



Philosophical  
interviews

## Husserl, self and others: an interview with Dan Zahavi<sup>47</sup>



Picture source: Dan Zahavi's archives.

### How did you originally get interested in philosophy?

I met philosophy early. I read much as a child, and occasionally came across references to philosophy. I didn't understand what it meant, but I was curious, and when I was 12 years old, I asked my mother to buy me a copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy: the Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers*. I can't claim to have understood much at that age, but Durant's account of Plato was still so inspiring that I there and then decided that I wanted to study philosophy. And that was basically a decision I stuck to, and which I have never regretted. It made me opt for modern languages in the gymnasium, since I wanted to learn German so that I could read Kant and study in Germany. Right after the gymnasium, I enrolled as a philosophy student at the University of Copenhagen. Initially I was mostly interested in the history of philosophy (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Kant), but

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eventually I got interested in Husserl, which I back then took to be an interesting synthesis of Aristotle and Kant. So I decided to write my MA thesis on him, and it was on this occasion that I finally realized my plans about studying abroad. I went to Wuppertal in Germany to study with the renowned Husserl-scholar Klaus Held. Held had been the assistant of Landgrebe, who himself had been one of Husserl's assistants. In the spring of 1991, I handed in my MA thesis which was entitled *Intentionalität und Konstitution*. It also became my first book (Zahavi 1992).

By then I had decided that I wanted to write a PhD. I was lucky enough to obtain scholarship and went to the Husserl Archives at the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* in order to work with Rudolf Bernet as my doctoral supervisor. In 1994, I successfully defended my thesis *Husserl und die transzendente Intersubjektivität*, which later was also published as a book (Zahavi 1996). By then, if not sooner, I was already set on an academic path with phenomenology as main area of focus. After some years as post.doc and assistant professor in Paris and Copenhagen, and after having written and defended my habilitation *Self-awareness and alterity* (Zahavi 1999), I submitted an application to the *Danish National Research Foundation* together with two colleagues, Arne Grøn and Josef Parnas. The application was successful and in 2002 allowed me to establish the *Center for Subjectivity Research*, which I have directed ever since. In 2006, I obtained a permanent position as professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen. Whereas my own background is strictly in philosophy, and whereas I initially worked alone, and only with philosophy, after the establishment of the *Center for Subjectivity Research* I increasingly started to collaborate with other people, including empirical researchers such as the psychiatrist Josef Parnas, the clinical psychologist Louis Sass, the developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat and the neuroscientist Andreas Roepstorff. Philosophers I have collaborated with include Shaun Gallagher and Evan Thompson. Together with the two latter, I have now for a number of years been involved in an attempt to build bridges between phenomenology, philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

### **What do you regard as your most important contribution to philosophy?**

Since my master thesis I have worked on phenomenology; a philosophical tradition established by Husserl (1859-1938) which in many ways can be said to constitute the cornerstone of what today frequently, and somewhat misleadingly, is called Continental philosophy. Briefly put, phenomenology might be characterized as a philosophical analysis of different modes of appearance and related hereto as a reflective investigation of those forms of understanding and structures of experience that allow the objects to show themselves as what they are. From the outset, I took it to be important to bring phenomenology into dialogue with other philosophical traditions. In my PhD I drew on critical theory (Habermas), in my habilitation it was the Heidelberg school (Henrich and Frank) and analytical philosophy of language and philosophy of mind (in particular Rosenthal, Anscombe, Perry, Cas-

tañeda and Armstrong). After the *Center for Subjectivity Research* was established, my methodological and theoretical pluralism has only become even more pronounced.

In my PhD, I presented a new interpretation of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity. I argued that Husserl's main reason for dwelling so much on the topic of intersubjectivity was transcendently motivated, and that his phenomenology would ultimately have to be appreciated as an intersubjective transformation of transcendental philosophy. In other words, rather than being interested in the basic building blocks of reality, Husserl was concerned with the transcendental philosophical question about what it means for something to be real, and how we can experience it as such. He defended the view that these questions couldn't be answered on the basis of an isolated subject, but only by considering the contribution of the intersubjective community. I also discussed Sartre's, Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's contribution to a phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity, and stressed the common features and virtues of such analyses when compared to the language-oriented approach to intersubjectivity found in Habermas and Apel. My PhD was published in the spring of 1996, a few months after Anthony Steinbock and Natalie Depraz had published their respective analyzes of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity. The three books are all different, and deal with different aspects of Husserl's theory. But they are all characterized by drawing on a quite comprehensive amount of sources and by their rejection of the traditional reading of Husserl as a quasi-solipsist. Since then, all three of us have often been classified as representing a new generation of (revisionist) Husserl scholars. A more overarching presentation of my reinterpretation of Husserl – which responds to the widespread portray (caricature) of Husserl as a subjective idealist, intellectualist, immanentist etc. – can be found in the book *Husserl's Phenomenology*, which in the meantime has been translated into a wide range of languages (Zahavi 2003a).

