



The ‘We’ in ‘Me’: An Account of Minimal Relational Selfhood

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Abstract

Many philosophers contend that selfhood involves a uniquely first-personal experiential dimension, which precedes any form of socially dependent selfhood. In this paper, I do not wish to deny the notion of such a “minimal” experiential dimension as encapsulating the very givenness of experience as for a certain subject, such that experiences are accessible to this subject in a way that they are not for others. However, I do wish to deny any temptation to view minimal experiential selfhood as ontogenetically more primitive than socially constituted selfhood. That is, the ‘thinnest’ construal of minimal experiential selfhood fails to properly account for characteristics that are essential to human selfhood; namely, the intimate, embodied interactions that unfold at the incipient moments of human life. I argue that taking the ontogenesis of embodied human existence seriously involves accepting the de facto equiprimordiality of minimal experientialism with a ‘minimal’ form of relational selfhood, i.e. the co-constitution of experience through engagements with others.

Keywords Minimal selfhood · Social constitution · Embodiment · Shared experience · Mother–infant interaction

1 Introduction

In recent years, numerous philosophers have contended that selfhood involves a uniquely subjective experiential dimension (Gallagher 2005; Legrand 2007; Strawson 1994, 2009; Kriegel 2009; Nida-Rümelin 2017). Central to this stance is the idea that one’s *minimal experiential self* precedes any form of socially dependent selfhood, encompassing social construction theories (Mead 1972; Foucault 1990), the linguistic construction of a self-narrative (Bruner 2003; Rudd 2012; Schechtman 2011), the normative constitution of cultural mores (Korsgaard 2009; Markus and Kitayama 1991), or developmental psychological dependence on others (Vygotsky 1986). Zahavi (2005, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018) is perhaps the main proponent of this stance and it is thus his characterisation of minimal experiential selfhood, as prior to any social dimension of selfhood, that will be targeted in this paper.

For Zahavi, minimal experiential selfhood is interchangeably construed as the “for-me-ness” (2014, p. 22), “self-givenness” (2005, p. 12) or “pre-reflective self-awareness” (ibid., p. 61) of experience. The heart of these descriptions

is that consciousness involves an inalienable subjective dimension, in the sense that experiences are given to a subject—and thereby accessible to her—in a way that they are not for others. My experiences, for instance, are always *for me*, in that I am directly aware of them while no one else is. The ‘minimalism’ of this dimension of consciousness lies in the fact that it does not require reflecting on one’s consciousness, nor does it involve objectifying one’s self, nor does it bring into awareness oneself as an experiencer. Instead, it is merely the unique acquaintance that one has with one’s experiences, outwith any entailment of reflection or positing of an egological ‘I’. In other words, minimal experiential selfhood is not reflective awareness *of one’s self*, but the ineliminable (pre-reflective) awareness of the very fact of being conscious. That is, for all experience, regardless of specific features of intentionality or phenomenal content, “whatever it is like for me to have this experience, it is *for me* that it is like to have it” (Zahavi 2014, p. 19). A basic subjectivity—‘for-me-ness’—is thus inherent in the very nature of experience (hence the ‘experiential’ aspect of minimal experiential selfhood). As we will come to see in Sect. 2, such subjectivity, as implied by the description of ‘for-me-ness’, is not anonymous, but allows for a first-personal distinction of one experiential life from another. If, following Sartre (2003) and Zahavi (2014, pp. 11–12), ‘self’ is identified with the subject of experience, and there is

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a non-anonymous, phenomenologically minimal subjectivity to all experience, then for-me-ness equates to a minimal form of selfhood (Zahavi 2005, 2015, 2018).

As a precursor to my argument in this paper, it should be made clear that I do not wish to deny the in-built presence of this minimal experiential selfhood. Nor do I wish to deny that this for-me-ness is a necessary condition for consciousness. What I do wish to deny is any temptation to view this minimal experiential selfhood as “ontogenetically more primitive” (Zahavi 2014, p. 14) than socially constituted selfhood.¹ Human selfhood, I will argue, also necessarily involves the foundation of intimate interactions with others and the social world. These interactions dynamically (co-) constitute one’s experience and amount to a foundational, or ‘minimal’, form of *relational selfhood*. Crucially, such foundational sociality extends to the very earliest recognisable occurrences of human conscious life, so that we are, in short, social beings through and through.

To this end, I will explain that the ‘thinnest’ construal of minimal experiential selfhood, as described by Zahavi, fails to properly acknowledge the pervasive presence of socially constituted embodiment, which is essential to human selfhood. My plan is to emphasise the co-presence of minimal experiential selfhood with the constitutive involvement of others at the incipient moments of human life, such that over and above the worldly content of experience and the intentional modality of experience, the phenomenality of many experiential states is socially constituted in a fundamental manner.

¹ Implicated, here, is the fact that I am not interested in focusing on logical (pre-) conditions of consciousness, but in the ontogenetic psychology of human consciousness. One may worry that this (i) assumes an empirical view of consciousness that is reducible to neuropsychology, and/or (ii) turns a blind eye to transcendental phenomenology. However, it will become apparent that neither (i) nor (ii) is the case for interrelated reasons. Firstly, Sects. 3 and 4 will evidence focus on the dynamical and relational structure of consciousness, as a property of human beings considered holistically (i.e. as embodied beings who are embedded in subject-dependent contexts and are therefore irreducible to descriptions that accord with some independent ‘objective’ reality). Secondly, as Gallagher (2018) argues, even if one believes that this approach amounts to ‘de-transcendentalising’ phenomenology, value can still be found in the ‘nature’ that is investigatively invoked. That is, if human consciousness is not taken to belong to a ‘nature’ of independent reality that is ultimately reducible to physics, but instead belongs to a ‘nature’ of inherent relationality between organisms and their environments, then phenomenological investigations can be ‘de-transcendentalised’ yet attentive to subjects’ (en)active and transformative roles in encountering worldly phenomena. There are, of course, some big issues surrounding transcendentalism, naturalism and reduction at stake here, but I believe that my approach preserves philosophical relevance in virtue of highlighting the social pervasion of human consciousness from the perspective of ontogenesis (see Sects. 3 and 4) and thereby contributing to “a fuller and more holistic view of cognitive life” (Gallagher and Varela 2003, p. 19).

