

The social dimension of self-experience

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Abstract:

In the past years much of my research has focused on investigating different forms of self-consciousness, and different levels of selfhood, and of analysing various modalities of intersubjectivity. The problem I wish to discuss today is in a very obvious way related to this ongoing endeavour.

There is a long and rather diverse tradition in philosophy for claiming that selfhood is socially constructed and that self-experience is necessarily intersubjectively mediated. This view has had many different voices. According to a widespread reading, Hegel argued that subjectivity is something that can only be achieved within a social context, within a community of minds, and that it has its ground in an intersubjective process of recognition rather than in some immediate form of self-familiarity. The coming to self-consciousness is the result of a progressive development of self-other differentiation. Central figures in the philosophy of dialogue have argued that we are selves not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another, and, as Mead would put it, that to be self-aware is to become an object to oneself in virtue of one's social relations to others (Mead 1962). Foucault claimed that individuals acquire their sense of autonomy inside contexts of domination and subordination. Thus forming subjects and subjecting them to authority are two sides of the same coin. As he wrote at one point, "the subject that is constituted as a subject – that is 'subjected' – is one who obeys" (Foucault 1976, 112). Finally, to mention just one further voice, Lévinas famously argued that *selfhood* depends upon *otherness*. I become a subject exactly by being addressed and accused by the other. It is when the other makes an irrefutable appeal to me; it is when I am confronted with an unsubstitutable and irreplaceable responsibility that I am provided with a true self-identity and individuality. Thus, subjectivity is ultimately taken to be a question of sub-jection to ethical responsibility (Lévinas 1974, 26, 29, 141, 183, 216-217). I don't want to contest that there are important insights to be found in all of these different claims, but I think they are all faced with at least one fundamental problem. The different notions of subject or self being employed are in my view all latecomers. To put it differently, throughout subjectivity is defined in such a robust and at times even idiosyncratic manner that the conclusion reached concerning the dependency of self upon other might even be said to be foregone and trivially true. What I intend to do in the following is to briefly outline a competing, or to be more precise, a complementary conception of what selfhood might amount to. The question I then wish to raise, is whether it might be possible to uphold a strong and non-trivial thesis regarding the relation between self and other even when it comes to this more fundamental concept of self.