



Investigating subjectivity

Introduction to the interview with Dan Zahavi

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Cogito ergo... sum?

The problem of subjectivity constitutes one of the most crucial issues in contemporary philosophy, especially the philosophy of mind. An attempt to describe the structure and the role of conscious experience may help us to lay theoretical grounds for further research on this particular matter. When it comes to understanding the subject, which for a long time was based on Cartesian philosophy, the area of subjective experiences was regarded as an objective base for systematic enquires into the human mind (Bremer 2008: 43). According to Descartes, during the process of introspection we obtain the so-called privileged access to our (mental) states and, thus, we cannot be wrong about them. This infallibility was supposedly supported by the fact that we always experience our states as our own and from the first-person perspective. The role of personal reports as reliable indicators for a theory of human consciousness was also founded on 19th-century psychology, which continued to use the method of introspection. Therefore, the first-person perspective in the research on consciousness was for a long time an accepted approach in the traditional philosophy of subject. However, at present there is a tendency to renounce this kind of an approach to subjectivity. Introspection has been recognized as an unreliable, and above all, insufficient way of describing the human mind. Together with the progress in neuroscience and the widespread cooperation between philosophers and empirical researchers, in recent years the so-called reductive approach to subjectivity has gained popularity. According to this approach, subject's mental life and the subject itself can be reduced to a particular experience generated by neural activity (Metzinger 2004), or the very existence of the experience of self can be questioned (Prinz 2012). We are going to look at two philosophical propositions that annihilate the subject in some sense, and consider whether the issue of subjectivity has been resolved or not.

I – that is, no-one

Recent years have brought a lot of attention to Thomas Metzinger's thesis that "there is no such thing as a self" (Metzinger 2009: 1). Metzinger denies the existence of a metaphysical self, arguing that the notion of self does not refer to any observable things in the world. Therefore, the self cannot be real, where Metzinger recognizes a thing as being real only if it can be explained according to the rules and methodology of science (Zahavi 2008: 101). On the other hand, Metzinger points out the fact that the concept of self is, for some reason, quite common – which is why it is worth taking a closer look at how it could be affected by the structure of our experience. While investigating the sphere of human subjectivity, Metzinger discovers that it is characterized by certain stable patterns, i.e. first-person perspective, the sense of ownership in reference to our thoughts or feelings, and something even more basic – the sense of "being oneself." This sense of being oneself is understood as pre-reflexive and refers to the sense of oneself being identical through time. In spite of the fact that this experience is hard to grasp, Metzinger tries to analyze it carefully and to determine its minimal conditions. He does so by referring to experimental situations which manipulate the other properties of experience, especially first-person perspective (Blanke & Metzinger 2009). As a result, he argues that the crucial matter for developing a sense of self is the experience of one's own body.

Still, if the self – as Metzinger claims – does not exist, our experience of ourselves must be an illusion. And so it is - Metzinger calls it "the ego tragedy." We live in a constant illusion generated by our own brains. A human brain, being nothing but an information processing cognitive system, processes information in a way that creates a simulation of the surrounding reality as well as ourselves. However, this process is inaccessible to a subject, which results in our impression of being in direct contact with the world and ourselves. It has its evolutionary explanation, as it enables us to orientate in the environment and – what is important for this paper – to feel that we are ourselves.

Metzinger writes that his goal is to convince readers that the experience of being oneself can be in a satisfying way explained in subpersonal terms (Metzinger 2004: 2). In his attempt to characterize the sense of self, he engages also other levels of description: functional, informational/ computational, representational and at last, phenomenological (303). By showing how subjective states, including the sense of self, are correlated with brain functioning, he wishes to build a bridge between philosophy and science (4). This claim is of great importance here, as it unites all of the concepts presented in this paper.

The awaited self

As it has already been mentioned, while criticizing the metaphysical self, Metzinger acknowledges the existence of a phenomenal self, which his theory of subjectivity tries to describe. However, we can also hear voices that deny the existence of the metaphysical self as well as the phenomenal self. The American philosopher Jesse Prinz in his paper "Waiting for the self" (2012) refers to Hume's so-called "bundle theory" (Bremer 2008: 178). According to this theory, the self is identified with a bundle of flowing impressions, replacing one another through the time. There is no reason to believe that we can distinguish a self as an enduring thing that would be something else apart from impressions. Still, Prinz is not interested in a metaphysical reading of Hume's thesis, but he calls attention to the fact that among many different phenomenal qualities that constitute our experience, we cannot find any that could be described as „I-qualia" (Prinz 2012: 124). While experiencing a particular thing, we deal only with the qualities that make up the experience of this thing. At the same time Prinz stresses two possible ways in which we can read the claim that there is no such thing as I-qualia apart from the qualities that are given in perception. We can say that there are I-qualia, but they are reduced to other qualia (reductive claim) or we can say that there is no such thing as I-qualia (eliminativist claim). Prinz supports the latter claim, showing the weaknesses of both reductive and non-reductive views of the phenomenal self. By referring to different ideas of how the self can be grasped – for example the studies of brain activity or psychological experiments – he argues that we cannot point to the experience of oneself as a subject, neither at the phenomenal level, nor by looking for neuronal correlates of this kind of experience.