The paper’s key claim—that the most minimal form of experiential selfhood (i.e. for-me-ness) in humans is equiprimordial with socially constituted experiences, insofar as neither is developmentally prior to the other—will be unpacked across three stages. Firstly, I will further outline Zahavi’s specific notion of minimal experiential selfhood that this paper will be concerned with. Secondly, I will put forward the view that taking the ontogenesis of embodied human selfhood seriously involves accepting the de facto equiprimordiality of minimal experiential selfhood with co-constituted, other-dependent selfhood. In support of this view, I will draw on work by Krueger (2013, 2015) to show that early stages of human life, inclusive of the perspective of phenomenal consciousness, involve shared experiential states, in which one’s experiences are constitutively dependent on the modulatory role of others. One’s corporeality is thereby partly given over to another’s agency. Lastly, these kinds of experiential states will be shown to be present at the most incipient moments of human life, thereby affirming that any naturalistically grounded notion of pre-reflective human minimal selfhood should be construed as ontogenetically equiprimordial with socially constituted experience. Such socially constituted experience amounts to a form of minimal *relational selfhood*, which is not preceded by any other dimension of selfhood within the manifestation of human life.

2 Minimal Experiential Selfhood

There is a vast body of adherents from across the fields of philosophy, psychology and cognitive science to the view that conscious experience has an inalienable subjective character. That is, experience, in its most primitive and minimal form, is foundationally *given* to a subject in a phenomenally unique way. Whatever ‘I’ undergo in life, it is experientially manifest as *for-me*. Crucially for adherents of this view, such ‘for-me-ness’ is not a reflective or socially constructed achievement; rather, it is a pre-reflective, in-built feature of experience—an “adverbial modification” of any action (Rowlands 2013). As Zahavi (2014) summates:

for-me-ness[...] doesn’t refer to a specific experiential content, to a specific *what*[...] Rather, [...]it refers to the distinct manner, or *how* of experiencing. It refers to the first-personal presence of all my experiential content; it refers to the experiential perspectivalness of phenomenal consciousness. (p. 22)²

² It should be noted that Guillot (2017) has distinguished notions of ‘for-me-ness’, ‘me-ness’ and ‘mineness’ as, respectively: the special manner of being that an experience has *for* someone in virtue of it being uniquely *given* to her; the awareness *of oneself* that arises in virtue of living through an experience; the awareness of experience *as one’s own*. Importantly, for-me-ness does not seem to necessarily

This perspectival feature of phenomenal consciousness is claimed by Zahavi (2005, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018) to be our most minimal aspect of selfhood. It does not directly involve an awareness of *oneself*, nor does it necessarily involve awareness of experiences as *one's* own; rather, “[it] is part and parcel of any experiential episode qua its experiential givenness” (Zahavi 2017, p. 196). It is, in other words, the special, sole access that a subject has to her experiences by the very fact of having them. As such, minimal experiential selfhood is claimed to be a precondition for any more ‘full-blown’ sense of self, such as a socially constructed or narrative self.

Over the last couple of decades, Zahavi has defended the notion of minimal selfhood from various objections.³ Below are the bare bones of some of the core qualities that Zahavi claims are vital to a proper understanding of minimal experiential selfhood:

1. Within psychological and phenomenological literature, there are various long-standing empirically based theories (see Bonnier 1905; Merleau-Ponty 1964 for early accounts) which endorse the view that humans—even during pre-natal stages of development—have a basic bodily schema; that is, we have “a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without [reflective] awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring” (Gallagher 2005, p. 24). Having a bodily schema allows one to orient oneself in space, maintain bodily posture and accomplish various movements *without* consciously monitoring or deliberately attending to one’s body (ibid., pp. 19–30). In this sense, a bodily schema is a pre-reflective experience of one’s physiological and organic presence. As we will see in Sect. 5, a bodily schema

may be the source of our earliest consciousness. For Zahavi, what matters is that in spite of the pre-reflective nature of such a schema, it would be metaphysically and phenomenologically incorrect to characterise it as anonymous or impersonal. Rather, as with any form of consciousness, a bodily schema is uniquely given to the embodied subject in question; the pre-reflective bodily awareness is given *for* the subject, accessible to her in a way that it is not to others. A bodily schema, if it is to manifest our earliest consciousness, thus still involves the inalienable subjective character of minimal experiential selfhood. This provides an ontogenetic avenue by which one can claim that minimal experiential selfhood precedes any socially constructed dimension of self, in that claiming pre-reflective bodily self-awareness necessarily depends on the involvement of others would be a radical stance to take.⁴ It would suggest that one’s body—and one’s experience of one’s body—is in some way not one’s own (although, as we will see in Sects. 3–5, there may be more to this seemingly paradoxical claim than meets the eye). The very fact of being psychologically embodied therefore ostensibly supports the claim that minimal experiential selfhood ontogenetically precedes any social dimension of selfhood.

