

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-50635-9 - Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness

Philippe Rochat

Excerpt

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## Introduction: Main Ideas

Because his own *nature* escapes him, he tries to capture it in the eyes of others.

Jean-Paul Sartre on Baudelaire<sup>1</sup>

Preoccupation with the self is a human propensity, becoming particularly exaggerated in recent human history. For many philosophers and historians, self-preoccupation is the sign of “modernity.”<sup>2</sup> It is a syndrome associated with profound political transformations, the ratcheting effects of technological advances that transform the way we live and the way we relate to each other. This book is about this modern syndrome and how it manifests itself in human ontogeny.

As modern individuals, we promote and negotiate our own image via complex acts of self-presentation. We boast of and adorn ourselves. We excel in the promotion of desire, social envy, and seduction. We strive ultimately for our own social ascendance and inclusion by endless attempts at influencing what other people see of us, think of us, represent of us. It is an all-too-human propensity that cuts across people and cultures, hardly the special feature of shy, narcissistic, sociopathic, sexually deviant, or “needy” individuals.

As a species, we evolved a unique sophistication at self-promoting, self-deprecating, and self-spinning games. To be human, particularly in the

<sup>1</sup> Sartre, J. P. (1947). *Baudelaire*. Paris: Gallimard.

<sup>2</sup> See Taylor, C. (1989b). *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, and Taylor, C. (1989a). *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. (1991); and in French, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2005. Preoccupation with the self existed in antique and medieval tales that were produced under ancient aristocratic regimes dominated by loyalty and honor principles. But self-preoccupation appears to have blossomed, at least in Western history of ideas, from the seventeenth century on, from the Enlightenment and all the social and economic revolutions that followed.

modern era, is indeed to care about reputation. We are obsessed with the idea of what is public about us, obsessed with the representation other people might have of us, as persons, but also in relation to the group we identify with, whether family, gang, nation, or culture.

If to be human is to care about reputation, it is to have “others in mind,” and the goal here is to explore the origins of this very human propensity. I view this propensity as a cardinal trait and a major determinant of the human psyche.

For some, the property of Man is its ability to laugh. Maybe. But at the origins, what causes laughter and humans’ sense of humor are the *ridicule* and the *grotesque* that derive from Man’s desperate, often clumsy attempts at asserting and promoting its own person. We do laugh with Molière or the Marx brothers at the pompous, the snob, the inflated, and even the overly deflated, unassuming individual. Humor derives primarily from a preoccupation with the self in relation to others. It derives from what we are as members of a uniquely self-conscious species.

Here, as a developmental psychologist, I ask, “Where does it all come from?” In particular, what are the origins of self-consciousness? What determines our propensity to do, feel, achieve, or think with *others in mind*? What makes us so inescapably inclined to take the perspective of others onto our own person? Why do we care so much about how and what people think of us? To address these questions, I generate ideas from a simple theoretical premise. It is simple, yet constitutive of human self-consciousness.

#### BASIC PREMISE

Self-consciousness is inseparable from the basic drive to affiliate and maintain proximity with others. From the outset, to be alive implies being with others. I start from the simple fact that without others, *we would not be*. As infants we would not have survived. As adults, we would not have any explicit sense of who we are; we would have no ability, nor any inclination to be self-conscious.

Linked to this simple premise is the irresistible drive to *be with others, to maintain social closeness, and to control social intimacy*. The necessary counterpart of this drive is the basic fear of social alienation, the rejection from others, and the avoidance of such rejection at all costs.

I view the experience of being ostracized, pushed away, bullied, looked down on, isolated, or separated from others as the worst of all possible

psychological sufferings. The avoidance of social separation and rejection<sup>3</sup> determines most of what we are and what we do, from infancy on and across the great variety of individual circumstances. From the outset, the drive to affiliate and the avoidance of separation are constitutive invariants that cut across individuals and cultures.

