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**The Experiential Self Re-Creates Itself in Others via the Enlargement of
the Self's Space-Control Ability:
Dan Zahavi's Arguments for the Existence of the Self**

Abstract

The diversity and complexity of the arguments and criticisms among philosophers on the question of the actual existence of the self can be condensed into two contrasting issues: The self is an experienced phenomenon that is generalized into a concept to assign to the cognitive subject as a tool for identification, or the self has its own existence as a transcendental entity that is activated and developed through interactions between the cognitive subject and the environment. Dan Zahavi summed up the endless controversy over the formation of the self in phenomenology, existentialism, and new insights in neuroscience to conclude that the existence of the self is only meaningful when it is "the experiential self." My article will focus on two issues: firstly, the self is formed by the interaction between the subject and the object in which the object is actively engaged in the control space of the subject; secondly, the understanding of the subject's self-perception process, through the perspective of neuroscience, is triggered by the subject seeing itself in the other person.

Keywords Dan Zahavi, the experiential self, behavior psychology, mirror neuron

Possession of things is the beginning of the process of the self's formation

There is nothing else like "the self." If there is something similar, it is just an "ontologically independent entity." In his book *Self & Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, Dan Zahavi started his argument on the real existence of the notion of the self by using the anti-realism ideals of Thomas Metzinger and Miri Albahari.

Through use of neuroscience findings, Metzinger denies the existence of the self as "a really existing entity." He stresses that the notion and content of the self are our internal self-experiences that have been created and produced by our "multitude of interrelated cognitive modules in the brain" (Zahavi, 2014, 3).

Albahari continues this trend by emphasizing the distinctions between phenomenology and metaphysics as well as between experience and reality, in which she notes that our sense of self has been formed by our feelings, thoughts, and sensations of existence in reality only.

Utilizing Buddhist concepts, she suggests that our sense of self lacks realistic elements that can exist as an entity but merely as a non-real abstract concept. Zahavi repeats her analysis in order to question the real existence of the notion of the self:

One of the interesting aspects of Albahari's proposal is that whereas many advocates of a no-self doctrine have denied that consciousness is characterized by unity, unbrokenness, and invariability, and have taken the denial of these features to amount to a denial of the reality of the self, Albahari considers all three to be real features of consciousness, but she nevertheless considers the self to be illusory (Zahavi, 2014, 42).

In other words, these two scholars have drawn a clear line between the self as a product of human brain activity and the self as just the manner the subject uses to access the structure of facts. That is, we cannot refer to the independent entity of the self as an experienced event. However, this interpretation holds an intrinsic contradiction within itself. In assuming that the self is only a product of mental activity, constituted by interactions within thoughts, feelings, and sensations, both Metzinger and Albahari ignored the fact that human feelings, sensations, and thoughts cannot exist independently of external interaction with events or objects. There is no such thing as pure feeling or thought. It is always the feeling of *what*, the thought of *something*. We are addressing the subject's ability to evaluate, judge, and deduce during its interaction with the environment. In other words, the self is not only the product of that interaction but also a form of the cognitive subject in the projection of things.

Zahavi disagrees with both the abovementioned scholars. He mentions that their understandings seem to imply that the concept of the self is merely the domain of interpretation of philosophers. They have ignored the fact that the concept of the self is a topic of concern and interpretation not only in "cognitive science, development psychology, sociology" but also in "neuropsychology, and psychiatry" (Zahavi 2014, 4).

To solidify his argument, Dan Zahavi used interpretations of scholars like Gibson and Ulric Neisser's research on psychology to prove that the cognitive subject is not an entity that passively receives the reflection of reality but rather a dynamic one that actively explores the environment. Moreover, it is the sense of the self that, when actively involved in interactions with the diversity of things and environment, helps the cognitive subject recognize themselves in the relationship "between perceiver and environment." All human perceptions are the "co-perception of self and environment" (Zahavi, 2014, 4). Neisser's studies indicated that as soon as a baby is one month old, it is able to distinguish between objects within the range of reach and those that are out of reach. This means the infant possesses the capacity to determine what belongs to it and what is outside its scope. By distinguishing five different concepts of the self – "ecological self, interpersonal self, conceptual self, temporally extended self, and private self" – Neisser concludes that it is an individual experiencing his/herself to determine his or

her own space and peripheral space, the self has potential materials of the "basic form of self-experience" (Zahavi, 2014, 4) to shape judgment and motivate behavior.