2. If one is tempted to argue that the pre-reflective awareness of bodily schema, or any other dimension of consciousness, amounts to some form of subjectivity, but not bona fide selfhood (e.g. Dreyfus 2007; Lane 2009; Lyrra 2009), then Zahavi’s response is that acceptance of subjective experience simply must simultaneously be acceptance of selfhood. That is, experience qua phenomenal consciousness must be self-manifesting, and to claim that such self-manifestation only amounts to some form of ‘bare’ subjectivity is to distort the phenomenological foundations of selfhood (Zahavi 2014, pp. 27–30). This is not to say that experience implicates ‘self’ as an object, or as some supplementary quale to a conscious act; rather, “all experiences regardless of their object and regardless of their act-type (or attitudinal character) are necessarily subjective in the sense that they feel like something for *someone*” (Zahavi 2018, p. 6). As noted in Sect. 1, the self that emerges with each and every experience is thus truly minimal in that it is nothing more than the subjective givenness of experience (i.e. experiences are necessarily *for someone*). Without the reflexive nature of experience—the fact that it must be given to an experiencer in a unique

Footnote 2 (continued)

entail me-ness or mineness—a fact exemplified by depersonalisation disorder, in which phenomenal awareness seems to lack subjective character of both one’s experiential presence and one’s experiential ownership (ibid.). Nonetheless, depersonalised experiences are still *given* to subjects in a unique way and thus still have for-ness. Indeed, for-me-ness pervades all occurrences of phenomenal consciousness (ibid.). Thus, while Guillot’s distinction is important, it does not imminently reject the view that for-me-ness is our most minimal aspect of selfhood. Consequently, the view that I put forward in this paper applies to Guillot’s refined conception of ‘for-me-ness’ as well as to any conception that assumes the conjointness of for-ness, me-ness and mineness. The point remains that, for human existence, no form of selfhood qua experience precedes one’s experience as relationally constituted by other subjects.

³ See Ciaunica and Fotopoulou (2017), Garfield (2015), Kyselo (2016), and Ratcliffe (2017) for recent critiques.

⁴ Although radical, we will see in later sections that bodily self-awareness may not necessarily *depend* on the involvement of others, but human existence is such that there is good cause to endorse a view of the imbrication of our social and bodily (self-)experience from the very earliest moments of life.

way—there is no perspectival or access-based distinction between the experiential states of one individual (or ‘self’) and another. To experience at all is to be pre-reflectively aware of having a perspective on the world.

3. In spite of the notion that minimal experiential selfhood is an “invariant” quality that is an in-built characteristic of all experience (Zahavi 2014, p. 66), it amounts to more than merely claiming that every subject is numerically distinct. This is done by fully appreciating the *subjective character* of minimal experiential selfhood. That is, whilst a critic may, from an observer’s stance, contend that one experiential life differs from another simply because one experiential life unfolds ‘over here’ and another ‘over there’, the same trivial distinction cannot be made from a truly subjective stance. For instance, if we suppose that two twins, who are type-identical in terms of their psychological and physical properties, are staring at the same wall, such that the externally determined content of their experience is type-identical, then from an observer’s perspective it may seem reasonable to claim that the difference between the experiences of these two twins is one of numerical distinction, but not one of qualitiveness (Zahavi 2014). However, Zahavi (2014) explains that if we assume the first-person perspective of one of these twins, then despite the type-identity of the content of experience, the self-manifestation of experience will still be unique to each twin. Due to the inherent ‘for-me-ness’ that, in a fundamental manner, acts as an individuating characteristic, the first twin’s experience will have a reflexive subjective presence that may be quite unlike the second twin’s (ibid.). To deny this would be to suggest that the eradication of one of the twins would simply amount to the eradication of a duplicate experiential life, but, from the perspective of the twin himself, this is of course not the case. The foundation of the very subjectivity of experience amounts to a pre-reflective awareness of one’s own consciousness, which acquaints one uniquely with one’s own experiential life during all instances of phenomenal awareness.

Taking the points from 1 to 3 together, we can see that minimal experiential selfhood is claimed to underlie and constitute all forms of experiential life. In spite of this, it is not intended to result in an isolating account of selfhood: Zahavi (2015, 2016, 2017) has been at pains to note that a full account of selfhood should be ‘multidimensional’ and should include various “dimensions of selfhood that are intrinsically interpersonally co-constituted” (2016, p. 1067). Yet this does not mean, for Zahavi, that one’s most basic form of selfhood depends on others, is derived from others, or is constituted by others. Before even considering sociality, one can return to the idea that minimal experiential selfhood

is an in-built feature of conscious life that accompanies any other dimension of selfhood, from our first moments of existence through to our last.

3 No Others, No Dice

In the remainder of the paper, I intend to show that as far as the lived manifestation of human existence is concerned, minimal experiential selfhood—the for-me-ness of experience—is de facto co-emergent with minimal relational selfhood—the co-constitution of experience through engagements with others. The argument does not reject minimal experiential selfhood, but it does reject a view of it as a singular ‘core’ or primordial foundation to actualised human selfhood. Instead, ‘for-me-ness’ is co-emergent with the social modulation of human experience.

A key aspect of this central argument is that, in its ‘thinnest’ form, minimal experiential selfhood amounts to a formal condition of any consciousness, but one that fails to singularly capture essential characteristics of *human* consciousness. Once one grounds one’s investigations as beginning from the embodied subjectivity of human existence, one finds that minimal experiential selfhood is conjoint with a minimal relational form of selfhood.

There are two features of this claim that merit prefatory exposition. Firstly, the claim is not merely stating that there is more to human selfhood than the perspectival ‘for-me-ness’ of experience. Nor is it a mundane exegesis of the manner in which human selfhood is bound up with the lives of others. Rather, the idea is that once one’s subject matter is the phenomenology of human individuals, the co-constitution of any individual’s experience by other humans cannot play second-fiddle to any other aspect of selfhood. So, although minimal experiential selfhood is essential to the very nature of our being, so, too, is the *relational* aspect of our being. That is, the relational aspect of our being, in which we are co-constituted by experiential interactions with others, is neither preceded by, nor explanatorily inferior to, minimal experiential selfhood. The second prefatory point to the claim is that the description of minimal experiential selfhood as “conjoint” with minimal relational selfhood is intended to capture the developmental co-emergence and proportionate importance of these two dimensions of selfhood. However, the two dimensions should not be viewed as interdependent, nor should one dimension be viewed as derived from the other.⁵ Instead, the claim highlights the

⁵ Conversely, the two dimensions of selfhood should not be seen as two distinct ‘selves’. Rather, they are the essential aspects of what Zahavi (2014) refers to as a ‘multidimensional account of selfhood’. As noted, these two dimensions are not interdependent, but they are inevitably interconnected and co-emergent as far as human ontogenesis is concerned.

de-facto co-existence of the two dimensions in the normal course of human development, such that they are inevitably interconnected and both necessary for an account of human selfhood.

