

# Introduction: Towards an understanding of pre-reflective subjectivity

It is so hard to describe what I feel when I feel I really exist and my soul is a real entity that I don't know what human words could define it (Pessoa 1991).

If we succeed in understanding the subject, this will not be in its pure form, but rather by looking for the subject at the intersection of its various dimensions (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 433).

Alongside an increasing interest of contemporary philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience in the problems of consciousness and the nature of self-awareness, we are now witnessing a remarkable shift in our views on the very foundations of mind and subjectivity. From both the everyday and scientific points of view, it has become clear that subjectivity no longer stands for a uniform kind of being, defined as cognitive, conscious, or mental, and that it cannot be understood as detached from its embodied and affective dimensions, its interaction with the world and other living beings.

Subjectivity is clearly such a multifaceted phenomenon, so richly charged with various meanings and connotations, that we can hardly speak about it without first defining the general theoretical framework within which it is to be considered. Even though the themes of selfhood, phenomenal consciousness, and first-person perspective have firmly established their philosophical and scientific importance in the contemporary research, subjectivity remains fundamentally ambiguous, with some thinkers still reluctant to acknowledge it as being more than just an illusionary construction.<sup>1</sup> Such ambiguity can be regarded not as a lack of common theoretical ground, but rather as the mark left by the radical changes in our views concerning the very foundations of subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> See as examples the well-known positions of Thomas Metzinger in his book *Being no One* (Metzinger 2003) or of Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness explained* (Dennett 1991).

tivity, whose notion has undergone many changes and developments within the timeframe of modern philosophy.

In order to support this claim one would not be short of examples: the abandoning of the strictly Cartesian perspective can be observed not only in philosophy, but equally in psychology and nearly any scientific or artistic approach to the human being and his or her experience in the world. The recognition of the limits of rationality and rational cognition in respect to the self- and world-understanding characterizes not one single, but the majority of philosophical, psychological and artistic movements in the second half of the 19th and the whole of the 20th century. Edmund Husserl famously refers to this process as to the *crisis of European rationality*, implying that the crisis of the scientific world-view corresponds to the observable crisis of humanity and subjectivity itself. Through the major scientific and historical (and, largely speaking, humanitarian) dramas and perturbations of the 20th century, we have hardly come to any new and at the same time widely accepted theory of subjectivity and its place in the world. Such a new perspective is not simply missing, but rather not yet determined, since there are a certain number of competing theoretical positions struggling to win its place.

One may legitimately ask the following question: what exactly does this change of perspective in our understanding of subjectivity consist in? It is arguably a matter of overcoming the “cognitive” attitude according to which all the diversity of the mental sphere can be perfectly reduced to the activity of cognition or of the *cogito*, which allegedly represents some sort of universal structure of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless we could equally state the fact that today the fields of psychology and philosophy of mind are still, for the most part, considered *cognitive* sciences and therefore oriented towards the investigation of most psychic phenomena based on *cognition*, even though not in the purely Cartesian sense of the word.

Generally speaking, cognitive science—understood as “the interdisciplinary study of mind and intelligence” (Thagard 2014)—is concerned with the understanding of mental processes (as well as the underlying

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<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, it is the Cartesian perspective. See for example Descartes in *Principles of Philosophy*: “By the word ‘thought’ I understand all those things which occur in us while we are conscious, insofar as the consciousness of them is in us. And so not only understanding, willing and imagining, but also sensing, are here the same as thinking” (Descartes 1983, 5). In the words of Michel Henry, “I think” in Descartes means everything except thinking: “Je pense chez Descartes veut tout dire sauf la pensée” (Henry 1985, 7).

neural processes) involved in cognition. According to the so-called computational model of cognitive science, cognition refers mostly to the representational and computational processing of individual interactions with the environment (Thagard 1996). Thus conceived, cognitive science intends to explain not only what mind *is* and what kind of mental states it performs, but also *how it works*, what mechanisms underlie our mental activity, and how our brains process information. Nevertheless, one of the founders and main figures of the cognitive research in psychology, Jerome Bruner, in his book *Acts of Meaning*, argued that the key concept of cognitive science is not information processing, but *meaning*. According to this perspective, cognition is not seen as a result of mental representations combined with computational procedures (Thagard 1996, 11),<sup>3</sup> but as a process involved in the construction of meanings and unthinkable outside of the individual's intentional states and cultural context (Bruner 1990, 33).