We can explore this statement in more detail by returning to Jean Piaget's child psychology experiments. In these experiments, for example, when an object (such as a watch) was hidden under two different cushions, the baby, Jacqueline, raised the right cushion to find the watch and ignored the other cushion. She only focused on the object that she wanted to find. In another experiment, a baby named Laurent was able to manage both visual and invisible space when he ignored all of the options that were shown by the experimenter (a shoe, a toy, a ribbon) to find the right object that he was searching for from the beginning (a little box). This means that a baby's eyes will search for the object, pointing fingers toward the space where the child's eye cannot reach or see and finding the thing that it wants to have (Piaget, 1954, 66-78). These experiments demonstrated that a child from 14 to 20 months old has already formed a capacity for judgment on the absentee status. Tran Duc Thao argued this by suggesting the existence of a complex consisting of all positions (the whole unseen situation) in which the child is able to manage the space around itself and the objects (Tran Duc Thao, 1984, 48-60). These interactive actions have created the contact and connection between the subject and the object to which it is directed. Moreover, by managing the space around itself and the unseen situations, the subject can form its representation of the object. The next step in this interaction is the subject's ability to extend its own space beyond the arm and eye range to assign its control to the object and simultaneously enclose the object into its own space.

It should be noted that the formation of the subject's representation of the object here should not be construed as the establishment of a stable and constant reference system with which to determine the object. To paraphrase Kai Nielsen, we cannot separate any representations of specific objects and practices. The human language used to access the object cannot stand outside the relationship that the language refers to (Shook, John R. & Margolis, 2009, 131). This interpretation negates Metzinger and Albahari's stance of the concept of the self as unrealistic.

In the early stage of the self's formation, as seen in Piaget's experiment, a child applies its own representation to the object it seeks. At that point, the object no longer exists as a peripheral entity (i.e., outside the subject) but becomes the subject itself. In other words, it becomes part of the subject's space of management. The self, at the beginning of its formation, does not exist as "a pure self" separated from interaction but must be understood as the enlargement of itself in the object and the possession of the object into the self's space.

The beginning of the possibility of the existence of the self originates from the interaction between the subject and object. The self cannot be understood as an independent thing but is formed by the subject experiencing itself, and by which aware itself like the way Dan

Zahavi asserts that the self can only be the experiential-self, the self-consciousness. It should be noted that the experience cannot be interpreted as a process originating from the subject's private purpose and intention. The subject is not able to experience itself but is only able to experience something in something else. Even the process of self-consciousness is the result of self-liberation as a means through which the subject recognizes themselves as an object that they aim to achieve. The self as self-awareness starts with the subject realizing it as the subject, that is, it is different from the object. Then the subject approaches the object as part of the subject's managed space. The third step is to understand that the subject assigns its representativeness to the object and sees itself in the object. Finally, the subject separates itself from itself in order to see itself as an object to perceive. Thus, "selves are not born, but arise in a process of social experience and interchange" (Zahavi, 2014, 11). Zahavi reaffirms this point when he discusses the views of French and German philosophers such as Benveniste, Foucault, and Sartre. He utilizes their arguments to confirm that "subjectivity, rather than being a given, something innate and fundamental, is a cultural and linguistic construction" (Zahavi, 2014, 10) and to argue for the intention and purpose of the self as a concept that implies a possible object (one is always subject to, or the subject of, something). Arguments he used included that of Foucault, who conceived the idea of "the subject who is constituted as subject—who is 'subjected'—is he who obeys" (Zahavi, 2014, 10) and Sartre's account that "an experience does not simply exist, it exists in such a way that it is implicitly self-given, or, as Sartre puts it, it is 'for itself' (...) that is, self-consciousness" (Zahavi, 2014, 11).

However, this direction by Zahavi has a problem that Kym Maclaren pointed out in her 2008 study. That is, when Zahavi and other psychologists attempt to prove the possibility of the self in the interaction and exchanging of itself with the object, they default to the existence of the "subject" as the starting point of the self-consciousness process. There is the default existence of "I" and "mine" as the subject of cognition as well as the object outside of "I" and "mine." Although the process of forming the self comes from the interaction with the object through which the subject realizes itself, there is no process of accessing the object without the concept of "I" and "mine" as the origin point of the awareness. Zahavi and the phenomenologists and existentialists quoted by him all assert the embodied self by acknowledging the intention and purpose of the experience. However, this leads to another question: If we assert that the experience must be an experience of something, then should we be skeptical about "who is the subject of that experience?" Kym Maclaren argues that if the formation of the self begins to experience the difference between the subject and the object, then the experience must be presumably available when the subject approaches the object as something that does not belong to the scope of the subject's eyes and arms. In other words, the subject must possess a prior ability to distinguish itself from the other, i.e. a perception of themselves as a self.

