, however,” Zahavi appropriately remarks,

is whether the requirements that must be met in order to recognize an experience *as* subjective or categorize it *as* inner are identical to the requirements that must be met in order simply to *have* experiences – experiences that are essentially and by necessity characterized by what various authors have called ‘pre-reflective self-consciousness’, ‘first-personal givenness’, ‘for-me-ness’, ‘subjective presence’, ‘self-presentational awareness’, ‘intransitive self-consciousness’, or ‘reflexivity’. (29)

This brings us to the heart of the subtle disagreement between Kant’s view (or the Kantian view I find plausible) and Zahavi’s “minimal experiential self.” Put all too briefly, Kant’s view of the experiencing self has two carefully distinguished components: “inner sense” and “apperception”. His account of inner sense entails that our cognitive awareness of our own inner mental life is both as passively receptive and actively conceptualized as our awareness of empirically mind-independent outer objects in space. That is, what Kant thinks his Cartesian opponents “have failed to recognize is that both” inner and outer experiences “are in the same position” in this respect (A38/B55), and in fact the former depends on the latter (Kant’s Refutation of Idealism). Inner sense for Kant is thus a responsive yet conceptualized awareness *of* our own successive experiencings, and there is no other, more primordially self-revealing or “pre-reflectively given” way in which our own experiences are present to ourselves. Kant argues, however, that inner and outer sense can present both our own inner states and outer physical objects to us in this way only if such experiencings are embedded within a certain conceptually unified form of thinking and imagining that he calls the “unity of apperception,” a certain rule-governed form of conceptualizing the encountered world as objective. It turns out, then, that the most basic consciousness of one’s own thinking and experiencing *self* and its conscious states, and the conceptual cognition of an independent physical world as such, are mutually correlative cognitive accomplishments.

But this Kantian view now looks ready to fall victim to an intuitive idea to which Zahavi appeals throughout the book: surely infants, two-year-olds, and non-language-using animals, who either lack or have not yet acquired concepts in Kant’s sophisticated and logically structured sense, nonetheless *have experiences* which are *present to themselves from a certain perspective*; and surely there is *something-it-is-like-for-them* to be in such states, so that in at least that minimal (but crucial) sense such conscious experiences have first-personal *for-me-ness* in the basic sense intended by Zahavi? “One ought to avoid a two-tiered account,” he rightly insists, “that leaves us with an unbridgeable dualism between the non-conceptual sentience of the infant and the conceptualized mind of the adult” (62*n*).

This is a fair challenge to Kantian approaches, and in the end I think one has to weigh up the overall plausibility and explanatory power of the two importantly different approaches, which nonetheless share much common ground. Here I can contribute just a few remarks in favor of a modified Kantian view, one that endorses Kant’s decisive break with the Cartesian legacy of a pre-reflective givenness of the self (and also with the alleged ‘givenness’ of the intrinsic nature of experience generally), but which also welcomes the ongoing task of accounting for the richly perspectival nature of animal and infant experiential cognition as fundamental.

Kant indicates (B131–2) that the apperceptive ‘I think’ is a representation (in this case, a thinking) that must be *capable* of accompanying any of one’s own representations or experiences, if they are to be anything *for* the cognizing subject. In a different but related context (68–9), Zahavi suggests that appeals to a merely “potential consciousness” of the self must lose the core insights

of his experiential view of the self as intrinsically revealed in every particular occurrent experiencing as such. Kant's view, however, isn't that *the self* must be capable of being the *object* of an experiencing or a thinking (as we can be aware of our particular experiencings in "inner sense"), but rather that the structure of an implicit package of intentional distinctions between the world conceptually experienced as objective and our perspectival experiencings of that world is a *form of representation* that constitutes our active apperceptive self-awareness as such. (Note: there is nothing "inferential" rather than direct, and there is no "epistemological gap," involved in this Kantian conception of our self-aware cognition of objects.) This is why the self goes missing, on Kant's view, if one seeks to find it as "given" either intrinsic to, or as targeted by, particular experiences as such. And since the thinking and experiential self is a form of thought or representation of this structural or functional rule-governed kind, the way is open to identifying that *same* first-personal self with a certain particular animal organism that is also cognized from a third person perspective; and there is also no puzzle about what happens to "the self" when no conscious experiences are occurring (as in dreamless sleep). By contrast, Zahavi must concede that "there is indeed no experiential self, no self as defined from the first-person perspective, when we are non-conscious" (72); and thus also "to concede that the persistency conditions of such a self cannot be the same as that of an organism" (76). I would argue that an (admittedly modified) Kantian view that conceives the thinking self as above more plausibly leaves open the possibility of embodying and identifying such a functionally specified, conceptually unified first-personal form of consciousness with a particular living animal organism conceived as having both mental capacities and physical attributes.

