

Comments on Paolo Bozzi, “Untimely meditations on self and non-self” Robert Kelly and Barry Smith, University at Buffalo

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How is it possible, given the nature of our experience, that we can delimit what we take to be *ourselves* from what we take to be *outside of ourselves*? In his *Untimely Meditations on the Relations between Self and Non-Self*, Bozzi considers two popular approaches to answering this question—one rooted in the discussion of personal identity in Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*, the other rooted in the origins of constructivism in psychology. He uses these to set this stage Bozzi for his own account, which is at the same time realist and also rooted in experimental phenomenology and Gestalt theory. He outlines the method he uses to establish first that, against at least one reading of Hume, there really is a self. And second that, against the extreme constructivist position, it (or rather, *we*, which means: each and every one of our selves) can be distinguished ontologically from the objects of the external world. Both self and non-self exist. And to deny the constructivist position that the latter exists only because we *create* it does not require that we somehow get “outside of ourselves” in any illicit way. Bozzi defends his position from within an analysis of experience. His realism is, thus, phenomenologically derived.

Hume, familiarly, contends that ‘self’ is just the name we give to a unity we take to be present in the unfolding of experience, but which is in reality absent. For Hume, “All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds...IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS” (1739/2000: I.1.i). These amount to, roughly, sense perceptions (for example sights, sounds, smells), and thoughts about sense perceptions (for example memories, acts of reasoning). These are all we can know, and hence, to delimit the self it is with these that we must begin—so we must take up a phenomenological approach. But when we pay close attention to our perceptions, says Hume, we see no unifying self:

For from what impression could this idea be derived? This question it is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity ... It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives...But there is no impression constant and invariable...It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea. (1739/2000: I.4.vi)

From the bundle of perceptions—colors, shapes, feelings of joy, ideas of distance, and so forth, each of which is separable from the other—we come to the view that this bundle is *ours*, that we are constituted by some unifying nexus that is thought to maintain our sense of ownership over our changing perceptions. However, Hume contends that we are mistaken. The term ‘self’ is a term without a referent.

But we can resist this Humean rejection of the self by fully embracing his idea that all we come to know when we reflect on our experience is a bundle of perceptions. That is, we can embrace Hume’s own phenomenological approach, starting from and then analyzing subjective experience, while leaving a place for the self. We can do this by viewing the self as the very totality

of these perceptions: the self *is* the bundle; as the bundle changes, from one moment to the next, so also the self changes; but it remains the self-same self, from moment to moment.

As Bozzi notes, a view of this sort can be associated with an unfortunate view to the effect that the external world would drop out of the picture. For if all I have are my perceptions, and if I am identical with the present bundle of perceptions that is my experience, then, as Bozzi notes, it would follow that “everything is myself.” The view in question would then lead us away from Hume’s unwelcome conclusion that I do not exist. But at too high a price; for it cannot be, surely, that I am everything.

There is, certainly, a sense in which it is right to say that subjectivity is all-encompassing. Independently of whether an object of experience becomes a candidate for being a part of the self or a part of the external world, it is always given to us as just that: an object of *experience*. What we need, and what Bozzi offers, is an account that can embrace this ubiquity of subjectivity while still managing to demarcate the boundaries of the self and in a way that gives some status to the realm of what lies beyond the self as something independent.

As George Davie observes in his discussion of subjectivism and objectivism in Hume, this is no easy task. Davie draws here on Hume’s near-contemporary Sir William Hamilton, whose views on Hume had made a considerable impression on Brentano and, Davie suggests, on Husserl himself. For Hamilton, as Davie puts it,

whenever one gets down, in a professional way, to the reflective analysis of the facts of consciousness involved in the cognitive situation, [the] apparently clear contrast between the body observed and my observation of it becomes extraordinarily cloudy and difficult to draw

But, even though we are able

to make some kind of contrast between the subjective and the objective, the perceiving and the object perceived, nevertheless the distinction it draws ... is incapable of endowing the object-pole with the *independence* of the subject-pole which is demanded by our common sense about the external world. (1987: pp. 257-58, emphasis added)

To fill this gap, rather than letting either the self or the external world drop out of the picture, Bozzi proposes that we appeal to Gestalt theory as a means to fix the limits of the self in relation to what is external, while all the while working from within the realm of subjective experience.

Gestalt theory teaches us, for example through its principles of reification and multistability, that our perceptions of what is given in sensation are structured. We recognize this, for instance, when we notice how four cleverly positioned three-quarter-filled circles can produce the perception of a square, even though no square is present, or when a seemingly disparate array of black smudges produces, in a flash, the image of a Dalmatian sniffing around a tree. This tells us that our basic sensations are distinct from the perceptual field that is configured out of them, and that in every experience, we have a two-way relationship between the observer and the observed. What we must determine, then, if we are to discover the boundaries of the self, is the nature of this relationship.

As noted above, Bozzi wants neither to go the way of Hume, claiming that, in fact, all there is is the observed, nor the way of the extreme constructivists, claiming that the entirety of the observed is simply a creation of the observer, something like a dependent mirage. To understand

his approach, we are to envision ourselves as embedded in a three-dimensional spatial grid that extends all around us. The objects of our experience can be seen as each occupying a distinct location within this grid, and each object might be given its own name. We begin to see immediately that there is a particular region of this grid that we are inclined to call 'self'. Its boundaries are not exact, but we know that it occupies a space in the grid just as the other objects of experience do. And while we cannot yet say where it *is* with any precision, we can say with certainty where it is *not*. I, for instance, am not over there in the dining room by the bookshelf. Moreover, he continues, we will find that there are subjective experiences taking place *within* the self—the hearing of sounds, the thinking of thoughts, and so on.

