

“Self-Awareness, Self-Understanding, and Self-Interpretation”

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In *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, Dan Zahavi defends a model of selfhood on which an individual’s narrative self-interpretation (her personal identity) is distinct from and ontologically dependent upon a formal-phenomenological “minimal selfhood.” The latter, he argues, is to be identified with the basic first-personal, pre-reflective givenness of our experiences. But Zahavi’s use of the narrative conception of selfhood to account for an individual’s personal identity is problematic because, by conceiving of narrative selfhood strictly from the perspective *reflective* self-interpretation, he passes over an important phenomenon, namely *pre-reflective* self-understanding. An individual’s personal identity is first of all manifest and operative in the habits and style of her pre-reflective absorption in the world, not in the story she reflectively constructs about herself. This pre-reflective dimension selfhood is excluded in principle from constituting part of “minimal selfhood” as Zahavi conceives it, and it is neither reducible to nor adequately explained by how a person reflectively constructs her identity in a narrative interpretation of her life. Thus Zahavi’s twofold distinction between minimal selfhood and self-interpretation needs to be amended. Drawing on Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Frankfurt I will argue that the phenomena demand a threefold distinction in our conception of the self: self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-interpretation.

To begin with, I briefly present Zahavi’s conception of pre-reflective minimal selfhood and then go on to show how his use of the narrative conception of personal identity operates at the level of reflective consciousness. In Chapter 5 of *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, Zahavi discusses three different perspectives on the self: Kantian, Phenomenological, and Narrative. The first and

the second are, he notes, formal and minimal conceptions of the self, while the narrative conception is robust in that it aspires to explain an individual's *personal* identity, the notion of selfhood that is at stake in the Delphic injunction to 'know thyself'.

From the Kantian perspective, Zahavi notes, the self is "understood as the pure subject, or ego-pole, that any episode of experiencing necessarily refers back to."¹ That is, the self is a formal "*principle of identity* that stands apart from and above the stream of changing experiences and which, for that very reason, is able to structure it and give it unity and coherence."² The self, on this account, is never given in experience. Rather, we infer its existence because it is a condition of possibility of any experience. It is on this point that the contrast with the phenomenological perspective, with which Zahavi proposes to replace the Kantian perspective, is perspicuous.

From the phenomenological perspective the self is indeed given in experience. It is, Zahavi writes, an "experiential dimension." So, rather than being above and beyond experience, the self on this account "is rather a feature or function of its givenness."³ All of my experiences, whether thinking a particular thought or having a sensory experience, are pre-reflectively experienced by me *as mine*. This is why when I stop myself (or when I am stopped in a breakdown) I am able retrospectively and consciously to see my previously prereflective experiences as belonging to me. This pre-reflective and basic awareness of my experiences as mine, this self-givenness of my experience for me, is what Zahavi calls "experiential," "minimal" or "core" selfhood. Zahavi goes on to elaborate on this conception of selfhood and

¹ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 104.

² Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 104.

³ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 106.

convincingly to emphasize its importance by considering a number of pathological cases. The problems arise in his conception of personal selfhood.

As Zahavi rightly notes, both the Kantian and the Phenomenological perspectives are too formal and minimalist to account for *who* I am, for my selfhood in the Delphic sense. He intends to account for the latter by appealing to the narrative conception of selfhood as developed by MacIntyre, Ricoeur and others. The strategy is to use the phenomenological perspective on the self to replace the Kantian and to supplement the narrative perspective on the self by spelling out its ontological foundation.⁴ However, Zahavi seems to have reserved the pre-reflective dimension of experience only for the minimal self, banishing personal identity to the life of reflective consciousness.⁵

From the narrative perspective as presented by Zahavi, personal identity “is a construction. It is the product of conceiving and organizing one’s life in a certain way.”⁶ Moreover, “... the self is first constructed in and through the narration.”⁷ My personality, Zahavi writes, “is shaped by the values I endorse and by my moral and intellectual convictions and decisions.”⁸ Finally, we read that personal identity “is the fruit of an examined life.”⁹ This is partially because

⁴ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 105, p. 129.

