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How different are Dennett's abstract narrative self and Zahavi's minimal self really?

In philosophy of mind we can find two contemporary positions on the self that seem to be in competition with each other. The first position is described by Daniel Dennett and stems from a functionalist view on the mind. The other position is articulated by Dan Zahavi and stems from the research program called embodied cognition. In this paper I aim to describe both positions (section one and two) with the goal of showing that these positions don't really differ that much (section three) and that we need more radically different accounts on the self (section four) to progress in the quest of accounting for our paradoxical intuition of the self as persistent through time while also being subject to change.

Dennett's abstract narrative self

For Dennett, selves belong to the fictional realm. In his talk *The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity* he compares the self of a human being to the center of mass of a physical object. Both are postulated entities for practical purposes. A physicist incorporates a center of gravity in their calculations to predict the behavior of an object. Will it fall or move in a certain direction, given such and such circumstances? We do the same thing with human beings—complicated things that move around in the world—trying to interpret these. Using narrative models of ourselves and others helps us to predict what a person might do or which decisions to make for ourselves (Dennett 1992, 103-105).

If we take Dennett's overall position on the mind into account, his take on the self makes a lot of sense. The theory about the nature of mental states that Dennett adheres to is called functionalism. In this view mental states are identified by what they do (what function they realize) rather than by what constitutes them. Mental states as functions are interpretations of consistent behaviors which mean something to us and which we then call feelings, desires, beliefs, etc. According to this theory, mental states could be realized by any material, as long as that material can form the appropriate machinery to run these functions. This means that if we could build a computer that would have the same functional structure as a human brain, this computer would also be able to compute these functions which we would identify as feelings and beliefs. Not only would other people attribute mental states to this computer, but the computer itself will also attribute mental states to itself, just like we do regarding ourselves!

In the same fashion the self is, for Dennett, not defined by what it is constituted by, but by what its function is. He warns his audience not to look for the self in the brain or somewhere else in physical reality, because that would mean committing a category mistake (Dennett 1992, 104; 109 and 114). What he is referring to is Gilbert Ryle's famous critique on René Descartes' substance dualism, where the body is made from physical substance and the mind from thinking substance. The mistake is to attribute mind and body to the same logical category, that of substance in the case of Descartes and that of matter in the case of contemporary researchers that try to localize the self in the brain. The self belongs not to the category of physical reality, but to the abstract realm of descriptions, functions and interpretations. Dennett understands the self as a purely abstract object, a fiction (Dennett 1992, 105).

Dennett further specifies that the self is a *narrative* abstractum. To illustrate this point he asks us to imagine a novel-writing machine. Nowadays it is not hard to imagine such a machine, having chatbots like chatGPT. It is a program that is fed with a lot of language data and after being given a prompt it is able to create a completely fictional story with a protagonist. The computer in Dennett's story creates a novel that starts with the sentence "Call be Gilbert". Of course the computer itself is not Gilbert, Gilbert only exists as a fictional character in the story that the computer produced. Even if we would give the computer wheels and it would be rolling around in the world clanking out the novel *The Life and Times of Gilbert*, that presumably non-coincidentally matches the adventures of this robot, Gilbert would still be a narrative abstractum (Dennett 1992, 107-108).

For Dennett our brains are also story producing machines. Our bodies move around in the world, gathering data, just like the rolling robot mentioned above. Our mind, which is from the functionalist perspective like an abstract program, runs on the brain and produces a narrative about all that collected information, trying to model the world and itself. The novel-writing machine, the computer, doesn't know what it is doing. "It doesn't even know that it's creating this fictional character" says Dennett. And he adds to it: "The same is just as true of your brain; it doesn't know what it's doing either" (Dennett 1992, 108). To be able to function and to make sense of our world, we unconsciously create a fictional character that represents our body, interests, past experiences, etc., that we then call a self.

Zahavi's minimal self

Where for Dennett the self only exists in the abstract narrative dimension, Zahavi favors a *multidimensional* account of the self (Zahavi 2011, 75). He acknowledges that a part of the self must be constructed narratively. Besides that, however, there is also another dimension that cannot be excluded from a complete account of the self: the experiential dimension. It is clear that the stories we tell about ourselves are not random, like we would expect from a chatbot for example. The narrative part of a human self has some relation to the first-personal experiences that that human being has. This experiential dimension of the self is what Zahavi calls a minimal self and it refers specifically to the subjectivity of those experiences.

