

Time and Self

Abstract

What is a self? Does it possess experiential reality, is it rather a theoretical fiction, or is it something in between? It would be something of an exaggeration to claim that the notion of “self” is unequivocal and that there is a widespread consensus about what exactly it means to be a self. Quite to the contrary, if one looks at the contemporary discussion one will find it to be literally bursting with completing and competing definitions of the self. In this paper, I will compare and contrast two different philosophical conceptions of self, namely a hermeneutical (Ricoeur, MacIntyre) and a phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, Henry, Sartre, Husserl). Both of these conceptions stress the close relationship between selfhood and temporality, but they address rather different aspects, partly because they operate with rather different notions of time. It will be argued that the two conceptions are complementary rather than conflicting and that the phenomenological conception of time and self must be ascribed a certain priority.

Is the self real? Does it possess experiential reality, is it a theoretical fiction, or is it something in between? In order to provide an answer to these metaphysical questions, one first needs to get clear about what exactly it means to be a self. But if one looks at the contemporary discussion one will find it to be literally bursting with completing and competing definitions. In a well-known article from 1988, Neisser distinguished five different selves: The ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self, and the conceptual self (Neisser 1988, 35). Eleven years later, Strawson summed up a recent discussion on the self that had taken place in *Journal of Consciousness Studies* by enumerating no less than twenty-one concepts of self (Strawson 1999, 484). Given this escalating abundance, it is very easy to talk at cross-purposes, particularly in an interdisciplinary context. It is a simple fact that the concept of self connotes different things in different disciplines – sometimes radically different things.

What I intend to do in the following is to compare and contrast two different philosophical conceptions of self, namely a hermeneutical (Ricoeur, MacIntyre) and a phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, Henry, Sartre, Husserl). Both of these conceptions stress the close relationship between selfhood and temporality, but they address rather different aspects, partly because they operate with rather different notions of time.

I. A hermeneutical perspective: the self as a narrative construction

It has recently been argued, that it is impossible to discuss the issues of selfhood and personal identity in abstraction from the temporal dimension of human existence (Ricoeur 1990, 138). Human time, however, is neither the subjective time of consciousness, nor the objective time of the cosmos. Rather, human time bridges the gap between phenomenological and cosmological time. Human time is the time of our life stories. It is a narrated time, a time structured and articulated by the symbolic mediations of narratives (Ricoeur 1985, 439). What contributions do such narratives make to the constitution of the self? It has been proposed that they make out the essential form and central constitutive feature of self-understanding and self-knowledge.

In order to know whom you are, in order to gain a robust self-understanding, it is not enough simply to be aware of oneself from the first-person perspective. It is not sufficient to think of oneself as an I. Rather a narrative is required. When confronted with the question "Who am I?" we will typically tell a certain story, emphasizing certain aspects that we deem to be of special significance, to be that which constitutes the *leitmotif* in our life, to be that which defines who we are, that which we present to others for recognition and approval (Ricoeur 1985, 442-443). To answer the question "Who am I?" is to tell the story of a life (Ricoeur 1985, 442). I attain an insight into who I am by situating my character traits, the values I endorse, the goals I pursue, etc. within a life story that traces their origin and development; a life story that tells where I am coming from, and where I am heading. This narrative, however, is not merely a way of gaining insight into the nature of an already existing self. On the contrary, the self is the product of a narratively structured life. As MacIntyre puts it, the unity of the self "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre 1985, 205). Why is it natural for us to think of the self in terms of narrative structures? This is because human activities are enacted narratives. Our actions gain intelligibility by having a place in a narrative sequence. We live out narratives in our lives, and we understand our own lives in terms of such narratives.

Ricoeur has occasionally presented his own notion of narrative identity as a solution to the traditional dilemma of having to choose between the Cartesian notion of the self as a principle of identity that remains the same throughout the diversity of its different states and the positions of Hume and Nietzsche who hold an identical subject to be nothing but a substantialist illusion (Ricoeur 1985, 443). Ricoeur suggests that we can avoid this dilemma if we replace the notion of identity that they respectively defend and reject with the concept of narrative identity. The identity of the narrative self rests upon narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the same, the narrative identity can include changes and mutations within the cohesion of one lifetime. The story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about him- or herself. It is this constant reconfiguration that makes "life itself a cloth woven of stories told" (Ricoeur 1985, 443).