Moreover, the development undergone by cognitive science since the cognitive revolution shows that its research scope has become much larger than it was initially conceived, so that it currently transcends by far the purely cognitive level of mental life. To summarize the main challenges to the computational and representational view of mind, we could mention three important topics: (1) the hard problem of consciousness (phenomenal qualia, subjectivity of experience in its narrow meaning<sup>4</sup>); (2) the embodiment and more generally the embodied and enacted view of mind, seen as interdependent with the world and the social environment; and (3) the study of emotions, or affective science as to a certain extent opposed to cognitive science (Thompson 2007).<sup>5</sup> Each of these thematic developments within cognitive science suggests challenges to its basic conceptual presuppositions—those belonging not only to the sphere of empirical studies but to the conceptual level as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, Thagard refers to the central thesis of “the computational-representational understanding of mind,” which builds upon the analogy between minds, brains, and computers and features cognition in terms of mental representations and information processing. Later in his book, Thagard accounts for the several challenges to this model as they have been developed within cognitive science.

<sup>4</sup> For the distinction between narrow and broader meanings of subjectivity see §1 of the first chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Compare to Thagard's list of critical challenges: the emotion challenge; the consciousness challenge; the world challenge; the body challenge; the social challenge; the dynamical systems challenge; the mathematics challenge (Thagard 1996, 2014).

In the framework of the phenomenological approach, a similar shift occurred much earlier: Beginning with Husserl's late inquiries and up to the present day, an increasing interest in the pre-reflective and passive constitution of subjective experience testifies to a radical change in perspective. This transition inside phenomenology does not presuppose the abandoning of its initial interest in the nature of cognition. As conceived originally by Husserl, transcendental phenomenology's task was to "clarify the sense of cognition and its validity, and that clarification here means nothing else than to go back to the origin, to the evidence, thus to consciousness, in which all cognitive concepts are realized" (Husserl 1956, 356; Murphy 1980). Clearly it was Husserl's quest for the origins of cognition that led him to question the most basic structures of our experience and thus to go beyond the cognitive level of inquiry itself.

Along with the challenges which allowed widening the scope of cognitive science in the end of the 20th century, we might also outline some of the main problems and domains of research that permitted the broadening of the scope of the basic universal structures of subjectivity, in particular within Husserl's phenomenological project as it was already sketched in the 1920s.

The first domain concerns the investigation of the so-called *passive constitution* of subjective experience. Passivity describes the realm of pre-predicative experience that precedes and makes possible the explicit and thematic relation between the subject and the world. Another term to refer to this pre-cognitive dimension is "affectivity." The notion of affectivity in this context serves to designate not exclusively the sphere of emotions, but rather the impressional, receptive character of subjective experience in general. Structurally, it is based on *affection* as the original pre-cognitive correlation between the self and what is foreign to the self.<sup>6</sup> Husserl introduced this dimension during his genetic phenomenology period. He insisted that, before any cognitive correlation, the subject finds himself already affected by the world, which led him to claim the self lives not only in the *cogito*.<sup>7</sup>

The second area is that of *embodiment (corporeality)*, which represents a breakthrough transition from a dualistic conception of separated mental and bodily existences, and contributes to an understanding of human subjectivity as essentially embodied and embedded in the world. Along

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<sup>6</sup> I will concentrate on Husserl's notion of affectivity in § 8 of the second chapter.