Even though Zahavi and Dennett both work in philosophy of mind, they have some differences in the methodology they employ. Early on in his academic career Zahavi became

interested in Husserl, who is regarded as the founder of the phenomenological method. After completing his PhD, phenomenology became Zahavi's main research area (Zahavi 2011, 115). Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, things and the world as they appear to us in our experience. The idea is to explore the finer details of subjective experience and to describe the structures and meanings encountered in this experience. Keeping this method in mind, it becomes very understandable that, as far as it concerns Zahavi, the experiential dimension will be essential to a philosophical account of the self, or any other topic that can be studied phenomenologically for that matter.

We can see the phenomenological method in action with a thought experiment that Zahavi uses to show in detail what a minimal self would be (Zahavi 2011, 58). Imagine having these three experiences: seeing a green apple, seeing a yellow lemon and remembering the yellow lemon. If you compare the first experience of seeing the green apple and the third experience of remembering the yellow lemon, you can examine the differences between them. The object of the experience is different (apple versus lemon) and the mode of presentation (seeing versus remembering). However, you can also find a commonality between these experiences, namely the subjectivity or "first-personal self-givenness" as Zahavi also calls it. Zahavi stresses that 'first-personal' should not be understood as anything self-referencing or linguistically at all. It rather says something about the unique perspective of the experience (Zahavi 2020). 'Self-givenness' or 'mineness' says something about who this experience belongs to and the unavailability of it to others (the experience is not given to others). The minimal self is thus that unique perspective, the same subjectivity that an individual encounters in its experiences over and over again.

Just like in Dennett's case, Zahavi's understanding of self also flows from his understanding of the mind. In contrast with Dennett, who is a functionalist, Zahavi approaches this subject from within the research program called embodied cognition. This is not surprising, given the fact that embodied cognition is inspired by phenomenology. From the functionalist perspective the mind can run on whatever material is suitable, but from the perspective of embodied cognition this is impossible. If we would like to recreate a human experience with an artificial brain, by feeding it exactly the data it needs for that experience we would end up building a human body, because, in this theory, the specific way in which the information is gathered and given to the brain by the human body actually determines that unique experience (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, 147). The body shapes experience, mental states and the self.

Important to note is that the minimal self that Zahavi describes is inherent to the experience that is shaped by a material body: it does not exist by itself. Just like Dennett, Zahavi does not believe in a soul or any independently existing substance from which the self would be made. In philosophy, when we talk about experiences and the accompanying subjectivity, there is an intuitive tendency to distinguish experiences from the subject which *has* these experiences. Zahavi, however, does not want to uphold such a separation between a self that experiences and the experiences themselves. The minimal self only exists as part of experience. This means that when experience is interrupted, for example when a person is in a dreamless sleep state or in a coma, there is also no minimal self in that moment (Zahavi 2011, 74).

Zahavi realizes that his account of the minimal self may look like he is evading the big questions philosophers have about the self, like how it can persist through time for example. To be able to answer those, a more comprehensive account of the self is needed.

Is there or is there not an identical self from birth through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Ultimately, I think this question is overly simplistic, since it presupposes that the self is one thing, and that there is a simple yes or no answer to the question. (Zahavi 2011, 75)

The self is such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that we need to integrate various accounts to do justice to all its dimensions first. The description of the minimal self Zahavi provides is only part of that.

Both positions suffer from the same problems

Dennett's account does a good job resolving the seeming paradox of a self being able to persist through time while at the same time being subject to change. Defining the self as an abstraction has the upside that it is not restricted to physical laws, like a material object would be. All the physical properties of a human body are determined, but an abstract narrative self can have undetermined properties or even contradicting ones. Nothing stops us from uttering the words 'square circles' for example, because a concept doesn't have to be instantiated in reality to exist as an abstraction. The same way is a self, as a narrative construct, able to have both the properties of staying the same and not staying the same.

This is not possible in Zahavi's account on the minimal self. If the minimal self is part of experience and experience is uniquely shaped by a body and that body is constantly changing, then the minimal self must change together with the experience, to which it is inherent. The only way it could survive this change without changing itself would be if this subjectivity is some kind of unchanging essence of experience, but that would bring us back to it being either an independently existing subject (what Zahavi does not want) or an abstraction. In the latter case the accounts of Dennett and Zahavi would lead to the same outcome. On the other hand, if we let the unchanging part of the self exist only in the narrative dimension of Zahavi's account of the self, the question arises: what do we then need the minimal self for?