Ricoeur has sought to clarify the concept of narrative identity by means of the concept of selfhood (*ipséité*). As he points out, not all problems of personal identity can be conceived as problems concerning an unchangeable substance or substrate. Rather, the identity of the self (Latin: *ipse*) is linked to the question of self-understanding, is linked to the question "who am I" (Ricoeur 1990, 12-13, 140). When confronted with this question, I am forced to reflect on and evaluate my way of living, the values I honor, and the goals I pursue. I am forced to confront the life I am living. Thus, the answer to the question is not

immediately accessible; rather it is the fruits of an examined life.

Any consideration of narrative identity obviously entails a reference to others, since there is a clear social dimension to the achievement of narrative self-understanding. I come to know who I am and what I want to do with my life by participating in a community. To come to know oneself as a person with a particular life history and particular character traits is consequently both more complicated than knowing one's immediate beliefs and desires, and less private than it might initially seem (Jopling 2000, 137). When I interpret myself in terms of a life-story, I might be both the narrator and the main character, but I am not the sole author. The beginning of my own story has always already been made for me by others, and the way the story unfolds is only in part determined by my own choices and decisions. Who we are depends upon the stories others and we tell about ourselves. Our narrative self is multiple authored and under constant revision. The story of any individual life is not only interwoven with the stories of others (parents, siblings, friends etc.), it is also embedded in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structure (MacIntyre 1985, 221). The concepts I use to express the salient features of whom I take myself to be are concepts derived from tradition and theory, concepts that will vary widely from one historical period to the next, and across social class and culture.

Is the self an independently existing entity that makes the questions we ask about it true or false? Is it something whose nature we gradually unearth or is it rather wholly constituted and constructed by our descriptions? Some defenders of a narrative approach to selfhood have argued that the self is nothing but a linguistic and social invention. As Dennett puts it, biological organisms with brains like ours cannot prevent themselves from inventing selves. We are hardwired to become language users, and the moment we make use of language, we begin spinning our stories. The self is produced in this spinning, but it has no reality. It is merely a fictional center of narrative gravity (Dennett 1991, 418, 1992). It is the abstract point where various stories about us intersect. Thus, on this reading, the narrative account turns out to be a variant of the no-self doctrine.

Let us grant that the narrative self is a construction. It is not something innate, and the material used for its construction is not only real-life materials, but also ideals and fictive ideas. Let us grant that our narrative identity is subject to constant revisions, and that it is organized around numerous narrative hooks that differ from culture to culture. Does this then justify the claim that the self is nothing but a fiction? We should not forget that there are constraints. Some self-narratives are truer than others are. Moreover, it is undeniable that the self plays an important and crucial role in our psychological and social life by giving it organization, meaning and structure. That the narrative self might be a construction does consequently not make it unreal (Flanagan 1992, 205-210). Although both Ricoeur and MacIntyre would reject the idea of a substantial self, they would also insist that human life has a natural narrative structure. And to declare everything peculiar to human life fictitious, simply because it cannot be naturalized, simply because it cannot be grasped by a certain mode of scientific comprehension, merely reveals one's prior commitment to a naïve scientism, according to which natural science is the sole judge of what there is.

However, a lingering doubt remains. Is it possible to resist Dennett's conclusion as long as the self is taken to be nothing but a narrative construction? Does the narrative self not require some kind of experiential support?

II. A phenomenological suggestion: The self as an experiential dimension

The term "*ipseity*" (selfhood) has gained a recent popularity because of Ricoeur's writings on narrative and because of what he calls his "herméneutique de l'ipséité" (Ricoeur 1990, 357). But Ricoeur is by no means the first French thinker to employ the term, and if we look briefly at the way the term has been used by some of his phenomenological predecessors (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Henry) we will gain a better understanding of what the phenomenological concept of self amounts to.

Sartre is known for having dismissed an egological account of consciousness in his early work *La transcendance de l'ego*. However, whereas Sartre in that work had characterized non-egological consciousness as *impersonal*, he describes this view as mistaken in both *L'être et le néant* and in the important article "Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi". Although no ego exists on the pre-reflective level, consciousness remains personal because consciousness is at bottom characterized by a fundamental self-givenness or self-referentiality which Sartre calls *ipseity* (Sartre 1943, 142. Cf. 1948, 63). Sartre's crucial move is consequently to distinguish between ego and self. From the context, it is obvious that Sartre has nothing like narrative identity in mind when he speaks of *ipseity*. He is referring to something much more basic, something characterizing consciousness as such. It is something that characterizes my very mode of existence, and although I can fail to articulate it, it is not something I can fail to be. As Sartre also writes, "pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness" (Sartre 1943, 114 [1956, 76]).