With these two prefatory points in tow, we can move onto the first stage of reasoning, which arises from questioning just how 'thin' we can take minimal experiential selfhood to be. As far as Zahavi (2017) is concerned, minimal experiential selfhood is the "thinnest" form of self and "a condition of possibility for [...any] interpersonally constituted minimal self" (p. 197). This is because regardless of the worldly constitution of the content of consciousness—social or otherwise—the *how* of experiencing is an ever-present and underlying feature of the very possibility of having experiences (Zahavi 2005, 2014, 2016, 2017). In other words, minimal experiential selfhood is not concerned with *what* is experienced in terms of intentional act-types and the phenomenality of objects, but *how* it is subjectively manifest (Zahavi 2014, 2017).

The problem with this is that there is a danger of conceptualising this form of selfhood as so 'thin' that it loses its phenomenological value. For instance, if it were to be considered an isolable dimension of selfhood, then minimal experiential selfhood is no more than a theoretical precondition for consciousness. That is, its status is one of a logically necessary condition as regards the emergence of any consciousness.⁶ However, once one's concern is the manifestation of lived *human* consciousness, then minimal experiential selfhood cannot be a stand-alone dimension of existence. What I mean by this is that for-me-ness is always bound up with the what-it-is-like-ness of lived experience. Thus, as Zahavi (2014) himself asserts, for-me-ness is always an adverbial modification of experience, such that it is inevitably tied into "what-it-is-like-for-me-ness" (p. 19). As we will see throughout this section, once one moves away from the purely theoretical realm of logical dependencies and 'thickens' minimal experiential selfhood to this meaningful phenomenological level in which it is bound to the qualitative dimension of selfhood, one then has grounds from which to establish that minimal experiential selfhood must be developmentally conjoint with minimal relational selfhood.

⁶ As Zahavi (2014) points out, there are of course phenomenological repercussions to this for-me-ness, rather than it being merely a logical claim. However, these phenomenological repercussions only arise once the focus of analysis shifts to the actual emergence of consciousness. At the purely theoretical level of logical dependencies, for-me-ness carries minimal phenomenological weight in the sense of offering us subjective perspectivalness, but no further insights into the actual nature of human being-in-the-world.

As a first pass on this idea, consider that as long as consciousness, including minimal experiential selfhood, is not some form of transcendent Cartesian ego, but is naturalistically embodied (as Zahavi 2016 suggests himself), then even the 'how' of experiencing must inhere in an embodied subject. Put simply, the body is the site of conscious being—it is in and through the body that what-it-is-like-for-me-ness is present—and this fact should not be ignored even if one is seeking the 'thinnest' account of selfhood that is available. This is significant because, in a response to Ratcliffe (2017), Zahavi (2017) claims that if we want to 'locate' minimal experiential selfhood then we should not review *what* is experienced, but *how* it is experienced (i.e. how it is *for me*). For Zahavi, the *how* of experience is 'located' in the subjective dimension (i.e. for-me-ness) of experience, rather than the qualitative dimension (i.e. what-it-is-like-ness) of experience. Yet this is clearly a very particular interpretation of 'location'. It seems that if we want to naturalistically account for experience then we should not side-step the issue of *spatio-temporal* locality. Indeed, if we endeavour to address the matter of the spatio-temporal location of experience, then, in a broad manner, it seems safe to say that both the 'what' and 'how' of experience must fall within the purview of embodied being. As such, the body must be accorded a central role in any account of consciousness and, importantly, this means that the social modulation and connoting of the lived body, which we will look at in more detail over the subsequent two sections, must also be taken seriously.

It is important to stress that this grounding of experience in the (socially influenced) body applies not only to bodily intentionality, but also to the pre-reflective awareness of minimal experiential selfhood. Indeed, one can go so far as to claim that if minimal experiential selfhood is grounded in embodied being (encompassing the temporal dimension of the body), then although its presence may be invariant (i.e. the fact that it is *given to a subject*), the manner of its presence (i.e. the *manner of its givenness*) must not be, as a consequence of the unceasing mutability of the body.⁷

If one wishes to deny this and focus on nothing other than the very fact of the givenness of experiential selfhood, then, as alluded to earlier, it seems that one is only addressing a transcendental feature of consciousness—a mere condition of possibility. This is no doubt why Zahavi (2017) contends that minimal experiential selfhood is the "thinnest" form of selfhood, but in this guise it is in fact so 'thin' that it amounts to no more than a pre-condition for being. 'Pre-condition', here, is appropriate because, to reiterate, minimal experientialism is posited as an essential feature of *all* forms

⁷ This claim becomes highly relevant in the next two sections, in which we consider evidence for one's corporeality being experientially modulated through bodily interactions with others.

of subjectivity, for *all* conscious beings (Zahavi 2014, p. 14), but it is undeniably relevant *for human selfhood* that experience is always socially immersed (again, this point will be developed in subsequent sections). The very ‘thinnest’ consideration of minimal experiential selfhood—as an in-built feature of consciousness across all its organismic manifestations—amounts to a formal pre-condition for the inevitably ensocialled manifestation of human consciousness. But as soon as this pre-condition is rightfully considered as actually embodied by a human subject, who is experientially engaged with others in a fundamental manner, it is bound up with the ensocialled world. In Sects. 4 and 5, we will see that this social ‘binding’ takes place at the burgeoning moments of human consciousness, in such a way that human life cannot but be socially constituted and this social constitution is not preceded by any other dimension of selfhood. Such a stance moves beyond theoretical conditionals to rightfully imbue embodiment with social meaning in a manner that is lacking from existing accounts of selfhood. As embodied, one’s lived subjectivity is always a lived *bodily* subjectivity. And as a sense of self emerges and develops, one’s body—and its role in affective and cognitive behaviour—is modulated through interactions with others, both in terms of behavioural direction and the social meaning that is etched into such behavioural direction. In a notable sense, then, one’s corporeality is partly given over to others: it is co-constituted in social engagements. Ignoring this fact would be to distort the very first-person perspective that Zahavi rightly insists we take seriously, reducing it to a kind of propaedeutic of human being.