⁵ The criticisms that follow are partially motivated by similar worries found in criticisms of narrativist interpretations of Heidegger’s conception of selfhood, criticisms given by, e.g., Taylor Carman in chapter 6 of his *Heidegger’s Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) and his article “Authenticity” in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); and by Steven Crowell in his “Authentic Historicality” in *Space, Time, and Culture*, ed. David Carr and Chan-Fai Chung, (Kluwer: forthcoming) and “Facticity and Transcendental Philosophy,” in *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental*, ed. Jeff Malpas (London: Routledge, 2002). See also Philip L. Quinn, ‘Unity and Disunity, Harmony and Discord: a Response to Davenport and Lillegard’, in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John Davenport and Anthony Rudd, (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), pp. 327–337.

⁶ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 105. The emphasis in the following citations is mine.

⁷ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 105.

⁸ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 129.

⁹ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 108

To form a self-narrative more must be done than simply recall and recount certain life events. One must also consider these events reflectively and deliberate on their meaning to decide how they fit together.¹⁰

Zahavi himself considers several important objections to the narrative conception of self-identity, and my worry about his exclusive focus on thematic and reflective self-interpretation is captured in a passage from John Drummond which he approvingly cites (by way of a criticism of MacIntyre). Drummond notes that “not all of a life as pre-reflectively lived can be fitted into a narrative,” and that “we should not confuse the reflective, narrative grasp of a life with an account of the pre-reflective experience that makes up that life prior to that experience being organized into a narrative.”¹¹

Although Zahavi is clearly sensitive to this shortcoming of the narrative account of self-identity, he does not address it. He notes that Ricoeur himself denied that the question of selfhood is adequately dealt with by the notion of narrative identity and he agrees. According to Ricoeur what needs to be added to narrative identity is the dimension of ethical responsibility. To this Zahavi further adds the minimal dimension of pre-reflective self-awareness.¹² But neither of these addresses the issue of prereflective personal identity to which Drummond points our attention.

At one point Zahavi notes that “Who one is depends on the values, ideals, and goals one has; it is a question of what has significance and meaning for one.”¹³ With this he aligns himself with philosophers like Charles Taylor and Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt argues that it is through caring about things, ideals, and other people that “our individual identities are most fully

¹⁰ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 113.

¹¹ J. Drummond, “‘Cognitive Impenetrability’ and the Complex Intentionality of the Emotions,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11/10-11, p. 119. Cited by Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 113.

¹² See Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, pp. 113-114.

¹³ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 105.

expressed and defined.”¹⁴ But Frankfurt also rightly and explicitly notes that someone “may care about something a great deal without realizing that he cares about it.”¹⁵ What has significance for me is not always a function of—and may well be beyond the scope of—my reflection and deliberation. When something is of deep significance to me, I experience it as a claim on me and not as subject to my own will and intellect. Moreover, I *find* myself with many of my commitments and values and many of them, to be sure, operate *behind the back* of my consciousness. This is why Gadamer warns us that:

The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.¹⁶

The key here is to take “prejudice” in the extended sense Gadamer gives to it, i.e., as that which precedes my reflective judgment. In this sense my prejudices not only help to constitute my “historical being,” as Gadamer puts it, but also my personal identity.

My personal identity is manifest and operative in my pre-reflective habitual ways of comporting myself in the world and with other people. It is here that we need to make the distinction between self-understanding and self-interpretation. I reserve the term “self-interpretation” for the dimensions of personal identity which are the product of the person’s deliberative and reflective effort and I use the notion of “self-understanding” for the pre-reflective sense of self that is operative and manifest in the patterns of my pre-reflective absorption in the world.

In distinguishing understanding from interpretation I am of course following Heidegger. Put briefly, according to Heidegger, “understanding” characterizes Dasein's primary pre-

¹⁴ Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 50.

¹⁵ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 21, n.6.