The fear of social rejection is the mother of all fears, the driving force behind most higher-order human psychology, particularly the exacerbated human care about reputation and the control of public presentation of the self. I propose that the need to affiliate and its counterpart, the fear of social rejection, together form the bottom line of what underlies the experience of shame, embarrassment, contempt, empathy, hubris, or guilt. This underlies all the powerful and often devastating self-conscious emotions that are presumably unique to our species. By extension, it is also what underlies the explicit moral sense that can be expressed in benevolence, prosocial behaviors, as well as in revenge and systematic “costly” punishment, all viewed as hallmarks of human self-consciousness.

The definition of self-consciousness is relative to the theory, as for any complex concepts. Here, in its most generic sense, self-consciousness stands for *the representation we hold of ourselves through the eyes of others*. In what follows, I propose that this representation is in essence a social construction, as opposed to an individual elaboration. I try to show that it does not originate from within the individual in the absence of any encounters with others, but on the contrary originates in relation to others.

The main idea is that the origins of self-consciousness are inherently social, that there is no such thing as a “core” or an “individual self.” My hope is to debunk the concept of the individual self that would presumably exist and emerge in itself as a conscious object or entity. I propose instead that what develops and is unique to human ontogeny is a sense of self that is *co-constructed in relation to others*.

In short, the premise of the book can be stated in two sentences: We fear the judgment of others, and whatever this judgment might be, good or bad, it determines the representation of who we are in our mind (i.e., our self-consciousness). Once again, the view proposed here is that self-consciousness is in essence a social rather than an individual phenomenon. It depends on

<sup>3</sup> Social rejection is viewed here as an active separation caused by others as in bullying or punishing. Social separation is more generic and captures both active but also passive alienation from others, as, for example, in the case of an infant missing her momentarily absent mother who is fetching something in the kitchen or the widower missing his dead wife.

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others and does not exist in itself as an individual phenomenon. But how does it all come into place and what kind of psychology arises from such premise?

#### HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

The issue is not new. Self-consciousness is a classic philosophical conundrum in the Western tradition since the Greeks. Plato and the ancient Greeks began questioning systematically the relation of the mind to the body, extended by a long dualist tradition that culminated with Descartes's famous *Cogito*,<sup>4</sup> which continues to be debated in current philosophy of mind.

Ideas and debates around mind and body as separate entities have dominated Western philosophy. In recent years, however, the mind-body issue has been greatly tempered, even dismissed, by the recent advances in neurosciences that provide abundant evidence of an "embodied mind." The neurosciences provide literal images of a mind incarnated in the neural flesh of the brain. In a way, neuroimages give the hope of grounding and finally naturalizing the phenomenon of consciousness. Presumably, they provide the final blow to the persistent metaphysical idea of the mind as soul hosted in a physical body, an idea that implicitly or explicitly dominated the philosophy of mind since the Greeks.

However, these attempts at reducing the mind to biology do not elude criticisms. They are still considered by many as wishful thinking, a long way from giving the final blow to the dualist ideology of Descartes. These attempts are the expression of a persisting, relentless effort by neuroscientists to reduce higher-order processes and representations to simpler, more parsimonious, and ultimately more predictable causal accounts.

Inseparable to the mind-body problem is the perennial problematic of the self. This problematic rests on the following basic questions: What is *it* that we construe as the self and where might *it* be located? Furthermore, if it exists, where might *it* come from? There are obviously many other ways of stating the problematic of the self, asking, for example: What do we mean when we say "in my mind," "I think," or "I feel"? Who is the subject in such predicaments or ideas? Who is the agent? These questions are far from being resolved and probably will never be. They form an eternal conundrum, a very human conundrum.

<sup>4</sup> *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think; therefore I am," an inference that is often identified as the beginning of modern philosophy of mind, so-called egology, or metaphysical theories about the individuated self.

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## Introduction

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The ontology and origins of the self form the most difficult of all philosophical conundrums. The reason rests primarily on the fact that “we,” who think, feel, perceive, and raise the issue, form the issue itself. In other words, the problem we raise already entails its resolution!

When, for example, I ask, “Who am I?” or “Do I exist and if so, what exists?” I question the existence of something that in my mind already exists and that I refer to with the personal pronoun *I*. It is somehow difficult, if not impossible, to escape circularity. Even when asking “Who is I?” the question presupposes that there is a priori something like an “I.” Why ask the question otherwise?