Putting this idea into a thematic description, we can say that human experience, at its burgeoning foundations, is characterised as *what-it-is-like-for-me-through-you-ness*. This is obviously somewhat cumbersome phrasing, but it is an important description. The whole purpose of Zahavi describing experience as “*what-it-is-like-for-me-ness*” (e.g. Zahavi 2014, p. 19) is to emphasise that ‘for-me-ness’ is an inescapable subjective dimension of experience—its “*persisting dative of manifestation*” (ibid.). What I think we should add to this is the social inescapability of human experience: the fact that human experience is manifest ‘through-others’. As we will see in subsequent sections, this feature is inevitable in human existence. It is not a mere addendum to conscious experience, but rather an *existential* of being human, which, if denied, leaves one stranded in a realm of pure *theoria*. It is only by taking seriously our actual presence as living embodied beings, who are socially co-constituted in a foundational way, that we can have a proper—appropriately ‘thick’—phenomenology of human selfhood.

Note that none of this runs counter to minimal experiential selfhood per se, in the sense of rejecting the omnipresent for-me-ness of experience. Rather, the argument is simply that once minimal experiential selfhood is treated not as a

theoretical condition for *any* form of conscious being, but as an actualised feature of human existence, then we should ease away from characterising it as some sort of separable ‘core’, or ‘ontogenetically primitive’ aspect of selfhood. Instead, it is tied to other dimensions of experience and its diachronic equiprimordiality with a minimally relational self—that emerges through socially ensconced bodily interactions—should be acknowledged.

4 The Shared Experiential States of Early Life

Having outlined the claim that minimal experiential selfhood should be treated as equiprimordial with minimal relational selfhood, this section will advance arguments for why we should take there to be a ‘minimal’ relational dimension of selfhood in the first place. Building on work by Krueger (2013, 2015),⁸ I will suggest that phenomenality is often socially constituted in virtue of shared experiential states, i.e. numerically single experiences that are given to more than one subject. These experiential states are socially constituted by co-participating subjects such that the scope, rhythm and feel of experience is affected by the bodily dynamics of the involved subjects. Selfhood, including its minimal experiential dimension, emerges within and through this socially constituted world.

Importantly, this is not a prosaic claim that certain experiences will only arise courtesy of others. Rather, the claim modestly states that our capacity to share experiences is prevalent during the burgeoning moments of life and therefore can be viewed as foundational to subsequent experiential episodes.

To begin the exposition of our phenomenal co-constitution, consider the striking dependence on others of humans during the first moments of post-natal life. Unlike many other animals, human newborns do not skilfully exercise their limbs, nor do they display the behavioural dexterity or survival capabilities of precocial, and even most altricial, species. Instead, human newborns are largely helpless, with survival only being guaranteed through the keen attention of caregivers. As a result of this dependence on caregivers, the direction and scope of neonatal experience is predominantly determined by social interactions. For example, Krueger (2013) describes how breastfeeding, which is a relatively complex social interaction that typically occurs

⁸ Krueger’s (2013, 2015) primary concern is shared emotions, rather than selfhood. Whilst the content of his papers suggests likely sympathy with the stance on selfhood presented in this paper, my argument ultimately goes further by (i) addressing the very earliest emergence of consciousness, and (ii) endorsing the social permeation of bodily self-awareness.

within the first hour or so after birth, involves “a structured turn-taking, attention-directing character shaped largely by the mother “jiggling” the infant as a prompt to resume feeding” (p. 516; see also Kaye 1982). Whilst the newborn is clearly (and significantly) not completely passive in this interaction, the direction of her attention and the general scope of the experience are controlled by the mother’s tactile encouragement and reciprocation of the newborn’s needs. Similarly, if we consider other neonatal behavioural accomplishments, such as imitation of facial movements (Meltzoff and Moore 1983; Gallagher and Meltzoff 1996), imitation of hand movements (Nagy et al. 2005), orientation and preference towards maternal voice (Standley and Madsen 1990; DeCasper and Fifer 1980), preference for direct gazes (Farroni et al. 2002; Guellai et al. 2015), preference for ‘happy’ faces (Farroni et al. 2007), and attunement to responsive and reciprocating expressions (Filippetti et al. 2013; Meltzoff and Moore 1983; Nagy 2008), then it is notable that these interactions tend to be contextually guided and regulated by the authoritative role of the participating adult. What we find is that the interactive behaviours of caregivers seem to solicit kinaesthetic possibilities from neonates, such that there is a dynamic and bodily ‘coupling’ between neonate and caregiver (Krueger 2013).