(I hope it is clear from the previous paragraph that I am *not* attributing to Kant a model of *self-consciousness* based on 'inner sense'. Inner sense is the awareness of particular inner mental states as such, and the Kantian account sketched above sees him as arguing that such a capacity *presupposes* the intentionally structured, apperceptive self-consciousness discussed above.)

What about the perspectival experiences of non-concept-using animals and infants? Perspectival experiences, of course, come in many forms, most conspicuously and explicitly *for us* as reflected in our competent use of the indexicals 'here' and 'now' (et al.) in having spatially and temporally perspectival experiences, and in our competences with the pronoun 'I', expressing the first-person perspective. The Kantian does recognize an important distinction between *having* an experiential perspective on the world and being implicitly aware, in virtue of one's directly conceptualized cognition of the world *as* persisting independently of one's experiences of it, of oneself *as having* such a perspective, as being one point of view among others, capable of misrepresenting the world, and so on – the battery of conceptual-intentional distinctions that constitutes one as a potentially self-aware experiencing *self*. It is, for the Kantian, admittedly a different kind of task, both empirically and conceptually, to investigate from a third-person perspective what the experiences of non-concept using or "proto-concept" cognizing animals are like *for* those animals, for example. What the Kantian ought to do, but often doesn't do on specious principle, is enthusiastically to embrace this multidisciplinary task, too, and consider the sorts of cognitive-cum-environmental purposive capacities that enable the dog, for instance, to be aware of (what *we* would call) the bone as an object that is buried *there* (as we would put it). (For interesting Kantian conceptual investigations and comparisons of human and animal cognition along these lines, see for example Jay F. Rosenberg's unjustly neglected book, *The Thinking Self* (Ridgeview, 1986/2008, chapters 4–7); and Wilfrid Sellars, 'Mental Events', *Philosophical Studies* 39, 1981: 325–45. The *empirical* investigation of animal cognition is of course a currently burgeoning field.)

An animal's having a *temporal* perspective on the world is a particularly complex subject of investigation, with basic purposive modes of memory and anticipatory capacities involved in (proto-)cognizing objects as past, as present, and as future, but with the capacities for cognizing

an object *as having remained buried*, and so on, perhaps requiring the sorts of cognitive capacities that come only with tensed conceptualization proper. But whereas Zahavi's view of the experiential-phenomenological self attributes *first-personal for-me-ness* to all forms of particular conscious experiences as such, the Kantian plausibly recognizes distinctions that do not attribute the *perspective of an I* or a *me* to the nonetheless richly perspectival, spatially and temporally object-oriented and purposive conscious experiences of dogs and similar animals. Our capacity for *thinking* I-thoughts and forming I-intentions, however such conceptual capacities come to be and originally came to be (two further important subject-matters of investigation), is essential to being a self-aware subject or *self* of a kind that creatures not possessing those capacities do not share.

Overall for these and other reasons I take the Kantian approach, which rejects the sort of elusive but tempting pre-reflective *givenness* of (in this case) *for-me-ness* that is appealed to in the venerable tradition Zahavi builds upon, to have more to recommend it than the alternative starting point. (The Kantian does not, of course, ignore the fact that objects and experiences are *given* to our receptive capacities.) The alleged threatening "possibility of functionally equivalent zombies" (17*n*), if it were viewed as a worry for the sort of Kantian view sketched above, is a suggestion that requires embracing various "Nagel's bat"-type intuitions or assumptions about phenomenal presence and perspectival experience that are not compulsory; and I find it doubtful whether Zahavi's "Mick and Mack" thought experiment (22–23) breaks any further new ground in this respect (if, indeed, any new ground was broken by Nagel). It is noteworthy that throughout the book Zahavi often objects to various views that do not start from a self-revealing 'givenness' as therefore requiring a merely *inferential* access to the relevant phenomenon to be explained. But the oft-missed Kantian lesson to take away from Sellars's classic work, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' (1956), was that the rejection of the "myth of the given" is consistent with, and in fact (as in Kant's Refutation of Idealism) *must* go along with, a conception of our *non-inferential* or direct (though conceptualized) access to the world, to other minds, and to our own thinking selves. As I hope is evident, however, despite these disagreements I certainly highly recommend Dan Zahavi's *Self and Other* as an extraordinarily comprehensive and compelling contribution to the venerable Cartesian-Husserlian tradition on which he builds.