

Name: Tanja Mourachova
Studentnumber: s1027979
Date: June 13th, 2024
Word count: 2831

Social Minimal Self

An overview of the scholarship contributing to an interpersonal account of the minimal self

Surveyed Literature

Ciaunica, Anna and Laura Crucianelli. 2019. "Minimal Self-Awareness: from Within A Developmental Perspective." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26 (3-4): 207–226.

Kyselo, Miriam. 2016. "The Minimal Self Needs a Social Update." *Philosophical Psychology* 29 (7): 1057–1065. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2016.1214251>.

Ratcliffe, Matthew. 2017. "Selfhood, Schizophrenia, and the Interpersonal Regulation of Experience." In *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture: Investigating the Constitution of the Shared World*, edited by Christoph Durt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes, 149–171. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Introduction

The notion 'minimal self' has its roots in phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that studies the structures of experience. Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, conceptualized the distinction between reflective and pre-reflective self-awareness found in experience. Reflective self-awareness refers to a process of turning inward to examine one's own experiences, in which the self appears as an object for reflection. Pre-reflective self-awareness refers to the implicit awareness of ourselves as experiencing subjects, which is inherent to all experience and a prerequisite to reflective self-experience. Many philosophers have elaborated on the notion of pre-reflective self-awareness, one of which is Shaun Gallagher, who coined the term 'minimal self' to use the concept in an interdisciplinary context. Dan Zahavi subsequently adopted and refined the term, defining it as the 'first-personal givenness' of experience, where 'first-personal' should not be understood as anything self-referencing, but as the same unique perspective or subjectivity an individual encounters in their experiences over and over again and which is not accessible to others.

Zahavi, as many before him, has tried to explain how the minimal self, that is fundamental to all other self-experience, exactly relates to more complex forms of selfhood, such as the narrative and social self. Recently, with the growing literature in the cognitive sciences about the effects of interpersonal relations on the self, some philosophers saw the need to reconceptualize the minimal self, as defined by Zahavi, integrating the self-other relation not only in complex forms of selfhood, but already in the most basic sense of self. In this article I will survey three such attempts, all coming from a different perspective: Miriam Kyselo inspired by enactivism, Matthew Ratcliffe drawing on insights from relational psychology and Anna Ciaunica and Laura Crucianelli employing a framework from theoretical neuroscience.

Three contributions towards a social minimal self

Kyselo's 'minimal self' emerges from being-with others

Kyselo's article "The Minimal Self Needs a Social Update" is a critical review of Zahavi's book *Self and Other*. In this book, Zahavi formulates his main hypothesis that a differentiated subjective viewpoint is a prerequisite for intersubjective engagement. This has implications for how we understand interpersonal notions such as empathy, which for Zahavi does not consist of eliminating the difference between self-experience and other-experience, but is rather "a form of understanding others, which clearly respects the already existing minimal difference between

subjects, as distinct experiential selves” (p. 1060). Kyselo takes issue with Zahavi’s clear-cut view on the relation between the minimal self and the social self, that is, that the minimal self is primary to the social self. She describes Zahavi’s position as a “solipsistic or individualist approach to the self” and a rather mature viewpoint on the subject that risks “downplaying its developmental, processual, and open nature” (p. 1057).

Kyselo asserts that Zahavi’s individualistic approach is driven by an “implicit equation of the minimal self with the body” (p. 1061). Analyzing his example of Mick and Mack that stare at the same white wall but have different experiences, Kyselo notes that the assumed difference in those experiences, being the subjectivity or first-personal givenness, seems to come from us imagining Mick and Mack as bodily distinct. Therefore “the sense of mineness and for-me-ness seems to be grounded in the fact that I am a singular organismic being, physiologically distinct from other bodily beings” (p. 1061).¹ If the minimal self is equated with a distinct body, this means that the minimal self is already present in humans from birth on. It is, however, far from clear that the sense of individuating mineness holds for all human self-experience, including that of infants, argues Kyselo.