<sup>7</sup> "Die Reflexion findet aber zeitlich vor dem Cogito eventuell eine Strecke der Affektion, des Reizes einer nichterfassten Gegenständlichkeit auf das Ich, das also nicht nur im Cogito lebt" (Husserl 2001b, 284).

this line, Evan Thompson, describing both enactive and phenomenological approaches to embodied subjectivity, claims: “Human mind is embodied in our entire organism and embedded in the world, and hence is not reducible to structures inside the head” (Thompson 2005, 408). This implies that the human subject cannot be understood merely as a “pack of neurons” (Crick 1994, 2). On the contrary,—continues Thompson—“you are a living bodily subject of experience and an intersubjective mental being” (Thompson 2005, 408). Thomas Fuchs also makes a similar claim: “The individual mind is not confined within the head, but extends throughout the living body and includes the world beyond the membrane of the organism, especially the interpersonal world of self and other” (Fuchs 2009, 221).

This last indication leads to another fundamental dimension, namely to *intersubjectivity*, which of course cannot be associated solely with the level of pre-reflective experience. Intersubjectivity transcends the very idea of self-enclosed subject and allows us to envisage subjectivity not only as constantly related to others in the shared life-world, but also as constituted through these relations. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes:

True reflection presents me to myself, not as an idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical to my presence in the world and to others, such as I currently bring it into being: I am everything that I see and I am an intersubjective field, not in spite of my body and my historical situation, but rather by being this body and this situation and by being, through them, everything else (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 478).

One may notice that this general attitude, especially common for contemporary phenomenological and enactivist approaches, however inspiring and productive it may be, faces certain theoretical problems. These problems become particularly apparent on the conceptual level, when it comes to the very notions that are supposed to describe this new understanding. At this point, no notion at hand seems to be fully reliable as all are the product of those traditions which tried to find a uniform way of understanding and defining the kind of beings we are. The most significant examples are the notions of mind and subjectivity, stemming respectively from naturalist and transcendentalist approaches. Notably, they both have the same content, that is to say they aim to describe the totality of psychic life. And at the same time, they have different meanings: while “mind” tends to underline the “mental” or distinctively cognitive characteristics of our experience, “subjectivity”

implies the ownership of experiences as their essential characteristic. Moreover, also the meaning attributed to subjectivity in these two approaches differ considerably: while in philosophy of mind, it is seen as a phenomenal quality of mental states, for phenomenology, subjectivity describes not a quality, but the totality of one's experience.

Despite their differences, in the present theoretical situation these two traditions face the same challenge, namely, how to include in their content all these new dimensions, which transcend their traditional conceptual frameworks by definition. It is rather difficult to imagine how the "subject" can include "otherness" in itself, how "mental" can account for embodiment, or, finally, how cognition can be consistent with affection, since they all originally have opposite meanings. Inside the phenomenological approach, in particular, this challenge appeals to such an idea of subjectivity that could account for its intrinsic multidimensionality. Not accidentally, the contemporary discussion on the pre-reflective self-experience develops in the direction which tries to go beyond merely formal definition of the minimal selfhood.

The idea of the pre-reflective self-experience is based on a highly significant step within phenomenology. First, it was constructed as a response to those accounts of the self calling upon an independent entity or substance. Unlike Kant, Husserl could not postulate the self as a mere *a priori* principle of unity without linking it to the structure of experience. At the same time, he could not agree with Hume, who famously stated that one would never find any self in experience but the multiplicity of distinct perceptions. This double divergence places Husserl's approach at the intersection of empiricism and transcendentalism, and effectively defines his philosophical ambition to account for *a priori* structures of experience, which must be found *inside* experience itself. According to Husserl, the self-conscious character of our subjectivity belongs to its intrinsic definition, and there is no self to enable experiential unity independently of the multiplicity of experiences. Although Husserl himself is still committed to an "egological" vocabulary and mostly speaks about the "pure I" (*reines Ich*) and the transcendental ego as a pole of affections and intentions, he already wonders whether he should rather employ the term "self" (*Selbst*) instead of "I."<sup>8</sup> In French phenomenology, one can detect a clear tendency to overcome such a terminology which implicitly and probably even unwillingly makes of the subject an independent entity. In Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Mer-