Henry repeatedly characterizes selfhood in terms of an interior self-affection (Henry 1963, 581, 584, 585). Insofar as subjectivity reveals itself to itself, it is an *ipseity* (Henry 2003, 52). Or as he puts in his early work *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*: "The interiority of the immediate presence to itself constitutes the essence of *ipseity*" (Henry 1965, 53 [1975, 38]). What we find in Henry is consequently a clear accentuation of the link between selfhood and self-awareness. Because consciousness is as such characterized by a primitive, tacit, self-awareness, it is appropriate to ascribe a fundamental type of *ipseity* to the experiential phenomena. More precisely, Henry links a basic notion of selfhood to the first-personal givenness of experiential life.

As for Merleau-Ponty, he occasionally speaks of the subject as realizing its *ipseity* in its embodied being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 467). However, he also refers to Husserl's investigations of inner time-consciousness and writes that the original temporal flow must count as the archetypical relationship of self to self and that it traces out an interiority or *ipseity* (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 487). One page later, Merleau-Ponty, then writes that consciousness is always affected by itself and that the word "consciousness" has no meaning independently of this fundamental self-givenness (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 488).

The crucial idea here is that an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa. To put it differently, the claim being made is that the investigations of self and experience have to be integrated if both are to be understood. More precisely, the self is claimed to possess experiential reality, it is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective,

and is in fact identified with the very first-personal *givenness* of the experiential phenomena. This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something quite incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experiences *subjective*. Although there are different types of experiences (the smelling of hay, the seeing of a sunset, the touching of an ice cube etc.), and although there are different types of experiential givenness (perceptual, imaginative, and recollective, etc.) there are common features as well. One such common feature is the quality of *mineness* (or to use Heidegger's term "*Jemeinigkeit*"), that is, the fact that experiences are characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them as one's own. Whether a certain experience is experienced as mine or not, does not depend on something apart from the experience, but on the givenness of the experience. If the experience is given to me in a first-personal mode of presentation, it is experienced as my experience, otherwise not. To put it differently, with a slightly risky phrasing, their first-personal givenness entails a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-referentiality.

At its most primitive, self-consciousness is simply a question of having first-personal access to one's own consciousness; it is a question of the first-personal givenness or manifestation of experiential life. To be conscious of oneself, is consequently not to capture a pure self that exists in separation from the stream of consciousness, rather it just entails being conscious of an experience in its first-personal mode of givenness. In short, the self referred to is not something standing beyond or opposed to the stream of experiences, rather it is a feature or function of their givenness. It is the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences. Thus, the self is conceived neither as an ineffable transcendental precondition, nor as a mere social construct that evolves through time, rather it is taken to be an integral part of our conscious life, with an immediate experiential reality.

This phenomenological notion of self is a very formal and minimalist notion, and it is obvious that more complex forms of selves exist. Having said this, however, the phenomenological notion nevertheless strikes me as being of pivotal significance. It is fundamental in the sense that nothing that lacks this dimension deserves to be called a self. Thus, in my view, this experiential sense of self deserves to be called the *minimal self*.

What has all of this to do with temporality? We find an answer if we return to Husserl. What we find in his writings is a sustained investigation of the relationship between selfhood, experiential self-givenness, and temporality. As Husserl would argue, given the temporal character of the stream of consciousness, even something as apparently synchronic as the givenness of a present experience might not be comprehensible without taking temporality (or as Husserl would call it: inner time-consciousness) into consideration.

It has often been overlooked that Husserl's interest in temporality was motivated by his interest in the question of how consciousness is given to itself, how it manifests itself. As he writes in the beginning of the recently published *Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewusstsein*, consciousness exists, it exists as a stream, and it appears to itself as a stream. But how the stream of consciousness is capable of being conscious of itself, how it is possible and comprehensible that the very being of the stream is a form of self-consciousness, is the enduring question (Hua 33/44, 46).

