

---

NICOLA ZIPPEL

*Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"*

*[nicola.zippel@uniroma1.it](mailto:nicola.zippel@uniroma1.it)*

---

# CONSCIOUSNESS, EGO, ALTERITY: CROSSING OF NEUROSCIENCE AND PHENOMENOLOGY?

*abstract*

---

*The paper aims at comparing the recent findings of neurosciences with the phenomenological approach as regards the multifaceted relationship between self as consciousness and self as subjectivity. Phenomenology, thanks to the careful consideration of the issues concerning the constitution of mental life, offers a precious chance to set the scientific results in an authentically philosophical outlook.*

*keywords*

---

*Self-Identity; time consciousness; reflection; sociality*

---

As Gallagher and Zahavi explain in Chapter 3 of their analytic study, consciousness always involves the moment of self-consciousness, which has “to be understood as an *intrinsic* feature of the primary experience” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 53). This character of internality means that self-consciousness is given prior to the reflection upon it: for this reason, the authors rightly stress its *pre-reflective* mark. This givenness is worth investigating, considering that the fact that self-consciousness precedes any observation or inference one can address to it doesn’t entail that one is not able to be aware of it, but rather that one can be *immediately* aware of it. According to Goldman quoted in the text, it is “a non-reflective self-awareness” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 51).

Thus “pre-reflective” signifies a peculiar givenness of this inner feature of the primary experience, because “prior to reflection” doesn’t mean “prior to consciousness”, albeit the consciousness’ domain is implicitly referred to the reflective one, but it indicates an original possession of myself by myself, a possession that I *feel* before knowing it, just to reflect on it (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 49).

In one of his previous studies on these issues, Dan Zahavi has clearly stressed the relevance and the complexity of the relation between the pre-reflective level and the reflective one: since both share the dimension of consciousness as a location of their development, they improve a peculiar form of interdependency.

This in turn is not symmetric, because “the act of reflection is itself a prereflectively self-given act”, and for this reason it “must also already be prereflectively self-aware, since it is this that permits it to recognize the reflected act as belonging to the same subjectivity as *itself*” (Zahavi 1999, p. 56). The question of the reference of the reflecting act to its pre-reflective root is of basic importance from a phenomenological standpoint, because it deals not only with the essence of the method, but also with the status of Ego as performer of such a method. If one identifies the egological level *only* with the reflective one, it becomes hard to affirm that the pre-reflective sphere is *self-aware*: how is it possible to talk about a self, which is in turn not an I? But on the other hand, if one attributes the egological trait both to the reflective and to the pre-reflective consciousness’ grade, it is possible to question not only the legitimacy, but also the necessity of something like the phenomenological method: why should I carry on a reflection on myself, if I am self-aware already as *pre-reflecting*?

To exit from this antinomy, one has to come back to the fundamental distinction Gallagher and Zahavi make between *feeling* and *knowing*, where the latter only is linked to the authentically egological level of self-aware (the one of the method), while the former describes the *immediate* experience of self: "When I am aware of a current pain, perception, or thought, the experience in question is given immediately, non-inferentially, and non-criterially as *mine*"; it means that "I am usually able to respond immediately, i.e. without inference or observation, if somebody asks me what I have been doing, or thinking, or seeing, or feeling immediately prior to the question" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 54). The central mark of the pre-reflective self-awareness is thus its present occurring, which involves simultaneity of experiencing (perceiving, being in pain, thinking) and being aware of it.

If I cannot doubt a self as mine when I am *currently* experiencing something I am living *now*, because *I feel* prior to knowing that *I am* experiencing, what happens to past experiences? If to the question "are you in pain?", i.e. "are you as your-self in pain?", I am able to answer *immediately* "Yes, I am – as my-self", since I am simultaneously feeling in pain, can I show the same confidence to the answer "Are you – as your-self – the one *who was* in pain?"? In this case I am not feeling in pain, but I should remember to have been in pain, and so I should *know* that I as my-self I am the same who was before in pain and remembers it now, and that the pain was and is always *mine*. From where does this knowledge derive? Which is its legitimacy, considering that it lacks the grounding trait of immediacy? The question is linked to the last, which has elapsed between the experienced pain and the remembered one, and so such a question must find a solution related to its temporal mark.

The difficulty which remains, in any case, open is the following: where, i.e. in which point of self-consciousness, is there something like becoming Ego? In order to try to point out a possible answer to such an intricate matter, one can joint the phenomenological standpoint on this fundamental issue to some recent neuroscientist approaches, relying upon the fruitful interconnection between both accounts.