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<sup>8</sup> "Statt 'Ich' müsste ich vielleicht besser immer sagen 'Selbst'" (Husserl 1973c, 48).

leau-Ponty, and Michel Henry, subjectivity of experience is already described in terms of “ipseity” and selfhood, thus marking its clear separation from a transcendent ego. In contemporary phenomenological philosophy, this tendency reached its peak and an ego-subject as a center of cognitive activity has unanimously given way to the exploration of primary and pre-reflective selfhood. As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi write:

We should not think of the self, in this most basic sense, as a substance, or as some kind of ineffable transcendental precondition, or as a social construct that gets generated through time; rather it is an integral part of conscious life, with an immediate experiential character (Gallagher and Zahavi 2015).

It should be noted that diverse conceptions of the minimal or core self and pre-reflective self-awareness occupy not only the forefront of phenomenology, but also hold strong positions in the philosophy of mind, neuroscience and psychopathology. Though there might be a certain consensus concerning the sense of “mineness” and possession of the first-person perspective as essential characteristics of the minimal selfhood, there are nevertheless disagreements that prevail on the level of its internal structure and the scope of its impact. For example, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio points out that “the scope of core consciousness is here and now” (Damasio 1999, 16), so that this minimal form of self is reduced to the always new spatial-temporal point and, as such, has no past,<sup>9</sup> nor future, though it retains a sense of self—a paradoxical sense of self given that the self appears as always different from moment to moment. Galen Strawson also follows this line of argument in his “minimal subject” conception, proposing to understand it as a mere experiencer, being “present and alive in the living moment of experience” (Strawson 2011) without necessary relation to his or her temporal<sup>10</sup> or embodied dimension. Phenomenologically grounded interpretations of core consciousness differ considerably from the above mentioned accounts and tend to explore minimal selfhood in the first place through the pre-reflective self-experience. Thus, Zahavi proposes to see it, following Husserl, as an inner time-consciousness that is not a mere here-and-

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<sup>9</sup> “The only past it vaguely lets us glimpse is that which occurred in the instant just before” (Damasio 1999, 16).

<sup>10</sup> Even though Strawson underlines that this living moment is not “a durationless instant,” his understanding of its temporal scope is limited to a singular experience time interval and thus is quite close to Damasio’s.

now-point, but rather a “stream” and duration (Zahavi 2003, 2005). The same concerns the question regarding the embodied dimension of the minimal selfhood, which phenomenologists see as one of its fundamental characteristics (Fuchs 2008, 2012c).

A distinctive feature of phenomenology, as compared to the other disciplines, consists in its interest not in mere descriptive characteristics of the pre-reflective selfhood or in the underlying brain structures, but rather in its transcendental constitution. A reference to “transcendental” means that we are asking the question: What is the internal structure of this primary self that makes its phenomenal manifestations possible? What constitutive organization of our pre-reflective experience gives rise to the character of “mineness” or “selfness” that always implicitly belongs to it? In this sense, it is of course reasonable to doubt how minimal this minimal self actually is (Zahavi 2010), since, seen from the phenomenological standpoint, it possesses a complex inner structure.

Thus, while “mineness,” first-person perspective, pre-reflective and non-objectifying character of self-relation can be listed among most important *descriptive* characteristics of this primary level of subjectivity, there still remains a question of the transcendental structure which makes this phenomenal self-manifestation possible. There are three basic and *constitutive* features which are held among the contemporary phenomenologists to be responsible for the constitution of the pre-reflective self-experience: (1) structure of inner-time consciousness or implicit *temporality* of experience; (2) *affectivity* or self-affection; and (3) *embodiment or corporeality (Leiblichkeit)*.<sup>11</sup> It is also often stated that primary *intersubjectivity* should be considered as a part of the self-constitution, as even the minimal subject cannot be separated from its environment and other people (Fuchs 2012c).