Endorsing enactivism, an interdisciplinary position influenced by both phenomenology and cognitive science, Kyselo proposes a socially derived account of the minimal self. The phenomenological accounts of for example Heidegger and Merleau-ponty argue for a derived differentiation of subjectivity, where the relationship between the minimal self, body, and others is turned on its head. Here, the experienced differentiation of the first-personal perspective is a developmental achievement, rather than a given. Even in adulthood, subjectivity is constituted not by the individuality of the body, but through being-in-the-world, a process that is mediated by the body interacting with its environment and other embodied beings. Subjectivity “emerges from our being-with others and is co-constituted in a joint organizational process through interpersonal relations” (p. 1062). Differentiation is thus a continuous organizational process whereby a sense of self, even in its most minimal sense, is not merely bodily, but social.

Ratcliffe’s ‘minimal self’ is part of an anticipatory structure that is influenced by others

In his article “Selfhood, Schizophrenia, and the Interpersonal Regulation of Experience”, Ratcliffe articulates his argument for why the minimal self, as defined by Zahavi, needs to be

¹ ‘Mineness’, ‘for-me-ness’, ‘first-personal givenness’ and ‘subjectivity’, all refer to the same phenomenon in Zahavi, which he calls the minimal self.

reconceptualized in interpersonal terms. Building on Husserl's account of the unfolding character of experience combined with phenomenological insights from psychopathology, he comes to the conclusion that “minimal selfhood, the coherence of world experience, and a sense of relating to the world are all aspects of a unitary phenomenological structure” (p. 152). The way the world appears to us, the perspective we see it from and the possibilities for action we feel, are all part of the same structure of experience, which is open to the influence of other people. Although Ratcliffe agrees with Zahavi that the ‘self’ refers to a range of different phenomena, and that they all need to be distinguished, he sees no ground for postulating an “even more minimal”, pre-social, self.

Ratcliffe's position is supported by two distinct arguments, which taken together form the foundation for his interpersonal minimal self. The first is that he grounds subjectivity in the ability to distinguish different modes of intentionality, which is part of the anticipation-fulfillment structure of experience, as discussed by Husserl. Known modes of intentionality are ‘perceiving’, ‘remembering’, and ‘imagining’. An ongoing anticipation of how experience is going to unfold, gives one the sense in which intentional state one is. If for example, a certain experiential content is surprising, one is not imagining or remembering, but perceiving. Ratcliffe's argument is as follows:

If one's experience did not respect the distinction between perceiving and remembering, one would lack a sense of temporal location. And if one could not distinguish imagining from perceiving, experienced boundaries between self and environment would break down, to the extent that one would lack any sense of spatial location. (...) Without some sense of spatiotemporal location, it is difficult to see how the experience of being a singular, coherent locus of experience could be sustained. (p. 151-152)

Since Zahavi defines the minimal self as subjectivity, and subjectivity is the sense of being one locus of experience (which requires a place in space and time), the minimal self must include a sense of in which intentional mode one is. Given that the modal structure of intentionality is part of the anticipation-fulfillment structure of experience, this means that the minimal self is part of this structure.

The second argument is based on the results from the field of relational psychology, which show that many psychological disturbances have a high correlation with trauma or childhood abuse. In individualistic approaches, such that of Zahavi, disturbances in the minimal self are taken as the cause that give rise to symptoms of schizophrenia, such as hearing voices. Such

an explanation, however, does not illuminate why interpersonal factors, such as childhood abuse, play a big role in the development of schizophrenia. Ratcliffe also connects this to Husserl's discussion of the anticipation-fulfillment structure of experience. The anticipatory structure of experience is highly malleable and influenced by other people. For example, talking with a friend about a problem could change your outlook and introduce new possibilities in your experience of the world. Even just the presence of certain people can change how you experience the moment. Ratcliffe suggests that interpersonally inflicted trauma could disrupt the anticipatory-fulfillment structure and break down one's ability to distinguish intentional modes and diminish one's sense of self, giving rise to anomalous experiences such as experiencing one's own thoughts as someone else's. Ratcliffe hopes to bring the individualistic and relational approaches together by redefining the minimal self in interpersonal terms, making the theoretical and empirical puzzle pieces fit together.