At this early juncture, one may protest that all the aforementioned behavioural studies demonstrate is that there is dynamic physical coordination and close causal influence during social interactions—something that no one would want to deny. However, the claim that I want to endorse is that these neonate–caregiver interactions are more than mere causal reciprocity and, from the perspective of *experience*, are in fact genuinely shared in the sense that they dynamically span the bodily behaviour of neonate and caregiver (ibid.). Such joint corporeality amounts to not only the content of experience being phenomenally possible as a result of mutual engagement, but also the manner of experiencing only manifesting through dyadic constitution. This results from the mutual enactment of a congruous social domain that is generated through the physical and affective regulatory guidance of a caregiver and the guided responsiveness of a neonate. Key to the generation and maintenance of such a social domain is the fact that, unlike adult humans, the attentional capability of neonates is largely *exogenous*, that is, determined by the unwilled excitation that results from various worldly stimuli (Posner and Rothbart 1998). Consequently, neonates’ attention is heavily dependent on caregivers’ tactile encouragement, gestural patterns, eye contact, gaze orientation and postural directing, amounting to “exogenous scaffolding that[...] allows the infant to exceed her developmental constraints and achieve a flexibility and stability of attention well beyond her current developmental level” (Krueger 2013, p. 516). In other words, the regulatory interaction of the caregiver and responsive neonate produce

a social system that is functionally shared.⁹ Crucially, this shared social system, which is exogenously attended to from the neonate’s perspective, unearths a novel phenomenological insight; namely, that neonates’ socially directed attention within a coupled interaction is properly co-constituted by another’s involvement (ibid.).

This idea requires the exposition of two points:

- (a) Firstly, there is the fact that attentional control is an integral part of first-personal consciousness: the capacity to selectively attend to specific aspects of the world is essential to actively shaping one’s experience (Krueger 2013). Such selective attention imbues experience with an unquestionable degree of ‘mineness’—an appreciation that there is agential power involved in what is engaged with.¹⁰ This is not to say that one has one-way control over what is attended to, but that one’s self-directed agency is an integral constituent—in conjunction with a world that affords certain actions—in experiencing the world subjectively. Without attentional control, one’s experience is not brought forth as a kind of matching process between one’s present cognitive state and the possibilities for action offered by the current situational context, but is instead determined unilaterally by worldly happenings. Subjective choice is simply removed from the picture if attentional control is absent. The capacity for endogenous attention is therefore central to securing a sense of agency for consciousness, and as this attention is seemingly lacking in neonatal life, it is likely that neonates “lack the feeling of stable perspectival selfhood” (Krueger 2013, p. 518).

This does not mean that neonates lack *any* sense of selfhood—they are still subjects with rich experiential lives. Rather, they lack the kind of autonomous control over a crucial feature of selfhood that human adults have and rely on caregivers as agential surrogates until their psychological potential is further developed. The point is that such agential surrogacy can be construed

⁹ Further evidence for this can be found from the ‘still face’ experiment, in which neonates display unease and irritation at mothers adopting expressionless faces in the midst of interactions (Weinberg and Tronick 1996). The claim is that the neonates’ irritation results from expectation of a certain kind of dynamic bodily resonance that is dyadically manifest through interaction, and which has been sedimented in the neonates’ “*intercorporeal memory*” through previous interactions (Fuchs 2016).

¹⁰ This agential selection of experiential attention is clearly a richer notion of ‘self’ than that required for minimal experiential selfhood. However, at this stage, I am merely developing Krueger’s work so as to illustrate the early-life presence of shared experiences. Later in this section, and in Sect. 5, we will see how no aspect of experience emerges developmentally prior to socially constituted experience.

as a form of *shared experience* (there will be more on this shortly), and as neonate–caregiver interactions are the earliest experiences that any human undergoes, it follows that these shared experiences should be considered foundational to any full-blown, multidimensional sense of selfhood.

- (b) Complementary to the important role of attentional control is the fact that the exogenous direction provided by a caregiver amounts to actually entering into the phenomenality of the neonate’s experience. As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs—and as is evident from the simple observation of neonate–caregiver interactions—there is a kind of systemic congruence of movement and posture when a caregiver is attending to a neonate (e.g. during breastfeeding). Importantly, there is also a kind of systemic *emotional*¹¹ congruence. The reasoning behind this can be put as follows: due to the fact that neonates lack endogenous attentional control, they also lack endogenous emotional control, and this means that they are phenomenally poised to experience the emotions of their caregivers (Krueger 2013). Although we have already seen an argument for the lack of neonatal attentional control, it will now be necessary to briefly consider the second and third stages in the aforementioned reasoning.

When it comes to emotions, it is common to think of them as involuntarily occurring states. However, it is more apt to think of them as experiences that are, at least in part, subjectively controlled (ibid.; Solomon 2004). For instance, as Krueger (2013) explains, one may be angered by some worldly event, but the unfolding of the experience of anger is not unilaterally determined by the world. Instead, one has the agential capacity, even whilst gripped by anger, to sustain the event “by willfully assuming a particular posture or stance[...or] focusing on specific anger-inducing aspects of the situation” (ibid., p. 518), or, alternatively, to quell the anger “by willfully adopting a more placid posture, breathing slowly, and directing[...] attention to pleasant things” (ibid.). Similarly, one may attempt to intensify an experience of joy by openly embracing it through physical expression—throwing ones arms in the air, clapping and whooping—or one may attempt to silence it by shunning such celebratory actions and assuming a reserved demeanour. Whilst they are often involuntarily incurred, emotional experiences therefore still involve an important degree of agential guidance. Crucially, this agential guidance goes hand in hand with attentional control: one can inhibit or intensify one’s affective responses by *attending* to the situation in a specific way

(Krueger 2013). Thus, neonatal lack of endogenous attentional control results in a lack of endogenous emotional control.