Antonio Damasio, among others, has stressed this constantly developing state of self, which roots in her temporal constitution: "What is happening to us *now* is, in fact, happening to a concept of self based on the past, including the past that was current only a moment ago. *At each moment* the state of self is constructed, from the ground up" (Damasio 2005, p. 240, second emphasis mine). This construction is not isolated from its experience context rather it is based upon precisely this context, which constitutes its living environment. According to Damasio, this environment consists of two different and reciprocal sets, the object and the organism which responds to the object, both producing specific images; the self as subject refers to these two sides of

the same living experience, but it doesn't identify with nor reduce to that or the other, since "subjectivity emerges during the latter step when the brain is producing not just images of an object, not just images of organism responses to the object, but a third kind of image, that of an organism in the act of perceiving and responding to an object" (Damasio 2005, pp. 242-243). Thus subjectivity arises in the meeting point between object and experience of the object, and this point corresponding to the encounter of consciousness with something else means the authentic appearance of Ego; phenomenologically speaking, "we also focus on the *subjective* side of consciousness, thereby becoming aware of our subjective accomplishments and of the intentionality that is at play. If we want to understand how physical objects, mathematical models, chemical processes, social relations, or cultural artefacts can appear as they do, with the meaning they have, then we need to examine the experiencing subject to whom they appear" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 25). The temporal trait, which animates this subjective coming out, constitutes for Damasio a sort of autobiography, "a combination of memories of the past and of the planned future" (Damasio 2005, p. 239)<sup>1</sup>, and links up with the *bodily* side of experience, which represents the "basic", i.e. "grounding" reference of self. Upon this basis the self is able to recollect her history which is developed until that moment, and this recollection takes place mainly as a nonverbal though narrative way, which uses "the elementary representational tools of the sensory and motor systems in space and time" (Damasio 2005, p. 243). Despite his stated disagreement with Gerald Edelman's point of view due to the greater emphasis put on the primary consciousness, Damasio acknowledges, recalling the assertions by Edelman himself and Giulio Tononi<sup>2</sup>, that the "language may not be the source of the self, but it certainly is the source of the 'I'" (Damasio 2005, p. 243. See also Chomsky 1980, pp. 185-216). As a linguistic being, the Ego is ready to *communicate* her personal states, which means that the passage from the pre-reflection to self-consciousness

<sup>1</sup>This autobiographical trait contributing to the formation of self-identity is emphasized, among others, by Daniel Schacter, who points out the fact that "Psychologists have come to recognize that the complex mixtures of personal knowledge that we retain about the past are woven together to form life stories and personal myths. These are the biographies of self that provide narrative continuity between past and future – a set of memories that form the core of personal identity. [...] [That fact] underlies our trust in autobiographical memory as a basis for self-understanding" (Schacter 1996, pp. 93 and 101). See also Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), in particular pp. 200-202.

<sup>2</sup>"With the emergence of a higher-order consciousness through language, there is a consciously explicit coupling of feelings and values, yielding emotions with cognitive components that are experienced by a *person - a self*" (Edelman and Tononi 2000, pp. 204 and 205, emphases mine).

as I-consciousness is characterized by the openness to an alterity and therefore by the becoming a social consciousness. Husserl himself has clearly expressed the gradual transition from a pure egological sphere to a complete intersubjective world, via body (see Husserl 1989, pp. 103-230; Husserl 1999, p. 108 ff.). This involves the impossibility to conceive an isolated subject, a subject without relation with other subjects, but it involves nevertheless the necessity to start from a *first*-person account of mental life, in order not to fall in a solipsistic circle, but rather to enable talking *also* about subjects *other* than me: “When Husserl realized this, he abandoned his nonegological theory. Every conscious experience, even an anonymous one, belongs to a subject, i.e., either to me or to somebody else. It cannot belong to nobody” (Zahavi 1999, p. 143). As he asserts this research perspective, reaffirmed in his recent work (see Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, pp. 40-41), Zahavi also recalls the same position expressed by Eduard Marbach in his analytical comment to the problem of I in Husserl (Marbach 1974)<sup>3</sup>.

To consider the environment which determines the process of experience of an I-consciousness implies going forward to talk about the *social* context where this experience is always communicated, tested, discussed, objected or acknowledged. The public characteristic of the subjective cognition as inborn part of the growth of consciousness is not something that occurs from the outside, but is an *intrinsic* feature of the phenomenon of becoming Ego<sup>4</sup>, i.e. of becoming a person. As such, this improvement starts from the beginning of one’s mental life, namely from the birth of individual consciousness (see Merleau-Ponty 1962). For this reason, the discourse about self-consciousness both in its pre-reflective and reflective levels involves always a speech about the others, with regard to the *first* steps of subjective growth: “While we cannot say when the ‘true subject’ starts, we can be sure that, from the birth, the baby is constructing his or her own ‘scenes’ via primary consciousness and that these scenes rapidly begin to be accompanied by the refurbishment of concepts through gesture, speech, and language. From the earliest times, the thought that accompanies language and that flowers with its development is likely to be metaphorical and narrative. [...] According to this picture, internalism and externalism are too extreme – components of both

<sup>3</sup> With regard to this egological trait of inquiry, Eduard Marbach develops a very valuable point of view, which is able to treasure the findings of neuroscience within a phenomenological perspective (Marbach 1993, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> “Self-alterity provides a fine tool to understand better that there is no exclusive alternative between ego and non-ego. The truth lies in a middle path, which can be called a self-altered ego. In that respect, ‘alterology’, being the science of such a self-altered subjectivity, constitutes an *inner* alternative to egology” (Depraz and Cosmelli 2003, p. 180, emphasis mine).