**The ability to see oneself in others as a premise
for the self-consciousness process**

In her study, Maclaren points out that Zahavi, Neisser, Butterworth, and Stern have acknowledged that the infant was very early in its ability to see itself as an embodied entity that is different from others, the ability of self-perception that "I" is approaching and interacting with the object and that the object *is not me* or *does not belong to me*.

Infants possess, much earlier, an ability to distinguish themselves *perceptually, as embodied subjects*, from other objects and people (...) she may be able to distinguish unreflectively, in her perceptual engagement with the world, between 'my' and the other's actions, 'my' embodied being and the other's, and 'myself' and that thing (Maclaren, 2008, 66).

Thus, recognizing the "very nature of perception" as "a lived sense of distinction" (Maclaren, 2008, 66) of the subject as a premise for the experience process is imperative in order to access the interaction between subject and object. In other words, there is no process of experiencing if the subject does not recognize the distinction between itself and others.

Maclaren explains this trend by analyzing the psychological studies of Gibson and Butterworth on the movement of subject vision and the "moving room" case study (Maclaren, 2008, 66). Whether accidentally or deliberately, the vision of the world from the subject's eyes will change depending on whether the moving head of the subject is the starting point for this interpretation. As we turn our heads, the image of the world moves in the direction of the rotation of the head, i.e. the image of the world the subject receives is not fixed but instead depends on how the subject looks at it. At the same time, the subject's body does not move, and if we look down the tip of our nose at any time, it does not move. Put yourself in the shoes of a child who is beginning to become capable of managing things in the space it is trying to access, which is a primitive understanding of the distinction between the viewer and the viewed world. Maclaren contends that Zahavi used this view to point out how a child perceives the difference between its body and the world around it. This is the crux of the theory of the self-experience as the self-consciousness. It begins with the premise that an individual recognizes themselves as *a self* rather than *a thing*. The acceptance of the interaction of the environment in oneself must emanate the clear distinction that *I* am looking at the world, and the world is coming to *me*: "Primary body-awareness is not a type of object-consciousness, is not a perception of the body as an object at all..., but on the contrary a genuine form of self-experience" (Zahavi 2004, 58, quoted by Maclaren, 2008, 67)

This view, according to Maclaren's argument, is the continuation of traditional phenomenological perspectives that assert the subjectivity of the experience process and that the self-consciousness cannot be seen as an object. In the study by Butterworth and Neisser on the "moving room," the psychologists also pointed out that when a child is placed in a room with

a movable wall, it will move forward if the wall recedes or fall backward if the wall approaches it. That means that the child, in addition to being able to manage the surrounding space, can also use the information that the world brings to it to promote action as an active subject: "the infant as agent 'make use of this information to control her actions" (Maclaren 2008, 68). Thus, the sense of self is formed when the subject, using "an internal motor schema or 'motor plan'" (Stern, 1985, quoted by Maclaren, 2008, 68) perceives themselves as a self and recognizes themselves as an active subject who can manage space and promote action with their will.

Zahavi and the above psychologists acknowledge that the consciousness of the self as a unique entity is the most important premise in forming the distinction between the subject and the object through which the self experiences the interaction between its body and the environment. That is, the perspective of the "first person" as *I* and *mine* is already present in a complex set of possibilities that a baby has since birth, and the interaction with the object, as well as the possibility of space management, does not stem from social conditions and the will of others.

Maclaren contends that the perception of an object as a person is entirely different the observation of an object as an inanimate object. The innate ability of a child to observe objects could play a role in shaping a clear perception of the difference between subject and object, but this is not enough to form an awareness of the self. The child can catch things and manage space around it proactively, but this is not an expression of self-awareness as a self. When a child receives feedback from others, such as when a baby is pointing and demanding a toy, another person catches and gives it to the baby. Then and only then, when it receives this *acknowledgment* and *re-engagement* from others, can the infant realize the possible existence of itself as a living entity. That means, through Maclaren's theory, that "selfhood is socially conditioned rather than given with consciousness" (Maclaren 2008, 63). We can move backward in time to find a point of view that supports this analysis. Mark Johnson (1993), in his book *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, pointed out that the self cannot be identified by purely biological mechanisms and physical interactions but by the participation of the subject in the process of interacting with others in social contexts and historical situations. "The self is defined (...) by its ends, its interpersonal relationship, its cultural traditions, its institutional commitments, and its historical context. Within this evolving context it must work out its identity" (Johnson 1993, 150). The identification of the self and the definition of its action privately begins with a complex of subjective perception and imagination when perceiving an object. It only plays an initial role in forming the self, but it is not the self. We must understand the self as a process of experiencing itself from moment to moment, from situation to situation, in a social and moral relationship in which the subject recognizes the temporary nature of his or her characteristics.