In virtue of lacking endogenous emotional control, neonates are openly susceptible to the modulatory emotional experience of caregivers (ibid.). To exemplify this, consider a mother playing a ‘game’ with her newborn, in which she leans forward and nuzzles her child before moving back and then repeating the action. The movements may be accompanied by ‘motherese’ statements (e.g. “Who’s a pretty girl?”, “Aren’t you clever?”, “Isn’t mummy silly?”, etc.), smiling, and encouraging head movements. In response, the newborn will be induced into smiling, vocalising (e.g. laughing) and playfully moving her body. As noted earlier, in spite of the newborn’s lack of endogenous control, the mother’s actions are not one-way directives, but are sensitive responses to the newborn’s behaviour. The ‘game’ is thus a kind of dialogue: an expressive give-and-take of attuned movements. Thanks to the innate disposition for capacities such as facial imitation, neonates are poised to enter into such intersubjective ‘dialogues’, wherein their other-induced imitations and expressive responses are reciprocated and further engendered by caregiver responses (Reddy 2008). Neonate and caregiver thus collectively form a dyadic system in which the unfolding of the interaction cannot be individualistically attributed to either of them (cf. De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007)). Moreover, as expressive mimicry generates corresponding emotional states (Kugiumutzakis et al. 2005; Zlatev 2008), such bodily expressed intersubjective dialogues entail a form of “mutual *affective resonance*” (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009, p. 478), in which we find “a finely tuned coordination of movements, rhythmic synchrony and mirroring of affective expressions” (ibid.). In this way, mother and child enter into, sustain and regulate a shared physical, affective and experiential domain for which they are simultaneously constituent and constituting participants. Notably, however, as the mother is the only participant with the capacity for endogenous control, it is her behaviour that is leading the expressive contours, postural rhythm and cadence of the co-constituted interaction (Krueger 2013). Once more, the newborn is not completely inert or lacking any form of regulatory agency within these interactions, but she is exogenously open to the physical and affective modulation of the mother/caregiver. Resultantly, neonates are affectively excited and moulded by caregiver behaviour within co-constituted interactions, in such a way that the very phenomenality of the neonate’s experience is intersubjectively evoked and parameterised (ibid.). The neonate can, at best, assume the role of “an assistant” in her own affective regulation (Taipale 2016).

Although clear cases of emotional sharing, such as the above mother–child ‘game’, are more prevalent several weeks or months after birth, one can speculate that the

¹¹ Throughout this paper, I am using the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’, and their derivatives, interchangeably.

immediate pre-birth cuddling, rocking and soothing that is generally part and parcel of ostensibly physical interactions, such as breastfeeding or the external regulation of neonatal temperature through bodily contact with caregivers (Hofer 1994), may already contain important affective components. They are, at the very least, preparatory experiences for the manifestation of the kinds of shared affective interactions that we have looked at thus far, and which are an important feature of early-life phenomenal consciousness. Within every shared experience, we find that the caregiver not only enables the unfolding of certain experiential content, but also plays a regulatory role in *how* this experience is manifested, encompassing the very process of experiential taxonomy (Krueger 2013; Merleau-Ponty 1964).

Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that many of the qualities that are taken to be our 'most human'—love, passion, camaraderie, memory, rationalisation—ontogenetically require the leveraging of shared experiences.¹² That is, subjects often go beyond expected capacities by co-creating and co-modulating collective domains of social organisation that are irreducible to any subject considered individualistically (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Indeed, Tomasello and Carpenter (2007) suggest that it is our capacity to share experiences (or, as they phrase it, 'share intentionality') that transforms our early cognitive development into something uniquely 'human', distinct from the social skills of gaze following, manipulation, group activity, and intersubjective learning that we share with other primates. When we share experiences, we move beyond individualistic possibilities because, in a notable sense, our physical and affective states fall partially under the control of (an) other(s), such that moods and cognition come to be co-constituted. This is in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's (1964) notion of *intercorporeality* (and Fuch's (2016) entailed notion of *interaffectivity*), wherein subjects' intentions 'inhabit' one another's bodies, leading to mutually modified entwining of the physical and affective expressions and reactions that encapsulate an experience. This entwining, or co-constitution, could give rise to new experiences that were hitherto phenomenally alien.

Whilst this clearly would not exactly mirror the dyadic shared experiences of neonates and caregivers, it certainly

seems plausible that the exogenous openness of infancy may still be active, perhaps in an attenuated form, in certain mature interactions.

5 Reconsidering Minimal Experiential Selfhood

It may seem that although the experiential world may be socially modulated and influenced from early moments of existence, this does not alter the fact that our very first experiences—regardless of their worldly nature—involve an in-built reflexive dimension (i.e. for-me-ness) that will accompany us throughout life. Why, then, should minimal relationality be accorded equal importance as regards human ontogenesis?

In Sect. 3, the first prong of a forked response to this question was outlined: without the socially co-constituted dimension of selfhood, minimal experientialism fails to capture essential characteristics of human life and is confined to a realm of pure *theoria*. Yet, for this to hold true, we require the second prong of the response: no human experience manifests prior to socially co-constituted experience. This requires the argument that the exogenous social guidance of human experience is present with the very earliest signs of life. Of course, until we have exact neurobiological correlates of consciousness, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when consciousness emerges. However, if we run with the idea that the earliest sense of self is most likely pre-reflective bodily self-awareness, as noted in Sect. 2, then I believe that one can make a case for this simultaneously being a kind of co-constituted awareness, in virtue of the social permeation of the body.