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1975), p. 245.

reflective everyday absorption in the world. On Heidegger's account we are not first and foremost self-reflectively aware subjects acting explicitly on reasons. Rather, we comport ourselves in the world understandingly by projecting upon and understanding ourselves in terms of possibilities.¹⁷ Understanding for Heidegger terms is plainly pre-reflective in that "the character of understanding as projection is such that the understanding does not grasp thematically that upon which it projects—that is to say, possibilities."¹⁸ On the other hand, "interpretation" is derivative of understanding and involves an (always partial) explication what of goes unarticulated in understanding. Interpretation is, as Heidegger puts it, the self-development [*sich auszubilden*]¹⁹ and appropriation of [*Zueignung*]²⁰ what is understood, and it happens in a space of reflective distance, typically as the result of a breakdown in our pre-reflective dealings with the world. Hence Heidegger writes that, in an interpretative stance toward the world, "the ready-to-hand comes *explicitly* into the sight which understands. All preparing, putting to rights, repairing, improving, rounding-out, are accomplished" in such an act of interpretation.²¹ In interpretation I come explicitly to understand something *as* something. With respect to myself, I come explicitly to understand myself *as* having a certain character, certain commitments, a certain life history, etc. As Zahavi puts it, the self-interpreting agent "consider[s] her own aims, ideals, and aspirations *as* her own and tell[s] a story about them."²²

But what, then, is self-understanding? That is, how is my personal identity—understood, as Zahavi suggests, in terms of my values, ideals and what has significance for me—*pre-reflectively* operative in my everyday absorption in the world? Again Heidegger provides the

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Edward Macquarrie and John Robinson, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 185.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 185.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 188.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 203.

²¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 189.

²² Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 129, italics in the original.

key. We have seen that everyday Dasein pre-reflectively projects upon possibilities. But which possibilities? Here we need to examine Heidegger's conceptions of affectivity [*Befindlichkeit*] and attunement [*Stimmung*]. With these, Heidegger means to capture the way in which things and possibilities always already matter to Dasein in some particular way.²³ Dasein "as essentially affective [*als wesentlich befindliches*] has already got itself into definite possibilities."²⁴ Moreover, Heidegger writes that "By way of having an attunement, Dasein 'sees' possibilities, in terms of which it is."²⁵

What does it mean to 'see' possibilities? It is helpful here to turn to Merleau-Ponty, for he gives a finer-grained analysis of the phenomena in question. For Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, my orientation in the world involves a pre-reflective sensitivity to possibilities of action, a sensitivity I have through a constellation of factors. Some factors are personal (or "individual") and have to do with our personal identity, and some are general, or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, "pre-personal" or "anonymous," and are not bound up with our own particular sense of self. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, to say that an agent "sees" possibilities is to say that this motivational constellation "polarizes" her perceptual field and field of action. This means that that certain objects and options stand out to the agent in the foreground as important or relevant and draw her to action (without her having to deliberate reflectively), her while others repel her or simply remain indeterminately in the background.²⁶ Hence Merleau-Ponty writes of the way these motivational factors "polarize the world, bringing magically to view a host of signs which

²³ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 176-177.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 183, translation slightly modified.

²⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 188.

²⁶ This is what Hubert Dreyfus is getting at in his Merleau-Ponty-inspired description of our non-reflective responses to the "solicitations" of a situation. See his "The Return of the Myth of the Mental" and "Response to McDowell" in *Inquiry*, Vol. 50, No. 4, August 2007. Dreyfus' account, like Merleau-Ponty's, remains one-sidedly concerned with the pre-personal or general aspects of an agent's motivational constellation.

guide action...²⁷ Merleau-Ponty also calls this phenomenon an agent's "spontaneous evaluation" of his situation, without which he "would not have a world, that is a collection of things which emerge from a background of formlessness by presenting themselves to our body as 'to be touched', 'to be taken', 'to be climbed over.'²⁸

Merleau-Ponty's conception of these motivational factors is essentially an explication of Heidegger's remark that "understanding has itself possibilities which are sketched out beforehand within the range of what is essentially disclosable in it."²⁹ I am already thrown into a broad (general) horizon of possibilities within which a particular range will matter particularly for *me*.

According to Merleau-Ponty, examples of general motivational factors include: (1) the person's body:

Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose. These intentions are general...³⁰

The kind of things in the world showing up to me in the foreground of my perceptual field as relevant to my purposes (and the options that can show up in my field of possible actions and solicit me to act) depend on the kind of body I have and the way in which I am bodily inserted into the world.