Prinz suggests that waiting for the self to come is similar to waiting for Godot (Prinz 2012: 148). However, he says that although we do not experience the self directly, somehow it becomes present through its own absence. How is that possible? We can refer to certain characteristics of our experience, such as stable first-person perspective, the fact that the experienced qualia depend on our sensory apparatus and that we cannot experience things that are not within the reach of our senses. As Prinz puts it: "the self is absent if we look for it, but is always already there in each act of looking" (Prinz 2012: 149).

The self under a magnifying glass

Both Metzinger and Prinz begin their philosophical observations with rather radical theses: "nobody was or had a self" (Metzinger 2004: 1), "there is no [...] phenomenal I" (Prinz 2012: 123). But when we analyze their views further, we can see that, firstly, they are not as radical as they might seem at first sight, and secondly, that they have something in common. Both philosophers admit that the self is present to some degree - in the way it structures our experience (Prinz) or additionally in the elusive but distinguishable feature of "feeling like oneself" (Metzinger). What is more, both philosophers believe that the phenomenal self can be - and should be - a subject of empirical studies. Metzinger in his works refers to the

results from neurobiology, neurology, psychiatry and other disciplines belonging to cognitive science. In his analyses there can be found examples of psychological disorders caused by neurological dysfunctions, or altered states of consciousness. All of them are to become the basis for comprehensive research on the subjective experience with the application of scientific methodology. Similarly, Prinz mentions philosophical attempts at capturing the self by using methods of brain imaging. By pointing out their shortcomings, at the same time he becomes a voice making the case for careful research planning and even more careful analyses of their outcomes.

Some of the aspects of presented conceptions, such as their interdisciplinary character and inquisitiveness in discovering even the most vague facets of the self, can likewise be found in the views of Dan Zahavi, whose story about subjectivity we present in this issue of AVANT (see: his interview in this issue). Other aspects of these theories, such as their intended revolutionary and controversial character, have become the object of Zahavi's criticism.

Self as someone

Dan Zahavi has already been our guest in T/2011 AVANT, when we presented translations of his works concerning naturalization of phenomenology and studies on the self. In the paper dedicated to the latter subject ("The complex self: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," Polish translation – "Złożona jaźń: Perspektywy empiryczne i teoretyczne", 2011), Zahavi presents his opinion on the matter of investigating the self, addressing above all the issue of validity of this kind of research, seemingly undermined by the aforementioned philosophical approaches. The Danish philosopher brings attention to the problem raised also by Prinz, that is, the issue of necessity of philosophical reflection on different understandings of "self" and of implementing the results of philosophical analyses into empirical research (for example, of developmental psychologists, psychiatrists). As Zahavi observes, many empirical researchers use different concepts of the self (Zahavi 2011), which causes nothing but confusion in a matter which is already complicated enough. Zahavi dedicates a passage of his text to mentioning the variety of philosophical definitions of self, including Neisser's and James's typologies. At the same time he refers to Metzinger's theory of subjectivity, which is based on – as it was said before – the critique of the notion of self as not referring to any real thing in the world. But as Zahavi argues, this kind of „reified” understanding of self is not the only one that is offered by philosophy. Hundreds of years of investigating what the self is have brought a wider range of theoretical opportunities than merely the self in the Cartesian sense, seen as unchangeable and enduring substance (Zahavi 2011). The mutual work of philosophers and scientists has made it possible to explore the topic not only from the theoretical, but also the practical standpoint.

In effect, Zahavi pays attention to the phenomenon of interdisciplinary research which has increase its popularity over the last few years and which – also according to Metzinger and Prinz - has made an important contribution to the research

on the self. As Zahavi writes: “the self is so multifaceted phenomenon that various complementary accounts must be integrated if we are to do justice to its complexity” (from the paper: „The complex self: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives” that was originally presented during the symposium “Phenomenology, cognition and neuroscience” on 19.02.2010 in Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA). Integrating different options – also in the field of philosophy itself – is regarded by Zahavi as a part of the role of philosophy. As we can read in the interview in this issue of AVANT: “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.” As we can see by reading the interview, Zahavi actively promotes interdisciplinary research by managing the Center for Subjectivity Research in Copenhagen. The Center is a place where many specialists from different disciplines meet, people who believe that the self is a topic worth exploring. As we can find out on the website of the Center, the main idea of the Center is that “the notion of self is crucial for a proper understanding of cognition, action, sociality, and experience” (<http://cfs.ku.dk/about/>). That is why Zahavi – in opposition to Metzinger and other supporters of the thesis that self doesn’t exist – persistently claims that instead of „being no-one” we should be talking about „being someone” (Zahavi 2005). Discussion concerning this problem is still open though, as Zahavi admits in our interview: “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.”

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