play major roles in subjective development” (Edelman and Tononi 2000, p. 198). It is possible to find an analogous consideration of social connection of individual consciousness as well as in some recent phenomenological analyses, which following the Husserlian investigations (Husserl 1970, pp. 178-186; Husserl 1973; Husserl 2006, pp. 79-86) assert the relevance of the intersubjective aspect of I-experience, and they root this aspect in the egological mind with mention also of studies regarding the children’s representational achievements (Kern and Marbach 2001) and their corporal way – emotional, sensorimotor, out or prior to any belief – to refer outwards (Gallagher 1996; Gallagher and Varela 2003, pp. 105-106; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, pp. 187-191; Zahavi 1999, pp. 174-180).

The natural tendency of the individual level to transcend itself towards another already from the beginning of existence, like the reference to the infantile level of relationship to something else demonstrates, enables the progressive formation of the social dimension of life. This is primordially embedded in the *bodily* feature of the Ego, since “to exist embodied is to exist in such a way that one exists under the gaze of the other [...]. Bodily behaviour, expression, and action are essential to [...] some basic forms of consciousness” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 148). This means that the recognition of him/herself both as a conscious and self-conscious individual I finds in the social, public side of this cognition not only its counterpart or confirmation<sup>5</sup>, but rather the original location of self-manifestation as embodied subject, and so an experiential domain to describe and deal with in order to gain a more *complete* phenomenological account of the mind. Phenomenology, thanks to the analytical consideration of the issues regarding the constitution of mental life, which it describes with a specific focus on the interconnection between Ego and consciousness, offers a precious chance to set the scientific findings in a truly philosophical outlook.

---

<sup>5</sup> Such a confirmation is depicted in a very compelling manner by the following James’s statements: “No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when he spoke, or minded what he did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead’, and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all” (James 1950, pp. 293-294).

**THE AUTHOR**

Nicola Zippel, Ph. D., teaches as a scientific assistant at the Department of Philosophy of Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza". Among his publications: the monograph *Tempo e metodo. Il problema del soggetto nella fenomenologia di Edmund Husserl* (2007); articles: *Die phänomenologische Reduktion und ihre zeitlichen Bedingungen* ("Phänomenologische Forschungen", 2008); *The Way to the Subject between Phenomenology and Psychology* ("Philosophy Today", 2010, SPEP Supplement); translations: E. Husserl, *Introduzione all'etica* (2009); E. Fink, *Studi di fenomenologia 1930-1939* (2010, translation and editing).

**REFERENCES**

- Chomsky, N. (1980), *Rules and Representations*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Damasio, A. (2005), *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Penguin Books, New York.
- Depraz, N., Cosmelli, D. (2003), *Empathy and Openness: Practices of Intersubjectivity at the Core of the Science of Consciousness*, in Thompson Evan (Ed.), *The Problem of Consciousness. New Essays in Phenomenological and Philosophy of Mind*, University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, pp. 163-203.
- Edelman, G., Tononi, G. (2000), *A Universe of Consciousness. How Matter Becomes Imagination*, Basic Books, New York.
- Gallagher, S. (1996), *The Moral Significance of Primitive Self-Consciousness*, "Ethics", 107/1, pp. 129-140.
- Gallagher, S., Varela, J.F. (2003), *Redrawing the Map and Resetting the Time: Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, in Thompson, Evan (Ed.), *The Problem of Consciousness. New Essays in Phenomenological and Philosophy of Mind*, University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, pp. 93-132.
- Gallagher, S., Zahavi, D. (2008), *The Phenomenological Mind. An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, Routledge, London & New York.
- Husserl, E. (1970), *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. by D. Carr, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.
- Husserl, E. (1973), *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Husserliana XIII-XV, ed. by I. Kern, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague.
- Husserl, E. (1989), *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book, Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. by R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- Husserl, E. (1999), *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by D. Cairns, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- Husserl, E. (2006), *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology. From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910-1911*, trans. by I. Farin and J. Hart, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.

- James, W. (1950), *The Principles of Psychology I-II*, Dover, New York.
- Kern, I., Marbach, E. (2001), *Understanding the Representational Mind: A Prerequisite for Intersubjectivity Proper*, "Journal of Consciousness Studies", 8 (5-7), pp. 69-82.
- Marbach, E. (1974), *Das Problem des Ich in der Phänomenologie Husserls*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague.
- Marbach, E. (1993), *Mental Representation and Consciousness. Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Representation and Reference*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- Marbach, E. (2006), *Wie sich Bewusstsein mit Hilfe der Husserlschen Phänomenologie in die (Neuro-) Wissenschaft einbeziehen lässt*, in Lohmar, Dieter – Fonfara, Dirk (Eds.), *Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven der Phänomenologie*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 203-234.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by C. Smith, Routledge and Kegan Press, London.
- Schacter, D. (1996), *Searching for Memory. The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, Basic Books, New York.
- Zahavi, D. (1999), *Self-Awareness and Alterity. A Phenomenological Investigation*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.