How do we understand the conflict that Zahavi is facing? Is there another explanation for Maclaren's critique of Zahavi? Is there a possible explanation of the cognitive ability of the self that has been formed as soon as a baby is born?

Zahavi seemed to have realized that he must utilize scientific explanations rather than purely philosophical inquiries into the notion of the self. Nowadays, neuroscience is a competent research area that provides us with a necessary foundation for self-awareness and self-image. David Precht pointed out in his research that, as early as the 1920s, scientists like Emile Devaux and Louis Bolk discovered the mechanism of brain development. The human brain continues to grow after birth at the same rate it does in the womb. Eventually, it reaches a size that surpasses the brains of other primates, especially in the cerebral cortex areas of spatial orientation, musical sensibility, and concentration capability (Precht 2011, 10-18). Precht also observed that Cajal's research results gave us an insight into the fantastic properties of brain cells, which are completely different than other body cells. It is noteworthy that the nerve cells can feel, act, hope, and desire (Precht 2011, 18-26).

Using new discoveries in neuroscience, Zahavi presented his views on how the self is formed through interaction with others. How can one survive in a living space – not just the subject and the object but also the many others that the subject must interact with? The subject is not only required to be capable of understanding, recognizing, and responding to the actions of others but also must possess the capacity to explain and predict the behavior of others. Gallese points out that we can understand other persons as intentional objects not only by tracing origin from linguistic interactions or states of mental activity but also from the most essential element of the self: the "mirror neurons."

Rizzolatti, Gallese, and Forgas discovered that a group of neurons in the premotor cortex of the macaque monkey fired not only when the monkey performed a certain action (...) but also when it observed other individuals, be it other monkeys or humans, performing the same goal-directed action. (Zahavi 2014, 154)

The discoveries of Gallese in 1996 and the accidental discoveries when studying the activity of the F5 brain region (the premotor cortex) of Rizzolatti in 1992. In 1992, by chance, scientist Giacomo Rizzolatti of the University of Parma in Italy found that cells in the F5 area in the cortex of the monkey were very specific: these cells activate, go into action (this brain cells glow red, indicating that they are active) not only when the monkey performs a deliberate task - such as opening a door - but also act when the monkey see its friend doing the same movement (in this example is opening a door). That is, there is a "similarity" between the brain of the practiced monkey and the observed one. Rizzolatti published the results in 1996 in the journal *Cognition Brain Research*. This discovery proved that when the subject observes an action, the reflection mechanism in this group of neurons is triggered as a form of action simulation, i.e., the actions observed by the subject are not only reflected in the observ-

er's subjective image but also trigger the corresponding brain regions to simulate the observed activity. In neurosurgery, by using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), both Allan Siegel and Hreday Sapru proved in their book *Essential Neuroscience* that the response in the premotor cortex is more complex than in the primary motor cortex. This brain region can even provide the control and management the muscles by predicting the information that it received from the F4 region (the primary motor cortex): "This region of cortex controls the distal musculature by virtue of its projections upon primary neurons of area 4," and lesions in this brain region (SMA – Supplementary Area Cortex, and PMC – Premotor Area Cortex) will make a person lose the ability to control of the targeted behavior (Siegel, Allan & Sapru 2011, 332).

It is not just a simulation ability of the other's actions, the mirror neurons can also help the subject perceives the object as an intentional entity, which is the ability to predict behavior. The subject can understand another person's behavior because the subject is capable of practicing that behavior, and the subject can explain and predict that behavior because the subject is capable of explaining themselves when they perform the act.

The motor schema of the observer has to be involved. That is, the observer must rely in his or her own internal motor knowledge (provided by the mirror neurons) in order to translate the observed movement. (Zahavi 2014, 154)

This means that if the actions cannot be simulated or explained by the observer's internal motor schema, the purpose and intentionality of action cannot be understood and accepted by the subject. This simulation and interpretation mechanism is not limited to the observation of visually physical actions but extends to a larger dimension of human relations, including the sensation of emotion.