If we assume as Descartes did over three hundred years ago that thinking, by necessity and no matter what, presupposes the existence of a self, hence proves it (*I think; therefore I am*), then we are left with at least three basic questions regarding the issue of the self that are unanswered: *What is it? Where is it? Where does it come from?* Phrased differently these questions are What is a self? Where is it located? What determines it?

If we accept the existence of a self, the threefold question of its nature, locus, and origins is far from being resolved. It continues to animate fierce debates in the philosophy of mind. It is also a very engaging question for current cognitive and developmental scientists, as well as researchers in the booming field of cognitive neurosciences. But what are the continuing theoretical controversies around this threefold question? Let me try to stake the debate and situate my own ideas in relation to each of the three aspects of the question (nature, locus, and origins).

## BASIC PHILOSOPHICAL CONTROVERSIES

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76), one of the fathers of the empiricist tradition in the philosophy of mind, proposes that if such a thing as a “self” exists, it exists as an illusion, not as a real entity. When introspecting in search of the self, Hume<sup>5</sup> claims that he finds nothing but fleeting feelings and perceptions, no object per se. He concludes that what we tend to consider as self are in fact just sensory and perceptual impressions, not a real or core thing. It might exist, but if it exists, it is not as real as a rock or a chair that can be thrown or sat upon; it is fleeting and impressionistic, a representational construction of the mind.

Varieties of Hume’s basic idea are still very much alive today in the philosophical theorizing of the mind, especially by researchers who, well

<sup>5</sup> Hume, D. (1928). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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informed of the current progress in brain and cognitive neurosciences, deny any ground for the assertion that there is in reality such a thing as a self (see Metzinger, 2003, p. 1, who concludes that “no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self”).<sup>6</sup>

To the Humean’s skepticism, if not denial of the self, a radically opposite view is espoused by phenomenologists in the tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, or Sartre, to name a few.<sup>7</sup> Stated in a nutshell, phenomenologists anchor their investigation of the mind in the systematic description of a first-person perspective, the experience of the world through one’s own body, which is the primary locus of this experience as it unfolds in real time. The self exists primarily as a preconceptual, implicit entity that arises from the embodied experience of being in the world.

Historically, the phenomenological approach is a deliberate departure that shies away from intellectualism or any kind of purely formal, “disembodied” conceptualization of the mind. In basing their investigation of the mind, in particular the mind-body problem, on a first-person perspective, hence on “subjectivity,” the phenomenologists embrace a philosophy that gives a real status of the self, a status contested by Hume and his followers (see the recent book by the phenomenologist Dan Zahavi, 2006).<sup>8</sup>

What I will propose is that, contrary to the strict empiricist argument, the self is real and exists as an object, developing from being implicit and preconceptual to become a representation that is a *social sedimentation*. If there is “pure” subjectivity of first-person perspective, as proposed by phenomenologists, selfhood does eventually develop to become objectified and conceptualized from social interactions. It does not only exist in itself. In development, it is also socially *co-constructed* in interaction with others.

Explicit selfhood emerges as the product of social exchanges and reverberates back onto our primeval awareness of the body, the proto-awareness phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty insist upon in the realm of perception.<sup>9</sup>

From being first an implicit sense of the body in the world, selfhood eventually becomes objectified, experienced as an invariant entity, something one can label with a personal identity. But this identity does not exist a priori.

<sup>6</sup> Metzinger, T. (2003). *Being No One*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Sokolowski, R. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Zahavi, D. (2006). *Subjectivity and Selfhood – Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.

It is a by-product (i.e., sedimentation) of social interactions. Hence, in my view, selfhood is neither an illusion as proposed by Hume nor a core subjective reality that phenomenologists insist upon in reaction to and as an alternative to Cartesian rationalism. Selfhood is also socially co-constructed when looking both at child development and at the way we behave as adults across the great variety of human cultures.

#### INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL LOCUS OF THE SELF

If there is such a thing as a self, where is it? Is it in my body? Can it be superimposed on the physical entity each of us forms, and can it include the material things we own beyond our physical envelope? Once it is acknowledged and ascribed to the individual, delimiting selfhood is another classic puzzler in the philosophy of mind, a continuing debate in today's cognitive sciences and cognitive neurosciences.

In philosophy as in the cognitive sciences, there is an ongoing tension between theories that put more or less weight on the individual and the “internal” origin of consciousness, whether conceptual (explicit) or non-conceptual (implicit). For example, the armchair meditations of Descartes introspecting on his relation to the world and deciphering the proof of his own existence is prototypical of what could be called an *internalist* perspective on consciousness in general, and the experience of selfhood in particular.

Descartes's metaphysical meditations unfold as an introspective process that takes place “within” his person. It presupposes an “interiority” defining the self. The proof of the existence of the self can take place independently of any physical transactions with the “outside” environment, in pure logical thoughts: “I think therefore I am.”

Although philosophers in the more recent phenomenological tradition shy away from Cartesian intellectualism, they too put much weight on the private, internal experience of the individual encountering the world.

As already mentioned, contrary to the Cartesian focus on logical thinking and the analysis deriving from a self-reflecting mind, philosophers in the more recent phenomenological tradition describe subjective experience as a preintellectualized “direct” or unmediated encounter of the body with the world. Phenomenologists insist that from this encounter arises a preconceptualized awareness of qualities, that are foundational to mental experience, hence of any subsequent explicit awareness of the self.

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In the phenomenological tradition fathered by Husserl and Heidegger, the awareness of what we might be is grounded primarily in a preconceptual, hence implicit private embodied experience that is in essence unalienable. Self-experience happens, in this tradition, from an inside-out vantage point rather than the reverse. The weight is clearly put on the direct experience of what “I” feel encountering the world out there, be it physical or social.

The basic assumption of phenomenology as a philosophical system is that the issue of mind and its relation to the body as well as the issue of selfhood and self-knowledge rests primarily on this preconceptual subjective and first-person experience of the world. The emphasis is on what happens *inside* the individual, not outside. Once again, the phenomenological account rests on the fine description of what is experienced by the individual from “within.” It assumes as a given the interiority of experience (i.e., first-person perspective or subjective experience).

As a matter of fact, one could argue that emphasizing the subjective experience as phenomenologists do is an invitation to reinstate some dualism in different, maybe more subtle disguise. It can be seen as an invitation to separate subject and object, to separate the body as locus of experience and the world as encountered by the body that would exist in some kind of independence. Some, including me, are weary of such dualism in disguise and the strong assumption of a subjective experience located inside the individual rather than outside. As an alternative, it is possible to adopt a more “externalist” view of the locus of selfhood and consciousness, a view that I am more inclined to adopt in this book.

From the title, you can see already that my treatment of selfhood is *not* as something just located inside the individual. Rather, I defend the view that within months after birth, *in development*, it has also become increasingly located in the relation of the individual to others, in particular in their mutual evaluation and representation of each other. In general, the idea I will defend is that if there is such a thing as a self, it is not just interior to the individual but rather also at the intersection of the individual as he or she transacts with others. This idea about the nature of the conceptual self is externalist rather than internalist. In development, the weight is quickly shifted away from the individual to the relation of the individual to others.

In short, I will take the stance that within months of birth, the self is increasingly defined in relation to others, not on the basis of an interior subjective experience.

It is common for many contemporary theories in cognitive sciences and neurosciences to circumscribe the study of the mind to the individual and tend to reduce it to “internal” brain features. Language, for example, as



well as many other features of conscious life are often seen, or at least alluded to, as “instincts” or “core abilities” that reside from birth within the individual (i.e., its brain) as an evolutionary endowment of the species (see, for example, Pinker, 1994, but see also Thompson, 2007, for a radically different view).<sup>10,11</sup> Such conscious features are tentatively described as innate or prescribed “modules” residing in the brain of the individual.