(2) The cultural and social horizon of significance from within which a person draws her particular personal commitments:

We therefore recognize, around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is oneself, a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed,

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 112.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 441.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 186.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 440, my emphasis here and in the following two citations.

significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality [for example] of man, bourgeois or worker.³¹

(3) Features of the immediate environment

The bench, scissors, pieces of leather offer themselves to the subject as poles of action; through their combined values they delimit a certain situation....and the task to be performed elicits the necessary movements from him by a sort of remote attraction.³²

Merleau-Ponty focuses most of his energy on describing the role of the general or pre-personal aspects of the motivational constellation and tends to neglect the individual or personal aspect.³³ However, he himself insists that both the pre-personal *and* the personal aspects of human existence “are two stages of a unique structure which is the concrete subject.”³⁴

Additionally he writes: “There is an exchange between the generalized and individual existence, each receiving and giving something.”³⁵

But what is this personal aspect of my pre-reflective sensitivity to possibilities of action? It is what I have been calling my self-understanding, and, as we have briefly seen, it has to do with the particular range of things that the person cares about and to which she is committed, consciously or unconsciously. Merleau-Ponty gestures in this direction when he includes an agent’s “ideological and moral situation” in his definition of the ‘intentional arc’ — a central aspect of his explanation of our pre-reflective, bodily absorption in the world:

“Let us therefore say...that the life of consciousness...is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects.”³⁶

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 450.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 106.

³³ The notion of general or pre-personal intentions is discussed all throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*. See, e.g., p. 84, p. 216, p. 240, p.330, p.347 ff, etc.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 451

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 450.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 136, my emphasis. The notion of being morally and ideologically situated goes largely unexplained, with the exception of a few passages in the “Freedom” chapter in which Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre’s voluntarist views on the emergence of revolutionary consciousness in the self-interpretation of the worker. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 442 - 447.

To emphasize what the agent cares about is to see self-understanding as an *orientation* in moral space, to use Charles Taylor's phrase.³⁷ I have a sense, analogous to the way in which we talk about having a "sense of direction" in my city (even though I might not be able to draw you a detailed representation or map), of the actions that strike me as worthy or appropriate (and attract me to act) or as unworthy and inappropriate (and repel me).³⁸

Thus my commitments and cares are not first of all in my mind or the product of the story I reflectively tell about myself. They are *out there* in the polarization of my field of possible actions. My caring about the environment is manifested by the way it does not *occur to me* to drop the garbage which I find that I am carrying around in my rucksack on the park lawns or in the river—they just do not show-up to me as an appropriate place for dropping trash. Smith's love for his girlfriend (at least given the way our dominant culture has defined romantic love) is manifested in the way in which other people do not show up to him as possible mates or sexual partners. Wendy's commitment to help others in need can make a beggar on the street show up to her as an opportunity to help someone rather than as an obstacle in her path that repels her and which she walks over without even noticing it.

In order to explain the way in which a person's commitments partially constitute her self-understanding and contribute to her pre-reflective orientation in a field of possible actions, I will turn now to the work of Harry Frankfurt. Among analytic philosophers, Harry Frankfurt is a leading voice against conceptions of human agency and selfhood that are, as he once put it, "excessively intellectualized or rationalistic."³⁹ Frankfurt's description of the role that caring

³⁷ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 28.

³⁸ See Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³⁹ Harry Frankfurt, "Reply to T. M. Scanlon," in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes From Harry Frankfurt*, edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 184

plays in human agency comes very close to Merleau-Ponty's notion of an agent's polarization of the field of possible actions and can help fill in the gap left by Merleau-Ponty in his explanation of the personal motivational factors.