When the subject observes an action that contains emotion, the effect reaches the subject and activates the corresponding brain regions to cause both a simulation and similar emotion in them. Why does this mechanism appear? Emotions conveyed through specific behavior are a complex set of reflections that the subject cannot experience through simple senses. We cannot see pain or smell insults, but why can we perceive those feelings in others? Here, we are referring to a system of perceptions in the brain that functions corresponding to each of the behaviors it receives. This perception comes from the understanding and explaining of the behavior of others. When the subject explains and simulates the behavior of others, they unconsciously and automatically recognize the similarity between themselves and others. In other words, the other person does not exist as an object that is independent of the subject but as an object assigned to the representative of the subject.

By combining neurosurgery's findings with the philosophical arguments on cognitive process, we recognize that this simulation ability of behavior is not just a mental response but a form of self-consciousness like the explanation of the Theory of Mind (ToM, neural basis)

of Rebecca Saxe in 2009: "an observer might understand someone else's action using the same cognitive and neural mechanisms that she uses to plan her own. The idea is sometimes called the 'motor theory of social cognition'" (Banks 2009, 408). We have an image of the object attached to the image of the subjectivity in the subject, which constitutes the object-consciousness as the subjective experience of the subject. Humans see themselves first in others, as in a mirror. "I" can understand "you" behavior because "I" can simulate it. "You" are my image outside of "me", so "you" are representative of "me". Therefore, the effects that make up the emotion in "you" can be understood and felt by "me." An account initially expressed by Marx in which "Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo" (Marx, 1887, 55, note 19) was further explained by neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni "Mirror neurons suggest that we pretend to be in another person's mental shoes (...) In fact, with mirror neurons we do not have to pretend, we practically are in another person's mind" (Ker Than, 2005) and Zahavi's account on the ability of the subject to establish a bridge between experiencing action and feeling a sense of action (Zahavi, 2014, 155).

When we receive information from others, the intrinsic representation, which we use to assign to others, is awakened by functional brain areas expressing emotions corresponding to the emotions that we recognize could arise in others: "Observing others experience disgust activates regions involved in the subjective feeling of disgust" (Zahavi, 2014, 155). This means that although "I" cannot see the feeling of disgust in "you", "I" have the ability to associate the disgusting act, which "you" are suffering, with my feelings about that act because that is the feeling that "I" would feel if "I" were treated like "you" are now. Gallese asserted that our availability of "an internal motor knowledge (provided by the mirror neurons)" provides the ability to perceive others as our reflection and that we are also a reflection of others' emotions. This mechanism, from the very beginning, allows us to directly experience the understanding of other people automatically, without inference and without depending on any cognitive method, concept system, or rational thinking process.

Thus, if we assume that the subject can perceive itself as a self, we should recognize the possibilities for forming the self exist in the human brain structure as soon as it is created. Interaction with the environment (i.e. inanimate objects and other people) will activate the features available in the human brain. The awareness of the self has congenital conditions, and it is characterized by social interaction.

It is obvious the arguments of neuroscience above do not deny the skepticism of Maclaren for Dan Zahavi. As long as we assume that an individual already has a default of him/herself as a self which different from the things outside, then her question is remain. Neuroscientific discoveries that demonstrate the function of the mirror neurons do not negate

the interaction between the subject and others to form the self, i.e., the interaction between human with each other rather than the observing the things only. However, the explanations for the function of simulating and predicting the behavior and emotion of the mirror neurons, especially the automatic and unconsciousness of this function, have demonstrated the understanding of the self's formation which already has biological materials since the baby was born. These biological materials, on their own, cannot form the self-awareness of a person as a self if there is no interaction with others.

Conclusion

What we recognize here is that the self is not the self-awareness of the subject itself. Psychological, neurological, and philosophical analyses show that existence of the subject as an entity is only relative, i.e. the identification of the subject and subjectivity is only valid in the frame of reference with the object and space around the subject. The self does not originate from the subject's inner contemplation of itself. The self, with its innate conditions, is activated and formed from the beginning by the subject realizing the difference between it and the object. The recognition of this difference goes hand in hand with the process of extending the reach of the subject out of its scope and entering itself into the object. In other words, the subject realizes the difference between it and the object and finds itself as an image in the other.

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