On the basis of striking accidental brain pathologies and with the advance of brain imaging techniques, neuroscientists are increasingly tempted to capture the nature of selfhood or what constitutes a person in the way the brain of the individual works and the particular ways it is arranged, for example, on the basis of instances of accidental brain damage and correlative personality changes.<sup>12</sup> The interpretative temptation is naturally to construe the locus of self-experience inside (i.e., in the individual brain), rather than emerging from encounters with others interacting from the outside.

The internalist versus externalist controversy is generalized in all cognitive sciences, and now it permeates emerging neurosciences. Some neuroscientists realize that there is something profoundly invalid in studying the brain of the individual to capture the biological underpinnings of consciousness. For example, there is now evidence of a renewed effort to develop techniques to image multiple individual brains simultaneously as they work and communicate with one another.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, E. (2007). *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>12</sup> The most notorious case is the marked change of character and temperament of Phineas Gage, who, in 1848, working on a railroad track, had a one-and-a-quarter-inch-thick tamping iron pierce his head. This accident left him with most of the front left side of his brain destroyed. Despite the horrendous accident, the foreman survived and even went back to work a few months after the accident. The originally well-balanced and efficient Mr. Gage became after his accident irreverent, profane, and short-fused with his fellow workers. His employers eventually fired him, his friends lamenting that he was “no longer Gage.” This tragic case is typically interpreted as evidence of the equation personality = individual brain configuration and functioning. To my knowledge, such a case is never interpreted as evidence that the brain of the individual participates in ways of relating to others, that the consequences of the brain damage in the case of Phineas Gage are relational rather than internal to the individual. There is little consideration of the idea that personality is social and relational, not a stable intrapsychological entity.

<sup>13</sup> A new, promising technology is being developed and now used to scan multiple brains as they interact. This will certainly change dramatically the field of cognitive, social, and affective neuroscience. It will force neuroscientists to reconsider how the mind works, which is not in isolation, always in concert with other minds. See Frith, C. D., & Frith, U. (1999). Interacting minds – a biological basis. *Science* 286: 1692–1695; also Montagu, P. R., et al. (2002). Hyperscanning: Simultaneous fMRI during linked social interactions. *Neuroimage* 16: 1159–1164, for information of the developing technology.

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The brain is indeed adapted and shaped to live in a society of minds. If the brain of the individual can be anatomically described as a distinct entity, it can hardly be described as such at most levels of higher functioning, including self-reflection or self-conceptualization. Most of what the brain allows an individual to perform is done in conjunction with other brains, particularly performances such as thinking and talking, even thinking and talking about the self. This basic fact questions the validity of construing the locus of conscious phenomena in the brain of the individual since most of these phenomena depend on conjugate functioning with other brains.

In the realm of perception, the internalist versus externalist controversy is most evident in the contrast between what can be categorized as reconstructionist (atomistic) and ecological (holistic) theories. For some classic theorists of perception, what we perceive is essentially based on a mental reconstruction of bits and pieces of discrete sensations that are constantly processed by the brain via the various sensory systems. This perspective is eminently internalist as perceptual phenomena happen inside the head of the individual who infers and reconstructs what is out there in the world on the basis of discrete sensations that need articulation to acquire meaning.

In sharp contrast to this view, the externalist approach to perception claims that information or the basic ingredients of perceptual phenomena are contained in the environment, not in the head of the individual.

In his ecological approach to perception, in a radical departure from other existing theories on perception at the time, James J. Gibson<sup>14</sup> proposes that the environment is structured and that the perceptual systems, each the product of a long evolution, are preadapted to harvest directly information that specifies this external structure. Gibson claims the rather odd idea that visual *information is in the light* as it bounces on the objects and hits the eyes of the perceiver. Accordingly, this information is not in the head or the mental product of the individual perceiver but rather exists in the world *outside* the individual. In short, perceptual phenomena are not located within the individual but rather at the meeting of the individual, prepared by evolution, with the organized features of the environment, its resources.

Here, I will propose a view on selfhood that is in resonance with the contrainternalist view of Gibson in the realm of perception. In my view,

<sup>14</sup> Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.