The very earliest signs of bodily self-awareness are evident at 6–14 weeks of gestation through activity of vestibular nuclei, which, amongst other roles, are essential to the integration of head position, eye movements and bodily orientation (Gallagher 2005; Jouen and Gapenne 1995). If this amounts to any form of 'self', then, in accordance with the arguments presented in Sect. 2, it must involve the pre-reflective for-me-ness of experience. However, what we should also consider is the driving force behind this vestibular nuclei activation. Assuming we follow common sense, the 'driving force' is naturally the uterine environment in which the foetus is found and through which all foetal sensory stimulation is filtered. More than being merely physico-biologically dependent on this uterine environment, the foetus is also experientially dependent on this environment (once again, this is under the hypothesis that some form of experience is actually manifest). Inasmuch as this environment is provided by an 'other' (i.e. the mother), there seems to be social (exogenous) modulation from the outset of being. In other words, there is a kind of inter-modality

¹² Indeed, taking this claim to its extreme, we can entertain the possibility of a neonate who, from the point of insemination, is kept alive in a strictly 'artificial' manner (i.e. brought to term ex-utero in an artificial womb and nourished through artificial feeding tubes, whilst ostracised from any social contact). Such a being may well have some form of self-awareness (e.g. for-me-ness), but it is unlikely that one would refer to it as 'human' as anything more than a biological categorisation (which I also believe would be the case with alleged claims involving feral 'children'). The real-time, embodied nature of early-life interactions with other humans is not only crucial to the physical and emotional scope and manner of experience, but also, speculatively, to the development of recognisable 'human' capabilities.

between bodily and social awareness.¹³ Indeed, the preferences that neonates display for their native language (Moon et al. 1993) and for the sight (Bushnell et al. 1989), smell (Marlier et al. 1998; Varendi and Porter 2001) and sound of their mothers (Standley and Madsen 1990; DeCasper and Fifer 1980), immediately after and perhaps even prior to birth (Marx and Nagy 2015), are suggestive of the fact that the experiential world of any human—in terms of dispositions, sensitivities and predilections—is already socially shaped during foetal development. With the phenomenality of consciousness being accumulative, in the sense of implicating one’s historicity, any and all subsequent experiences are lived through the basis of this primary social modulation. And such social modulation is not limited to overt sensorimotor behaviour: Ciaunica and Fotopoulou (2017) describe how the multisensory integration responsible for interoceptive capacities is also exogenously regulated through early-life social interactions. So, although bodily self-awareness is not preceded by any kind of socially implicated awareness, it is also not clear that bodily self-awareness precedes socially modulated (self-)awareness.¹⁴ The experiential world, it seems, is foundationally shaped by others during the same tentative moments in which a sense of bodily self-awareness is developed.

Although this social co-constitution of neonatal life may not be an *innate* feature of consciousness like minimal experiential selfhood, in the sense that one could, in theory if nothing else, survive through inorganic assistance, it does seem that intersubjective dispositions and engagements are *connate* in the normal course of human life. A minimally relational sense of self thus appears equiprimordially, in terms of development and foundational importance, with a minimally experiential sense of self.

6 Conclusion: Clutching at ‘Thinness’?

Whilst the preceding sections have demonstrated that the notion of a minimal relational self should not be dismissed, there is reason to suspect that Zahavi may still advocate minimal experiential selfhood as ‘thinner’. This suspicion is derived from Zahavi’s (2017) recent response to Ratcliffe

(2017) and Ciaunica and Fotopoulou (2017), who argue for the *interdependence* of subjective and intersubjective experience. These arguments, respectively, endorse (a) the intersubjective constitution of one’s intentional modalities, such that the general incorrigibility of one’s remembering, imagining or perceiving is developmentally dependent upon (and sustained in adulthood by) the social validation of others (Ratcliffe 2017), and (b) the idea that selfhood is derived from proximal interactions and physical contact with others during post-natal life, in virtue of neonates’ indiscriminate schematization of bodily movements and synchronous states that are ‘amodally’ determined by a caregiver (Ciaunica and Fotopoulou 2017). There is naturally much to be said and discussed about each of these views, but even the titular descriptions that I have provided are indicative of their close affinity to the position that has been presented throughout this paper. What matters for present purposes is Zahavi’s (2017) response to both of these views: that the aforementioned authors are missing a “crucial element” (p. 194) of minimal experiential selfhood, i.e. what matters is the *subjective givenness* of any conscious episode that precedes any other form of selfhood—not *what* is experienced, but *how* it is experienced (Zahavi 2014, 2017). In other words, Zahavi returns to his stance that *any* conscious episode has a fundamentally reflexive character, notwithstanding engagement in social interaction.

This response facilitates the opportunity to further clarify the position of this paper. Firstly, unlike Ratcliffe’s focus on intentional attitudes, Sect. 4 directly addresses the shared *experiential* nature of human life in terms of the broad manifestation and scope of experience, rather than the mode of intention. Secondly, unlike Ciaunica and Fotopoulou, the suggestion is not that minimal selfhood is *derived* from social interactions, but that the reflexive character of experience (which is not to be denied) is manifest equiprimordially with the social permeation of experience. In other words, the earliest signs of selfhood seem to manifest in tandem with socially exogenous constitution of experience. And unlike both theories, the position of this paper does not argue for the *interdependence* of intersubjectivity and subjectivity, in that minimal experiential selfhood could theoretically exist without minimal relational selfhood. However, retreating to its ‘thinnest’ theoretical basis divorces minimal experiential selfhood from the lived reality of embodied humans.

Thus, whilst the need to appreciate the minimal experiential dimension of the self is both pressing and pivotal to a proper phenomenological understanding of existence, minimal experientialism should not uniquely hold court as an ontogenetically primordial or pre-eminent ‘core’ of *human selfhood*. Instead, the minimal experiential aspect of self should be entwined at all times with a minimal *relational* aspect of self. This latter aspect of self manifests through the fact that others are developmental *consociates* (Schütz 1967)

¹³ It may in fact be more appropriate to speak of *intra-modality*, here, in the sense that ‘bodily’ and ‘social’ worlds are seemingly inseparably entwined (see Higgins 2017).

¹⁴ If one were to take a more conservative view of selfhood based on the fact that the thalamo-cortical complex, which is considered an integral neural correlate of consciousness (Koch 2004), does not begin to develop until 24–28 weeks of gestation and is not fully integrated until roughly 2 months later (ibid.)—a point at which many of the social abilities that have been noted are functionally ready—then it would seem that the bedrock of the social world is already in place when self-awareness emerges.

in any human's being, with this co-constituted existence forming the experiential bedrock for the unfolding of life.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human and Animal Rights This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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