In my habilitation, I defended the concept of pre-reflective self-consciousness, i.e., the idea that our experiential life is characterized by a form of self-consciousness which is more primitive and more fundamental than the reflective form of self-consciousness that one for instance finds in various kinds of introspection. I presented a detailed reading of Husserl's analysis of self-consciousness and inner time-consciousness (which criticized Sokolowski's and Brough's internal object model), and demonstrated more generally, by also drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Henry and Derrida, how central and fundamental a role the concept of self-consciousness plays in phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology hasn't merely been interested in the question of how consciousness is involved in the appearance of objects, but has also inquired into the self-appearance of consciousness. The book is probably the most exhaustive discussion of phenomenological accounts of self-consciousness, and was in 2000 awarded with the Edward Goodwin Ballard Prize in Phenomenology.

My research in the years that followed has continued to address the same basic issues. On the one hand, I have been preoccupied with the relationship between experience, self and self-consciousness. I have argued that all three concepts are interdependent and that a theory of consciousness which wish to take the subjective dimension of our experiential life seriously also needs to operate with a (minimal) concept of self. Opponents have included those who either deny the reality of the self or who claim that the self is a social construct whose formation requires language and concept use, normativity and narratives. As part of this work I have investigated the strengths and weaknesses of the narrative account of self, discussed and criticized various forms of self-skepticism, and examined some of the forms of self-disorders that we find in schizophrenia (cf. Zahavi 2003b, 2005, 2007a, Sass, Parnas, Zahavi 2011). During the last few years, this interest has also gone in a more intercultural direction. I have started to work with experts in Buddhist philosophy from USA, Australia and South Korea. Our ongoing work is aimed at better understanding the similarities and differences between the concepts of self that the different traditions are operating with (see Siderits, Thompson, Zahavi 2011).

On the other hand, I have continued to write on intersubjectivity, empathy and social cognition. I have defended a phenomenological account of empathy, argued in favor of the bodily and contextual character of interpersonal understanding and criticized dominant positions within the so-called 'theory of mind' debate, including simulations theory and theory-theory. As part of this work, I have also spent time discussing and criticizing some of the standard accounts of autism, including the claim that the reason why people with autism have difficulties understanding and interacting with others is due to deficiencies in their theoretical capacities (Zahavi 2001, 2008b, Zahavi & Parnas 2003).

Most recently, I have started to study social emotions like shame (Zahavi 2010a). My interest is mainly due to the fact that such emotions do not merely express a concise form of self-experience, but that they at the same time involve relations to others. In the next few years I intend to continue working on various forms of socially mediated self-experience.

In parallel with my systematic work in these areas, I have on the one hand continued my Husserl research, where I, for instance, have discussed the metaphysical implications of transcendental phenomenology: Can the phenomenological clarification of the lifeworld and of the structure of experience tell us something about the nature of reality itself (see Zahavi 2008c), and on the other, I have sought to establish and promote increasing cooperation between phenomenology, analytical philosophy of mind, and cognitive science (in particular development psychology and psychopathology). The latter effort brought me in 2006 the *Elite Research Prize* of the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. Two representative publications are the books *Subjectivity and Selfhood* from 2005 and *The*

*Phenomenological Mind* from 2008. The latter book is co-authored with Shaun Gallagher with whom I am also co-editing the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*.

Although I initially to a large extent identified myself with Husserlian phenomenology, I eventually found the disagreements which have marked the relations between the different traditions in phenomenology more and more counter-productive. I will certainly not deny that it can be useful to focus on the difference between, for example, Husserl's, Heidegger's, Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology, but too much emphasis on the difference does not only run the risk of degenerating into a kind of trench war which is anything but philosophical fruitful, it also weakens the effort to make phenomenology a powerful and systematically convincing voice in contemporary philosophical discussion. For the same reason, I have in the last year been increasingly more eclectic in my use of the resources that can be found in phenomenology (cf. Zahavi 2003c, 2007b, 2008d). The same attitude has also characterized my work in the *Nordic Society for Phenomenology* which I, together with Hans Ruin and Sara Heinämaa took the initiative to establish in 2001, and which I was then president for in 6 years.

### **What are the main open problems within your area of philosophy?**

I will not deny that one might talk of progress, development and results in the field of philosophy, but I doubt that a number of the fundamental philosophical problems will ever be resolved in a way which will satisfy all future generations. In other words, I do not believe that we at some point will be able to close the debate, so that we from then on no longer have to deal with and wonder about what it for instance means that something is real, what it means to be a self, etc. For the same reason, I also think that most of the systematic problems I work with are and will remain open.