Ciaunica's and Crucianelli's 'minimal self' arises relationally through predictive processing

Anna Ciaunica and Laura Crucianelli mention Zahavi's minimal self in their article "Minimal Self-Awareness: from Within A Developmental Perspective", when taking the general idea of pre-reflective self-awareness as their explanandum. Coming from a theoretical neuroscience background, they use the influential predictive processing (PP) framework to find out how we perceive and represent ourselves at the most minimal, pre-reflective level. Their aim is to clarify what really lies at the primitive levels of pre-reflective self-awareness in young children specifically, because that "might be useful in examining how full-blown forms of reflective self-consciousness arises from more basic forms of self-awareness" (p. 210).

According to the PP framework, our brain is constantly integrating information across multiple sensory channels to build a cohesive representation of the environment and our body. The idea is that "regularities in prior experience are used to continuously predict incoming inputs, which are then in turn used to update predictions of future input" (p. 210). While navigating the constantly changing and complex environment, we tacitly experience a 'me', because the function of this predictive process is ultimately geared towards self-preservation. Predictive processing of incoming information generates a computational hierarchical model wherein the 'self' is a hypothesis, for which existence the system tries to maximize evidence by minimizing prediction error. Sensory prediction errors can be minimized by performing motor actions which have the effect of changing the incoming sensory data. This process is called active inference,

and is for self-preservation purposes geared towards actions that maintain and regulate the physiological needs and integrity of the organism. This last point, about active inference, is especially important in Ciaunica and Crucianelli argumentation.

A first critical remark Ciaunica and Crucianelli make about the current definition of the minimal self, is that defining it as pre-reflective self-awareness, contrasted with reflective self-awareness, “endorses an overly mentalistic perspective and might fail to capture the role of bodily self-consciousness (BSC) in constituting pre-reflective forms of self-consciousness” (p. 211). The notion of BSC originates from phenomenological works that emphasize the role of the body in shaping our experience. Ciaunica and Crucianelli connect the term with the neuroscientific term ‘body-ownership’ which refers to a perceptual status of one’s body, which makes bodily sensations seem unique to oneself.

The next point Ciaunica and Crucianelli then make is that there is increasing evidence that this bodily self awareness relies on the integration from both exteroceptive systems, sensory modalities that perceive the environment (e.g. vision, audition); and interoceptive senses, i.e. the afferent information arising from within the body (e.g. pain, temperature, itch). This means that the minimal self, als bodily self awareness arising from PP processing, is not only dependent on information coming from within, but also coming from outside of the body. Moreover, the current notion of interoception is now also tightly linked to homeo-stasis (p. 215-216). If BSC depends on interoception, and if interoception is linked to homeo-statis and to maintain homeostasis active inference is employed, this means that BSC is dependent on active inference.

Wrapping up their argument, Ciaunica and Crucianelli now turn to this dependency of BSC on active inference in infants specifically. They say that in “early infancy when the motor system is not yet developed, the functioning of several interoceptive modalities is wholly dependent on embodied interactions with other bodies”. Because infants can’t take self-preserving actions yet, their process of active inference involves organisms close to them. Thus, given that according to the PP framework our sense of self arises from the integration of information both from within the organism as its environment and given that in infancy the bodies of caretakers are part of this processing system regulating homeostasis, Ciaunica and Crucianelli come to a tentative but “radical” conclusion that “our sense of self or feelings of body ownership might emerge relationally” (p. 211).