As we envision this structure of experience, two points are crucial. First, that the observer-observed relation obviously holds between the self and the other objects within the grid. Second, we become aware that we are not the only “owner of subjectivity” that stands in the observer-observed relation. Just as I am here noticing objects around me, so, too, are those other observers. In fact, that and I can even stand in the observer-observed relation to *the very same object*. For instance, you and I can both observe the box on the table, point to it, describe where it is in relation to the glass and so forth. Hence, the observer-observed relation can be seen as a *type* of relation with many instances, both between the self and different objects of experience and any given object of experience and different selves. From this, we can infer that the structure of experience consists in *subjective perspectives*, none of which is privileged. Understanding the self this way, as an object in the space of experience, now allows Bozzi to more clearly delimit its boundaries in relation to the observed objects—i.e. in relation to the external world.

Recall the lesson from Gestalt theory that our perceptual experiences are configured, or structured, out of what is given to us in basic sensation. This lesson fits nicely with Bozzi's analysis of experience and the subjective perspectives of the observer. In other words, there is a sense in which the self can bring about changes on the side of the objects, as when the appearance of the box on the table changes as we walk around it, or when we look at a drawing and see a duck, where you, looking at the same drawing, see a rabbit. Such changes are brought about by changes in the subject.

But Bozzi makes clear that we also experience the object being observed as *unchanged* in some way. As we walk around the table, it is *the table and the box themselves* that appear to us differently. When the light hits the table just so, its color changes. We do not then have the experience that a new table has popped into existence; the same applies when the box changes shape. We automatically distinguish *changes in appearance* of the object due to changes in the observer-observed relation, from *changes* in the object itself.

Importantly, this is all given to us in experience. That is, in addition to the succession of changing experiences of a given object, we also experience that object, the same object that is appearing to us now in this way, now in that way, as somehow “standing behind” this succession of changing appearances. Bozzi provides a number of examples of this phenomenon. For instance, we experience one and the same house even as we shift our focus from the doors of that house to its windows. We do not take the rain on the window to have actually distorted the countryside behind it, even when we acknowledge that it has distorted our perceptions. In this way, Bozzi captures both the primacy of subjectivity in experience as well as the independence of the observed from the observer.

We might summarize the lessons to be drawn from Bozzi's remarks in the following way. The self is an object situated in space, where the latter can be characterized as an array of relations, of which the *relata* include both observers and the observed. We and other observers, the selves,

are those loci of subjective experiences that can be found standing in observer-observed relations with other objects within the grid. Those objects are distinguished from each other, and other selves from my own self, by constituting (in Davie's terms) distinct *poles* of the token observer-observed relations they always instantiate. Just as we can separate distinct regions of observation, as when we observe this table here and that bookshelf over there, so we can separate the region of the self from other regions we experience as standing apart from us. To be sure, the ways in which the regions (and their objects) *appear to us* belong to the side of internal, subjective experiences and thus are in some sense to be located within the region of the self. But as Bozzi has argued, it is a necessary presupposition of such experiences that the regions and their objects are apprehended as something that we do not create.

A final point may prove illustrative. Towards the end of his discussion, Bozzi emphasizes that we are already familiar with the experiences he has been analyzing all along. It should not seem strange to us to posit more than what is initially thought to be strictly given to us in subjective experience. Bozzi writes, "The field of actual experience of the external world ... is phenomenologically wider than the set of things that can be pointed to ..." (§7). We apprehend that there is a world of objects beyond the edges of our acts of observation—that there is a pasture beyond the pitch black of night, that the newspaper persists behind the overcoat it is slipped into, and so on. And if we apprehend objects of the external world always only partially, while at the same time recognizing their existence as enduring denizens of reality, so we might apprehend our self, too, only partially, while recognizing its existence, too, as something that endures.

There are aspects of Buddhism (its views on the non-self, on non-attachment) that have been described by appeal to an analogy with the situation in which, in observing a wall-sized mirror (for example in a restaurant), you mistakenly take your observation to be of a whole set of objects out there in the world. The lesson is supposed to be that this is what experience is like all the time. We get attached to "worldly" objects of our experience, naming them, imbuing them with value, and so on, when we should really understand all of this as an experience-sized mirror illusion. The world, understood as independent existence, including the self, is empty. However, Bozzi's method for *identifying* the self and *delimiting* its independent existence from the external world has taught us just the opposite lesson. Reflection on the structure of experience can seem like the wall-sized mirror in a way—it *does* represent a world of objects beyond what is basically given (given to the senses). But for Bozzi this is informative rather than (as for Hume, and as for the Buddhist) illusory. We must *begin* with experience and work from there. Bozzi's self as an object in space, distinct from those stable objects apprehended as standing behind our subjective experiences of them, is derived precisely from the nature of experience. Yet, there is no need for skepticism about the self. Or total ubiquity of the self. The tools for a phenomenologically derived realism were present all along. Bozzi's project is to teach us how to use them, and to recognize that they allow a self to be situated in a world of objects.

References

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