Some problems are however more urgent than others, and among the latter, one might for instance mention some of the methodological challenges which the ever more dominant naturalism has occasioned.

How, for example, should one for instance view the relationship between the first-person perspective, the second-person perspective and third-person perspective on consciousness? We know what it feels like to feel disgust at the sight and smell of spoiled food. We are able to recognize the disgust in the facial expressions of others. Neuroscience is increasingly able to locate and identify the areas of the brain that are active when we have these types of experiences. What is still missing is a real theoretical integration of these different perspectives. Such integration is essential, if we are to do justice to the complexity of consciousness, but it is in no way obvious how natural science all by itself will be able to do so.

A related problem concerns the relationship between philosophy and empirical research. I do not believe that philosophical considerations as such can be made superfluous or be replaced by empirical research – therefore, I also oppose the idea that philosophy ought to be naturalised, if that is meant to entail the suggestion that it should be made part of or an extension of natural science – but I do not think it is healthy for those branches of philosophy that I work in to operate in a vacuum without any contact to empirical research. The challenge is to find the right balance – where the unique contribution of philosophy is respected while strengthening the interdisciplinary collaboration (Zahavi 2010b, Zahavi & Roepstorff 2011, RoCHAT & Zahavi 2011).

### **How do you view the relationship between philosophy, other sciences and the world outside on science?**

It is fairly straightforward to show that the questions I am primarily dealing with – the nature of the self and its relation to others – are questions with immediate existential relevance to most people. Who has not considered the question of what makes up one's self-identity? Are you the same from birth to death? Can radical changes in one's values and convictions change one so much that one becomes another? Can one be a self alone, or only together with others as members of a community? How do we understand others in the first place? Can we at all experience others, or are we always strangers to one another? But as already indicated above, such questions are also central to a large number of empirical disciplines, including developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology, psychiatry and neuroscience. We find references to self and other in various explorations of perception, action, embodiment, emotions, memory, etc. It is in particular this fact which makes the questions so fascinating, and while one as a philosopher can learn quite a lot about the issues in question by a study of the empirical findings, there is also something deeply satisfying about seeing how a philosophical analysis of, for example, self-consciousness or empathy can be of relevance and inspiration to empirical researchers, such as psychiatrists and developmental psychologists.

### **What role do you think philosophy must play in the future?**

Fundamentally speaking, I see three tasks for philosophy:

First of all, it has the role of being a transmitter of traditions. The theories we today make use of didn't arise out of the blue. They have a historical origin, and by better understanding their background and the alternatives which have been developed over time, we are also in a better position to assess their strengths and limitations. Take as an example consciousness research. The field has undergone something of a renaissance during the last 20 years. But the topic itself is hardly new. Just think of the exploration and analysis of consciousness that one finds in

philosopher such as Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, James, Dilthey and Bergson. By ignoring the resources found in the tradition, one risks missing out on important insights that at best might be rediscovered decades or centuries later.

Although contemporary neuroscience on several occasions has criticized philosophy for not having made any progress or produced anything of lasting value during the last 2,500 years, familiarity with the history of philosophy will reveal the extent to which 17<sup>th</sup> Century epistemology and metaphysics, including its understanding of the structure of perception and nature of reality, of what is subjective and objective, continues to influence, in a not entirely harmless way, cognitive neuroscience. I consequently see history of philosophy as absolutely central to the work of philosophy.

Secondly, I think that philosophy has a critical task. It should raise and pose critical questions to contemporary dogmas, including the scientific ones. It should be a safeguard against a too facile reductionism, for example, one that would claim that everything must be explained by the theoretical resources we currently have available, and that that which cannot be so explained must be rejected as fiction. Here, philosophical training can remind us of how little we know. It will be able to insist on the complexity of the problems we are facing while nurturing an intellectual openness to new, original ideas.

Finally, I also think that philosophy has a constructive role to play. Not only can it contribute positively to the clarification of a number of problems that it shares with various empirical disciplines, but I also think that there are issues and problems belonging to the domain of, say, metaethics, transcendental philosophy, metaphysics and part of epistemology, which are specific to philosophy, and where it can make a unique contribution.

I hope that philosophy in the future will continue to flourish in all three areas. Reality is complex, and in order to do this complexity justice we need a diversity of complementary perspectives. This applies not only to the relationship between theoretical (philosophical) and empirical perspectives, it is also relevant to philosophy per se. Rather than to see it as a weakness, I regard the diversity of philosophical traditions as a strength. This obviously doesn't mean that everything is equally valid. But it is possible to do excellent philosophy in more than one way.

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