This brings us back to my main claim in this introduction, which is best expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s words that “If we succeed in understanding the subject, this will not be in its pure form, but rather by looking for the subject at the intersection of its various dimensions” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 433). I hold this idea as central for understanding what subjectivity stands for in the phenomenological tradition: While Husserl brought the subject back to its lived experience, contemporary research has shown how multifaceted and heterogeneous this experience actually is. Among the main dimensions of subjectivi-

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance: (Gallagher and Zahavi 2015; Zahavi 1999, 2005; Fuchs 2010, 2012c; Sass and Parnas 2003).

ty, which I have just mentioned, there are some which received more attention than the others. Temporality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity beyond doubt belong to the most studied and productive directions in both traditional and contemporary phenomenological philosophy. The focus of the present work will be, however, on the dimension of affectivity.

Inside the phenomenological approach, this term received at least two related but distinct meanings.<sup>12</sup> The first corresponds to “self-affectation” and designates an immediate and non-objectifying way of subjective self-manifestation. Merleau-Ponty claimed that the essence of time lies in its being “self-affectation by itself” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 449). Henry was considerably more radical and posited self-affectation at the very essence of ipseity. He defined affectivity as “the identity of the affecting and the affected” (Henry 1973, 468) and claimed that being affected by oneself implies no exteriority and no objectification. For Henry, therefore, affectivity is essentially self-referential and precedes any possible hetero-affectation.

The second meaning of affectivity follows from Husserl’s analyses of passive constitution. In this perspective, affectivity is not merely self-referential but rather describes the most basic level of contact with the world and its radical alterity. Not only intentionality but also affectivity is defined in terms of relation between the self and otherness: while objectifying intentionality is an active relation between the self-conscious subject and an object of its experiences, affectivity is described by Husserl as a passive relation between the self and the foreign-to-the-self (*Ichfremdes*) which affects it.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in Husserl, even basic level of self-manifestation and self-affectation cannot be separated from hetero-affectation. The two are in principle correlative: it is by being affected by something other than myself that I come to feel my own existence and the other way around: being affected by otherness means that I feel myself as thus affected. Self-affectation precedes and underlies self-reflection but there is no ontological priority of the self over the otherness as both are two terms of the same equation: “The I is not something for itself and the foreign-to-the-I is not something sepa-

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<sup>12</sup> I will return to this distinction between two meanings affectivity in § 8.3 of the second chapter.

<sup>13</sup> This point is also defended and thoroughly analyzed by Dan Zahavi in his book *Self-awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Zahavi 1999) and his paper *Self-Awareness and Affection* (Zahavi 1998).

rated from the I [...]. Instead the I and what is foreign to it are inseparable” (Husserl 2006b, 351–352).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, affectivity in this latter perspective designates, first of all, the level of passivity and the pre-cognitive correlation defining the subject as always and necessarily finding himself in the world and affected by it. Another important aspect which allows conceiving of affectivity as fundamental dimension of subjectivity lies in its meaning for the issues of the unity of consciousness and pre-thematic organization of subjective experience. As Husserl shows, affection is never an isolated occurrence but is always part of the affective configuration. In the second chapter, I will show what role affectivity plays for formations of distinct unities and how it allows conceiving of experiential unity beyond merely formal conditions provided by temporality of consciousness.

The notion of *affective subjectivity* in this work designates, therefore, the totality or unity of the pre-reflective experience. Such a unity is above all not formal and is constituted on the level of content of subjective experience. It is not a unity as enabled by the transcendental subject of cognition or by the overarching temporal form of consciousness, but rather by multiplicity of connections making up a living affective identity of a subject.

Thus, the two main directions to be explored in this work are affectivity and pre-reflective unity of subjective experience. In order to develop my approach to affective subjectivity, I have decided to concentrate on the three following topics. The first questions the basic conditions which are responsible for the unified and coherent way in which subjective experience is organized. The second addresses the unity as constituted by associative and affective connectivity of consciousness. And the third explores the pre-reflective level of past-experience and affective dimension of memory. Accordingly, the work is divided into three chapters each of which focuses on the organization of the pre-reflective experience in what concerns (1) unity of consciousness; (2) associative and affective connectivity; (3) affective memory and the unconscious.