The downside of Dennett's account on the self is that it mostly ignores the experiential dimension. We cannot scientifically test the idea that our selves are not fundamentally different from a computer program that spits out fictional stories. From an objective or a third person perspective you can't see any difference even if on a subjective level there would be. It is only my subjective experience that provides me with an intuition that I have an unique perspective that is not shared with anyone else. I can really *feel* my subjectivity and this feeling should be explained too.

Even though Zahavi explicitly engages with this feeling of subjectivity, which could be seen as an upside to his account, he still doesn't really do justice to our experience and intuition about the self. Miri Albahari writes in her paper *Witness-Consciousness* the following about Zahavi's position:

for all the talk of 'first-person givenness', there is no first person to whom the stream is given, no me that the for-me-ness is for. There is just the stream of experience that generates the impression of a me. (Albahari 2009, 80)

Zahavi uses the words 'first-person givenness', 'mineness' and 'for-me-ness' to describe what he calls the minimal self. These carefully crafted descriptions, in an attempt to point as accurately as possible to the exact feeling that we are talking about, is the part of experience that gives rise to the above-mentioned intuition that there is a self or a subject who undergoes this experience. Zahavi denies the existence of such a subject even though these descriptions do hint in the direction of a first-person, a me or a subject. In his position there is no independent self, but it certainly *seems* like there is one (Albahari 2009, 68). This brings Zahavi's position very close to that of Dennett in which the subject, if it exists, is seen as an illusion or a construct. He just changes the meaning of the word 'self' to not include a subject.

The final problem that both positions suffer from is that it is unclear how the subjective experience of an individual relates to the narrative aspect of the self. Dennett seems to ignore the experiential dimension, but he cannot escape it entirely. In his example of the robot that calls itself Gilbert, the program produces stories that coincide with real events that are happening to the computer on wheels it is running on. Why does the program include these events in its stories instead of just producing random fictional novels? Dennett's account does not explain this relation. The same goes for Zahavi's proposal for a multidimensional account of the self. The self as a multidimensional notion raises questions about how all these dimensions relate to one another. It is unclear how the minimal self exactly connects to the narrativistic aspect of the whole self.

Embodied narrative self

Personally I favor an account on the self that acknowledges the part that the body plays in shaping experience. I think functionalism can be compatible with embodied cognition if we would define mental states as functions that are accompanied with experience. It makes sense to me, intuitively, that we could build a synthetic that would have a body that is very much like mine and that it might also have an experience that is similar to mine. We both could have the experience of being a subject or having a self, even if it is only narratively constructed. This works for both functionalism and embodied cognition.

There is already an account called 'embodied narrative self' by for example Richard Menary (2008). The problem is that he wants to use Zahavi's minimal self to bridge the gap between subjective experience and the abstract narrative part of the self. This approach is in my opinion, as I have shown, a dead end. I believe we need to develop a more radical account, that not only acknowledges subjectivity but incorporates the full intuition of being a subject to which these experiences are presented, just as we encounter it in our experience when we employ the phenomenological method.

Conclusion

In this paper I discussed Daniel Dennett's position on the self as an narrative abstractum and Dan Zahavi's position on the self as an multidimensional phenomenon that includes both an abstract component as well as a minimal self in the experiential dimension, and how much these accounts actually differ. Dennet's understanding of the self follows from his functionalism where mental states are defined as abstract functions. The self is for Dennett also abstract and defined by its function, namely as a postulated entity that helps us to navigate the social world. Zahavi's understanding of the self follows from his embodied cognition where the body shapes experience, mental states and the self. Inspired by the phenomenological method he explores the experiential dimension and finds there what he calls the minimal self. This minimal self refers to the subjectivity or the first-person perspective of that experience. On a first glance these two positions look very different: Dennett's self is fictional while Zahavi's self really exists in the experiential dimension. Under closer inspection it turns out, however, that Zahavi also regards the intuition of being a subject as a mistake. Consistent with his embodied cognitivism, this means that the unchanging part of the self is still only found in the abstract narrative part of his notion of the self, rendering his account of the minimal self ineffective. Lastly both positions fail to explain how subjective experience exactly relates to a narrative self.

I think it is a great idea to develop an account of the self from the embodied cognitive perspective, possibly an 'embodied narrative self' where not only subjectivity but also the subject is included. Phenomenology as a method could possibly help to develop such an account, by examining the experiential dimension even more closely.

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