According to Frankfurt "The importance that our caring creates for us defines the framework of standards and aims in terms of which we endeavor to conduct our lives. A person who cares about something is guided, as his attitudes and his actions are shaped, by his continuing interest in it."⁴⁰ A person's caring creates "motivational structures that shape his preferences and that guide and limit his conduct."⁴¹ For the most part, Frankfurt focuses on the way that caring guides a person who, from within the reflective standpoint, explicitly tries to answer the question of how he should live. This is part of Frankfurt's ongoing attempt to show that our need to answer this question cannot ultimately be filled by disinterested rationality or morality.⁴² But our interest here is in how caring guide a person's actions from *without* the reflective standpoint. How does caring guide an agent nonreflectively in his everyday absorption in the world?

Frankfurt argues that care, or love,⁴³ is not grounded in reasons, but rather vice versa. Love, he claims, is a *source* of reasons to act. But, for Frankfurt, acting on the basis of reasons grounded in love is completely different from an action undertaken on the basis of a reflective endorsement of an impulse or desire— still the mainstream view in much analytical philosophy. This view completely and illegitimately generalizes the standpoint of reflective self-consciousness. A paradigm case of this is the account of selfhood and agency given by Christine

⁴⁰ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 23, my emphasis.

⁴¹ Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 129, my emphasis.

⁴² See for example, *The Reasons of Love*, I, §§10-12; and "On the Usefulness of Final Ends," §§ 10-11 in NVL.

⁴³ For the sake of convenience, I shall use the two interchangeably here, although this is not technically correct on Frankfurt's terms.

Korsgaard in her influential book *The Sources of Normativity*. Korsgaard takes it for granted that the distinguishing feature of human existence is above all reflective self-consciousness, that is, that we “human animals turn our attention on to our perceptions and desires . . . and we are conscious of them.”⁴⁴ This “reflective distance from our impulses,” she goes on to argue, “makes it both possible and necessary to decide which ones we will act on: it forces us to act for reasons.”⁴⁵ Korsgaard goes so far as to claim that “no human action can happen without reflective endorsement.”⁴⁶ Put briefly, on Korsgaard’s neo-Kantian theory we decide to act on particular ‘impulses’ by means of a judgment in which we apply general principles of choice deriving from—indeed *constituting*—our personal identity, or what she calls our “practical self-conception.” Note the terms in which Korsgaard describes “self-conception”: it is “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, if you replace “description” with “story,” this could be a formulation of the narrative conception of the self as presented by Zahavi.

Against this view that generalizes reflective self-consciousness (both of our ‘impulses to act’ and of our own conception of our personal identity), Frankfurt insists upon the “*immediacy* of the linkage between loving and what counts as a reason for doing things.”⁴⁸ In other words, the lover’s “taking it as a reason for performing the action is not the outcome of an inference.”⁴⁹

Although Frankfurt remains squarely within the discourse that conceives human agency strictly

⁴⁴ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 93.

⁴⁵ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 113. Referring to Richard Moran, Zahavi concurs: “reflective distancing is what allows us to relate critically to our mental states and put them into question; it forces us to act for reasons,” *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 91.

⁴⁶ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 161. Steven Crowell has also recently noted difficulties Korsgaard’s theory faces in accounting for unreflective action. See his “*Sorge or Selbstbewußtsein?* Heidegger and Korsgaard on the Sources of Normativity,” *European Journal of Philosophy*, 15:3 (2007), pp. 315- 333.

⁴⁷ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 101.

⁴⁸ Frankfurt, “On Caring,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 176.

⁴⁹ Frankfurt, “On Caring,” p. 176. Cf. *The Reasons of Love*, p. 37.

in terms of reasons for action, he shows that our caring gives rise to a mode of pre-reflective agency and in this way comes close to the phenomenological tradition. Two things support this.

(1) the point indicated just above about the “immediacy of linkage” between love and its reasons. In order for something “to count as a reason,” and move me to act, no implicit or explicit process or reflection is required. “Immediately taking something as a reason to act” does not depend upon reflection or deliberation. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, this is for the action in question to stand out as important and worthy in the polarization of the agent’s field of possible actions, soliciting her to act appropriately. Hence Frankfurt remarks that the things that we love simply “move us” to act.⁵⁰