*The first chapter* “Subjectivity and the Unity of Consciousness: a Phenomenological Approach” deals with the phenomenological notion of subjectivity and the unity of consciousness. It has a systematic role for the whole project, since it addresses the constitutive principles of

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<sup>14</sup> My translation of: “Das Ich ist nicht etwas für sich und das Ichfremde ein vom Ich Getrenntes und zwischen ihnen ist kein Raum für ein Hinwenden. Sondern untrennbar ist Ich und sein Ichfremdes.”

the unity of subjective experience and paves the way to the phenomenological ideas of synthetic consciousness and connectivity of subjective experience. The chapter is divided into three parts (§ 1–3). The first deals with the phenomenological idea of subjectivity, as well as its distinction from the similar notion employed in the analytic philosophy of mind. The second part addresses the problem of the unity of consciousness and the idea of synthetic consciousness as developed in the tradition of transcendental philosophy (Hume, Kant, and Husserl). The third part situates this phenomenological approach within the context of the contemporary debates on the nature of consciousness and its unity, and it provides some arguments supporting the theoretical advantages of the synthesis-based model of consciousness compared to the qualia-based model of consciousness. The phenomenological explication of the unity of consciousness in terms of synthesis implies that, besides formal unity ensured by temporal connectivity, there is another conceivable type of unity, namely, the unity of subjective experience established through concrete, content-based connections.

*The second chapter* “Associative Syntheses, Affectivity, and Pre-reflective Connections in Subjective Experience” intends to account for this second type of unity. Its aim, therefore, is to explore the topics of associative syntheses and affectivity as they provide some principles for such content-based connectivity of consciousness. The chapter is divided into five parts (§ 4–8). I start with a general introduction to Husserl’s account of associative connectivity (§ 4) and then proceed by situating this topic in the larger philosophical context in order to show how the topic of association was supposed to explore “the inherent lawfulness of mental life” (§ 5). Secondly, I provide some methodological clarifications concerning eidetic phenomenology and its distinction from the methodology of psychological investigation (§ 6). Then, I discuss some theoretical points involved in the dispute between associationist and Gestalt psychologies (§ 7.1) in order to clearly show, as a result, how Husserl’s idea of associative syntheses should be distinguished from both (§ 7.2). After these general clarifications, the aim of which is essentially to present the phenomenological approach to associative connectivity in the larger context of psychological and philosophical discussions of the time, I focus on Husserl’s transcendental doctrine of passive synthesis and discuss the topics of association and affection and their meaning for the phenomenological theory of synthetic consciousness and the genesis of subjectivity (the rest of § 7 & § 8).

## Introduction

*The third chapter* “Affective Memory and the Unconscious” inquires into the organization of subjective experience with regard to its pre-thematic unity with the past. My main intention here consists in questioning how the present and the past stay connected in the affective life of consciousness, especially before the institution of representational relation to the past in remembering. The chapter is divided in two thematic blocks: the first explores the phenomenological approaches to the unconscious (§§ 10 & 11) and the second deals with the topic of implicit memory (§ 12). I suggest that Husserl’s investigations on affectivity allow for the overcoming of the strict separation between consciousness and the unconscious by inquiring into non-representational past-experience. In the same vein, phenomenological contribution to the issue of implicit memory can be grounded on Husserl’s ideas of the “affective awakening of the past” and of the “affective past-horizon.” As the most of this chapter is dedicated to exploration of the non-representational accounts of memory and the unconscious, I also consider Merleau-Ponty’s and Fuchs’ ideas on perceptual consciousness and body memory.

In the conclusion, I summarize the central arguments and topics covered in each chapter and then address the perspectives for future research, among which I distinguish three most important, namely: the idea of synthetic consciousness and its meaning for experiential coherence, the issue of personal identity, and the phenomenological approach to uncertainty.