Book Reviews

Dan Zahavi


In his recently published book *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* the Danish philosopher and phenomenologist Dan Zahavi synthesizes and develops theories about selfhood and intersubjectivity that he has been pursuing since the early 1990s. The book is particularly interesting for those who have been following Zahavi’s voluminous and important work for some time now and this, I think, for two main reasons.

The first reason has to do with the share impact that Zahavi’s attempts to bring classic phenomenology to work in better understanding subjectivity, and a number of related fundamental concepts, has had, not only in the field of phenomenology itself, but also in analytical philosophy of mind, cognitive science and other related fields. The “phenomenological proposal”, as Zahavi’s views and analyses are sometimes simply referred to outside the scholarly circles of phenomenology, has not only been widely read and received, it has also given rise to a lot of criticism and misunderstandings that he tries to respond to and sort out in the present book. To follow the way the author handles various attempts of either trying to show that the phenomenological proposal has misunderstood the basic questions and concepts at hand in analysing selfhood and intersubjectivity, or, that it really only amounts to spelling out very basic features that are obvious and unhelpful in understanding the true complexity of these phenomena, is very instructive and educating. One can learn a lot from the way this book presents and relates a vast number of different positions on selfhood and sociality and the way the scholars in question have responded to (or ought to have responded to) the phenomenological proposal.

The second reason why it is so interesting to read this particular book, having followed Zahavi’s publications for a while, is that it represents a more recent phase of his work with new themes and aims in view than one finds in *Self-Awareness and Alterity* from 1999 or *Subjectivity and Selfhood* from.
2005. Whereas the attempt to show that selfhood is basically a subjective form of experience—and not something put in place by way of reflection or narratives—remains in place, the way of handling questions of intersubjectivity in relation to the self has been expanded and set foot on new paths. Whereas the earlier account was more focused on showing how intersubjectivity is always pre-given in an embryonic form by way of situated experience, the focus is now more on the very presence of the other person in front of me. The two keywords for this analysis found in the subtitle are empathy and shame that are the topics of part two and three of the book.

Zahavi’s aim in the first part—keyword: subjectivity—is not simply to recapitulate the Husserlian analysis of selfhood—informed by many other classic phenomenologists, indeed—that we find in his earlier works, but to situate the idea of basic or minimal selfhood in relation to other accounts and, particularly, in relation to the criticism raised by proponents of these other accounts in response to the phenomenological proposal. It is really amazing and sometimes surprising to find out how many different and sometimes utterly strange concepts and theories of selfhood that surface in the literature. We have the no-selfers in their many different robes, naturalist no-selfers like Daniel Dennett or Thomas Metzinger claiming that the self is an illusion produced by the brain as a result of natural evolution, or Buddhist no-selfers trying to commit “selficide” by way of meditative practices. On the other end of the spectrum we have the hermeneutically inclined all-inclusive selfers, who claim the self to be the product of quite advanced forms of culturally mediated recognition and construction processes. The most well known version of this is the narrative selfhood view defended, for instance, by Maya Schechtman. In between these we have the more moderate, standard form of self-theories that claim the possession of selfhood to demand some form of reflective self-consciousness—like recognizing oneself in the mirror or using the pronoun I in contrast to you in a way that shows that one has understood the difference. As the author points out, the research on selfhood and intersubjectivity in philosophy, cognitive science, developmental psychology, psychiatry, etiology, sociology, anthropology, and so on, is immensely complex and also made confusing by way of the researchers not only using different concepts of self but also in many cases failing to give any form of definition of the version of selfhood they are employing in their texts.

The author shows convincingly, to my mind, that much of the criticism of his idea of a self-presentational character of experience fails to acknowledge that it is meant to point towards a basic, necessary constituent of all forms of selfhood that opens up to and will—at least in discussing human adult, healthy persons—incorporate more advanced forms of selfhood built on self