Phenomenological analyses point to the 'width' or 'depth' of the 'living presence' of consciousness: Our experience of temporal enduring objects and events, as well as our experience of change and succession, would be impossible were we conscious only of that which is given in a punctual now, and were our stream of consciousness composed of a series of isolated now-points, like a string of pearls. A succession of conscious states does not ensure consciousness of succession and duration. According to phenomenology, the basic unit of temporality is not a 'knife-edge' present, but a 'duration-block', i.e., a temporal field that comprises all three temporal modes of present, past, and future. Three technical terms describe this temporal form of consciousness. There is (i) a 'primal presentation' narrowly directed toward the now-phase of the object. The primal presentation never appears in isolation and is an abstract component that by itself cannot provide us with a perception of a temporal object. The primal presentation is accompanied by (ii) a 'retention', which provides us with a consciousness of the just-elapsed phase of the object, and by (iii) a 'protention', which in a more-or-less indefinite way intends the phase of the object about to occur. The role of the protention is evident in our implicit and unreflective anticipation of what is about to happen as experience progresses. Consciousness is the generation of a field of lived presence. The concrete and full structure of this field is *protention-primal presentation-retention*. Although the specific experiential contents of this structure from moment to moment progressively change, at any given moment this threefold structure is present (synchronically) as a unified whole.

Husserl's analysis of the structure of inner time-consciousness serves a double purpose. It is not only meant to explain how we can be aware of objects with temporal extension, but also how we can be aware of our own fluctuating stream of experiences. Inner time-consciousness simply is the name of the pre-reflective self-awareness of our experiences, and Husserl's account of the structure of inner time-consciousness (protention-primal impression-retention) is precisely to be understood as an analysis of the (micro)structure of the pre-reflective self-givenness of our experiences (Husserl 1974, 279-280, 1952, 118). To put it differently, his investigation of time-consciousness must be appreciated as an analysis of a formal aspect of selfhood.

What is the relation between the self as experiential dimension and the self as a narrative construction? The two notions of self are so different that they can easily complement each other. In fact, on closer consideration it should be clear that the notion of self that was introduced by the narrative model is not only far more complex than but also logically and ontologically dependent upon the experiential self. Only a being with a first-person perspective could make sense of the ancient dictum "know thyself", only a being with a first-person perspective could consider her own aims, ideals and aspirations as her own, and tell a story about it. To avoid unnecessary confusion, one might opt for a terminological differentiation. When dealing with the experiential self, one might retain the term "self", since we are precisely dealing with a primitive form of self-givenness or self-referentiality. By contrast, it might have been better to speak not of the self, but of the *person* as a narrative construction. After all, what is being addressed by this model is the nature of my personality or personal character. A personality that evolves through time, and which is shaped by the values, I endorse, and by my moral and intellectual convictions and decisions. These convictions and endorsed values are all intrinsically social, and it is no coincidence that Husserl distinguishes the subject taken in its bare formality from the personalized subject and claims that the origin

of personality must be located in the social dimension. I am not simply a pure and formal subject of experience, but also a person, with abilities, dispositions, habits, interests, character traits, and convictions, and to focus exclusively on the first is to engage in an abstraction (Hua 9/210). To put it differently, the self is only fully developed when personalized, and this only happens intersubjectively. I only become a person through my life with others in our communal world. Nevertheless, the phenomenological notion of self has priority. Whereas one can be a self without being a person, one cannot be a person without being a self. This is a claim that might be supported by findings in recent neuroscience. As Damasio argues in *The Feeling of What Happens*, using a slightly different terminology, neuropathology can reveal that impairments of extended consciousness and of what he calls the autobiographical self (impairments such as transient global amnesia) allow core consciousness and core self to remain unscathed, whereas impairments that begin at the level of core consciousness demolish the entire edifice of consciousness and makes extended consciousness collapse as well (Damasio 1999, 17).

Ricoeur's work *Temps et récit* has occasionally been read as containing a crass criticism of Husserl's investigation of time. But even if Ricoeur might have been right in pointing to the limitations of a phenomenological investigation of inner time-consciousness – there is more to temporality than what is thought of in Husserl's investigation, and the latter is incapable of accounting convincingly for historical and cosmological time – this does not make Husserl's investigation superfluous. On the contrary, it remains pertinent for an understanding of the temporality of experiential life. Moreover, it describes a dimension of selfhood that is ignored by Ricoeur in his focus on narrative identity.

References:

- Dan Zahavi: *Self-awareness and Alterity. A phenomenological investigation*. Northwestern University Press 1999.
- Dan Zahavi: "Beyond Empathy. Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8/5-7, 2001, 151-167.
- Dan Zahavi: "Phenomenology of self." In T. Kircher & A. David (eds.): *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, 56-75.
- Dan Zahavi: "Inner time-consciousness and pre-reflective self-awareness." in D. Welton (ed.): *The New Husserl. A Critical Reader*. Indiana University Press, 2003, 157-180.