

Phenomenology of the Self

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Introduction

In this project, I will be utilizing a phenomenological method to investigate the self or ego as it functions in experience. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement inaugurated by Husserl and expanded by others that emphasizes a return “to the things themselves,” by analyzing the first-person structure of experience. Specifically, I will examine a debate in this field about whether every conscious experience contains a subject (ego) or whether consciousness is essentially bereft of an ego prior to self-reflection. My prediction is that both egological and non-egological theories of self have merit and that aspects of both theories are ultimately reconcilable. Because I am conducting research in phenomenology, a subfield of modern philosophy, my concepts will not be measured so much as analyzed and argued. To accomplish this, I will trace the ideas of self found in the work of early phenomenologists, namely Husserl, while integrating the work of contemporary researchers in philosophy, cognitive science, and psychology. This investigation may have value for the multidisciplinary study of consciousness currently being vigorously carried out around the world.

Research Question

Key Concept 1: Egological Theory of Self/Consciousness

- An egological theory of consciousness is one that claims there is a subject for every object of experience.

- Egological theories argue that every experience has an owner, a self. Therefore, awareness of something else is also awareness of one's ego.
- Egological theories were once unpopular under the dominance of functionalism and scientific materialism but have experienced a resurgence in the wake of failures to find definitive answers to the problem of subjectivity.

Key Concept 2: Non-Egological Theory of Self/Consciousness

- Non-egological theories deny that every experience has a subject.
- Mental events simply occur and there is no self that is intrinsic to having experience. Self awareness is something that occurs only upon reflection, it is not implied by consciousness.
- These theories are common in the sciences and have the support of some philosophers. Like egological theories, non-egological theories of the self also present difficulties.

Research Question:

Does every conscious experience contain a subject (ego) or is consciousness bereft of a self prior to self-awareness and/or self-reflection?

Background and Literature Review

Questions about the self have a long history in the philosophical and, especially, the phenomenological tradition. Husserl conceived of phenomenology “as a science of the essential structures of pure consciousness with its own distinctive method” (Moran 2002). He was centrally concerned with subjectivity and how the attainment of knowledge is possible. By

closely describing experience, Husserl attempted to outline the notion of the self, of which consciousness is a constitutive factor. His method was to “bracket out” the content of experiences. By abstracting away the specific objects that commonly engulf our consciousness, it becomes possible to penetrate to the transcendental “rules” that govern first-person experience. Through this reduction, Husserl sought to discover the pure foundations that comprise subjectivity. This approach and its conclusions, which attribute subjectivity to the self (ego), have been widely debated.

Attempting to clarify some issues brought up by Husserl’s opponents, Zahavi (2005) concentrates on the deceptively complex question: “What is a self?” Through his investigation, Zahavi attempts to reconcile phenomenology with modern neuroscience and cognitive theory. His hypothesis is that questions concerning selfhood are inseparable from those concerning consciousness. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of consciousness, it is imperative to understand the first-person perspective.

Zahavi’s investigation and others of the same sort inevitably encounter a quandary: does experience inherently contain a self? Classical phenomenology considers the ego to be the essential starting point through which experience is possible. However, other theorists in philosophy and cognitive science have proposed non-egological theories; they consider the self to be merely a social construction or, even, an illusion (Metzinger 2003). In light of these views, an investigation into the phenomenology of the self seems necessary in order to resolve key elements in this debate.

Methods/Design

- For this project, I will be utilizing phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement inaugurated by Husserl and expanded by others that emphasizes a return “to the things themselves” by analyzing the first-person structure of experience. As such, my concepts will not be measured so much as analyzed and argued.
- Issues of consciousness and subjectivity are some of the few problems that modern science has been unable to solve. Thus, phenomenology is a suitable approach; it is imperative that subjective experience is understood in its first-person “givenness.”

Materials:

- Texts written by prominent philosophers will be my primary sources. Husserl and his writings, especially those that focus on phenomenological reduction and its application to understanding the nature of the self will be a central focus. I will analyze commentaries on these texts as well as more contemporary writers that focus on the phenomenology of subjectivity.
- This design allows me to use the great theoreticians of the past as a guide for interpreting the contemporary debate in philosophy

Expected Conclusions and Significance

My prediction is that both ecological and non-ecological theories of self have merit and that aspects of both theories are ultimately reconcilable. Examining these texts in-depth will reveal a more nuanced conception of the self that incorporates parts of both theories.

The significance of these findings extends beyond philosophy to tangential fields that study consciousness and the self. Research in cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience may be illuminated by an analysis of the first-person nature of the self.

References

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