(2) Frankfurt’s response to a well-known remark made by Bernard Williams. Williams considers a man who sees two people drowning, one is his wife, the other a total stranger. The point is that if the man, before jumping in to save his wife, engages in a process of deliberation whereby he combines the singular thought that “My wife is drowning” with the general rule that “in situations like these it is *permissible* to save one’s wife,”⁵¹ then he should be reproached for having “one thought too many.”⁵² In a footnote, Frankfurt amends Williams on what is, in our context, an important detail: “It seems to me that the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero. Surely the normal thing is that he sees what’s happening in the water, and he jumps in to save his wife. Without thinking at all.”⁵³ In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, seeing his wife in the water immediately polarizes the man’s perceptual field and field of possible actions and draws him pre-reflectively and immediately into appropriate action, “by a sort of remote attraction,” as

⁵⁰ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 37.

⁵² Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.

⁵³ Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p.36, n. 2. My emphasis.

Merleau-Ponty likes to put it.⁵⁴ In this extreme case it is plain to see that the structure of polarizations is a function of what the agent cares about. Despite the dramatic nature of this example, Frankfurt's point can be generalized. The pre-reflective patterns of behavior to which our commitments give rise are the manifestation of our self-understanding, or rather, they *are* our self-understanding.

To put this again in Heidegger's terms, Dasein's attuned understanding, its personal orientation in a field of possible actions, captures what I am calling its pre-reflective self-understanding. Hence Heidegger writes that, through having an attuned understanding, "Dasein... 'knows' *what* it is capable of."⁵⁵ This phrase, *Dasein 'weiss' woran es mit ihm selbst ist*, can perhaps also be translated more colloquially: "Dasein 'knows' what it is all about," or "Dasein knows where it's at," "Dasein 'knows' what's with itself," etc. By putting 'knows' in square quotes, Heidegger is emphasizing the pre-reflective nature of this "self-knowledge."

Moreover, all of this elucidates why Heidegger in his 1927-28 lectures on Kant describes "ability-to-be" (*Seinkönnen*) in terms of a "moral disposition": "This shows primarily the character of ability. Moral disposition of a human being is a basic position toward a realm of possibilities which the human being controls on the basis of this moral disposition."⁵⁶ My ability-to-be in the world is not just an impersonal practical know-how around a world of equipment, as is often argued. It is personal because it is always attuned. What I am *able* to do, what "occurs" to me to do at all, what I *can* or *could* do, also has this ethical dimension, as is captured linguistically in the reproach "How *could* you do that?!". This is the phenomenology behind

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 106.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.315. This explanation of attunement also appears on p.184 and p. 385.

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1997), p. 254, my emphasis.

Hannah Arendt's remark that: "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good."⁵⁷

I want to end by making some rough suggestions about how we should conceive the relationship between non-reflective self-understanding and reflective self-interpretation and self-awareness. We should retain Zahavi's claim that pre-reflective self-awareness is the most basic phenomenon and the formal-ontological foundation for personal identity. Beyond this, we should note that, in one sense self-understanding precedes and makes possible explicit self-interpretation in that it provides the horizon from within which the latter can take place. I already have to find myself moved by or called by certain ideals and possibilities in order explicitly to take them up interpretatively into my self-interpretation and be moved to understand myself reflectively in their terms. Moreover, our pre-reflective sense of self will always exceed our reflective self-interpretation. I am not only who I think I am. This is one thing that Heidegger means to articulate with his existential conception of guilt: Dasein "never comes back behind its thrownness" and so will "*never* have power over [its] ownmost being from the ground up."⁵⁸

On the other hand, self-understanding and self-interpretation are clearly bound up in a circular inter-relationship, the hermeneutic circle of self-interpretation. Our explicit self-interpretative insights into, e.g., where we are heading, how we want to carry out our lives, what really is of significance to us, gets adopted back into the background of our pre-reflective self-understanding and then contributes to our practical orientation in the world. As Gadamer said: 'It is the untiring power of *experience*, that in the process of being instructed, man is ceaselessly forming a new pre-understanding.'⁵⁹ Mutually determining each other, our self-understanding

⁵⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research*, 38:3 (Autumn, 1971), p. 438.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 330.

⁵⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p.38.

and our self-interpretation are always revisable and in a process of becoming. As such, they are ultimately equiprimordial.

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