Trends and gaps

Now that I have summarized the above positions we can clearly see the main trend formed by these three positions. All of them argue that the 'self' that adult human beings experience, even in the most minimal conceivable form, is a result of a developmental process that involves other human beings. Another trend is that all of them try to ground subjectivity. Zahavi, who approaches the topic from a purely phenomenological point of view, takes subjectivity as a given, it is simply observed as part of experience. He is not trying to explain why this is the case. In contrast, the above authors are combining phenomenological insights with scientific evidence. They try to answer how subjectivity arises and how it is constituted, and they come to slightly different answers.

Both Kyselo and Ciaunica with Crucianelli see the body-environment interaction process as the source of experience and subjectivity. This forms also their foundation for a social minimal self, as other beings participate in the body-environment interaction for survival and therefore necessarily take part in constituting subjectivity. There is no 'me' without others. Ratcliffe, on the other hand, grounds subjectivity in the ability to distinguish between intentional modes of experience. The modal structure of intentionality is part of the anticipation-fulfillment structure of experience which is not necessarily always dependent on others (it is open to influence by others, though). This difference leaves Ratcliffe with the possibility to allow for humans to be born with a minimal degree of subjectivity, before developing it into a socially constituted one in adulthood (p. 153).

Another interesting similarity is that Ratcliffe's anticipation-fulfillment structure is quite comparable to the neuroscientific PP framework, isomorphic even, according to himself.² Both try to account for the continuous unfolding of experience, which is structured by anticipation or prediction. The obvious difference is that the former is a phenomenological description and the later is an explanation of how this structure of anticipation is implemented (computationally, in the PP case). For both authors this anticipatory structure is formed by past experiences, and this is what gives it its open character, such that other people can influence it. Although Ratcliffe does strive towards some explanation, his account is still quite phenomenological and descriptive. For him the anticipatory and subjective character both belong to a unified structure of experience, whereas for Ciaunica and Crucianelli predictive processing is not a characteristic

² Ratcliffe, Matthew. 2017. *Real Hallucinations: Psychiatric Illness, Intentionality, and the Interpersonal World*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. Page: 189.

of experience, but a computational function that gives rise to experience and the self as an abstract representation.

As we have seen, the question of what subjectivity is grounded in, is not settled yet. Besides that, the above accounts of a social minimal self also raise other questions. For example, it is not clear if the positions of Kyselo, Ciaunica and Crucianelli possibly allow for anonymous experience. If the sense of self and subjectivity is developed over time, what kind of experience does an infant have that is just born, or a developing fetus? Is it less subjective? Is first-personal givenness a quality that can be built up over time? Is an organism's experience impersonal at the start, converging to a first-personal perspective as more interaction and processing takes place? If yes, then these claims of gradualness of subjectivity need to be accounted for and it might be useful to consider eliminating the minimal self as a concept, instead of reconceptualizing it, as the very definition of it is created from the phenomenological observation that subjectivity is always part of experience. However, if Kyselo, Ciaunica and Crucianelli do not allow for anonymous experience, then the question arises of how something, that is already given, can develop. In the case that it is not first-personal givenness that is developed, but another aspect or version of pre-reflective self-awareness, Zahavi might argue that what they account for is not the minimal self, but a different kind of self, after all.

Although Ratcliffe anticipates this problem and tries to solve it by proposing the possibility for different kinds of subjectivity and minimal selves, non-social in infants and social in adults, whereby the first develops into the second, the question arises if 'minimal self' should refer to both of them and if it is logically valid to maintain that they are the same structure of experience. Ratcliffe's argument that there is no reason to assume that the first kind stays present in adulthood like an underlying kernel (p. 154) actually works against his attempt to bring together the puzzle pieces of individualistic and relational approaches to psychopathology. Zahavi's non-social minimal self that is taken to be disturbed in schizophrenia as explanation of the symptoms, ceases to exist as soon as a child develops according to Ratcliffe's account. Only during the development of a social minimal self the possible trauma that a child undergoes implies a change in the anticipatory-fulfillment structure and minimal self, giving rise to psychopathology in adulthood. Thus the divide in individualistic and relational approaches remains. Exploring all these issues could be possible directions for further research.