

INDIVIDUALITY IN CONTEXT: THE RELATIONALITY OF FINITUDE

Introduction

A common misconception among critics of relational perspectives in psychoanalysis is the notion that an emphasis on the relational or intersubjective contexts of emotional experience defocuses, or even nullifies, experiences of individualized selfhood. As my collaborators and I (2002) have emphasized, such criticisms tend to collapse the distinction between phenomenological description and theoretical explanation. As a phenomenon investigated by the psychoanalytic method, individualized selfhood is always and only grasped as a dimension of personal experiencing. Explanations of this dimension (or of disturbances in it) in terms of its taking form within intersubjective systems do not in any way imply a neglect or annulment of it. Contextualizing is not nullifying.

Husserl (1900, 1913), widely regarded as the founder of philosophical phenomenology, claimed that careful phenomenological description of structures of experience is a precondition for adequate theoretical explanations of them. Individualized selfhood is a dimension or structure of experience. For more than 25 years, my collaborators and I (1984, 1984-85,

1987, 1997) have sought both to illuminate this structure (phenomenological description) and to conceptualize the intersubjective systems that facilitate or obstruct its consolidation (theoretical explanation).

The present chapter is a continuation and deepening of this twofold effort. Drawing on concepts from philosophical phenomenology—the work of Zahavi (2005), in particular—I will first argue that at the core of the experience of individualized selfhood is the sense of “mineness” of one’s experiential life. Next I will contend that attuned relationality—the other’s attunement to and understanding of one’s distinctive affectivity—is a central constituent of the relational contexts that facilitate and sustain the mineness that is constitutive of experiential life. Then I will explore Heidegger’s (1927) contention that it is authentically taking ownership of our finitude that individualizes us. Lastly, I seek to “relationalize” Heidegger’s conception of individualized selfhood by emphasizing the necessity of integrating the emotional experiences accompanying ownership not only of one’s own finitude, but the finitude of all those to whom one is deeply connected.

The Experience of Individualized Selfhood

A book by Zahavi (2005), *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, provides valuable philosophical tools that can help us in clearing up conceptual muddles about “the self” that pervade contemporary psychoanalytic discourse. He delineates three distinctive conceptions of self found in philosophy.

The Kantian self: The self of Kantian philosophy is not directly experienced; it is the inferred locus of identity in the midst of changing experiences. Our changing experiences all have something in common: they all have the same subject, they are all lived through by one and the same self. The Kantian self remains one and the same through time. This selfsame subject, according to Kant, stands apart from our experiences and constitutes their unity and coherence. Although Zahavi does not make this point, the Kantian subject seems also to be the agent of choice and action.

The narrative self: In this conception, the self is assumed to be an interpretive construction, an evolving narrative or story about one’s life and personality that reflects one’s developmental and relational history and one’s values, ideals, aims, and aspirations. One might say that, whereas the Kantian self is the inferred subject or agent of reflection, the narrative self is an object or product of reflection.

Experiential selfhood: From the experiential perspective, selfhood is claimed to possess immediate experiential reality and to be found in the structure of subjectivity itself. Specifically, originary selfhood is identified with what Zahavi calls the *first-personal givenness* or *mineness* of all of our experiences. All of my experiences are given to me as *mine*, as experiences that *I* am undergoing or living through. According to the experiential conception of selfhood, to which Zahavi gives primacy, the first-personal givenness or mineness of experiential life is claimed to be the source of our most basic or core sense of self.

The self-awareness that is intrinsic to the first-personal givenness of experience is not to be equated or confused with the positing of the self as an entity or object of reflection. Rather, the self-acquaintance that is inherent to the mineness of experience is variously characterized as immediate, prereflective, implicit, unthematized and nonobjectifying.

Nor is the prereflective self-awareness that constitutes the core sense of selfhood to be equated with the self-enclosed interiority of a Cartesian worldless subject. On the contrary, this basic self-awareness is world-immersed—that is, intrinsic to the first-personal givenness of our experiential engagement in the world. As my collaborators and I (2002) have claimed, experiences of selfhood and of the world we inhabit are

inextricably bound up with one another in a broader contextual unity, such that “any dramatic change in the one necessarily entails corresponding changes in the other” (p. 145).

Zahavi’s position on the interrelations among subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the forms of selfhood is quite complex. He wishes to replace the Kantian self with experiential selfhood grounded in the mineness of experience, but then does not explain how he would account for personal agency. Experiential selfhood is a condition for the possibility of the narrative self. The narrative self is intersubjectively constituted, but mineness (along with otherness) is a condition for the possibility of both the narrative self and intersubjectivity. Zahavi does not consider the formative intersubjective contexts that promote or undermine the experience of mineness itself. That is a task for psychoanalysts, who are less concerned with the a prioricity of the sense of mineness than with the variations and modifications of it that occur within lived experience.

The Intersubjective Contexts of Experiential Selfhood

I contend that, both developmentally and in the therapeutic situation, it is the other’s ongoing validating attunement to and understanding of one’s distinctive affectivity that strengthen and consolidate the mineness of one’s

emotional experiences, the foundation stone of one's sense of individualized selfhood. My distinctive affectivity, if it finds a hospitable relational home, is seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom I experience myself as uniquely being. In contrast, as Brandchaft (2007) has elegantly shown, the mineness of experiential life and the sense of individualized selfhood are undermined when, in order to maintain a needed tie with a malattuned other, one sacrifices one's own emotional experience and accommodatively adopts that which is perceived to be required by the other. Under such circumstances, my emotional experience is no longer felt to be truly mine; it has been co-opted, it now belongs to you.

Kohut (1977) made important contributions to our understanding of the context-embeddedness of experiential selfhood, but his tendency to reify self-experience muddied the phenomenological waters. Zahavi's delineation of the three philosophical conceptions of self can help disambiguate conceptual difficulties found in Kohutian self psychology. According to Kohut, the self is a bipolar structure composed of two basic constituents—nuclear ambitions at one pole and guiding ideals at the other—deriving from the person's developmental and relational history. The two poles are said to be joined by a “tension arc,” which is seen as the source of motivation for the person's basic pursuits in life. The Kohutian bipolar self would seem to

fit well with Zahavi's characterization of the narrative self—an evolving construction or story about who one is, was, and is seeking to become.

But consider the following sentence, whose structure is typical of many that appear in the self psychology literature: “The fragmented self is striving to restore its cohesion.” Who is the self that is engaging in such striving? Clearly it cannot be Kohut's bipolar self, since a narrative construction, particularly one that has fallen to pieces, cannot engage in an action such as striving. So it must be a Kantian self, a subject or an agent who stands apart from the fragmenting self-experience and engages in actions to restore its cohesion. Or perhaps it is just the particular person—Bob Stolorow, for example, not Bob Stolorow's “self”—who performs such actions. And who is the self that is fragmenting? Is it merely the person's story about himself or herself that is falling apart? Or is it something much more profound, such as the person's basic experience of selfhood, the enduring and unifying sense of mineness lying at the core of his or her being? Applying Zahavi's typology makes it clear that “the self” of Kohutian self psychology confusingly conflates the three philosophical conceptions of self and coalesces them into a reified entity that tells a story, fragments, and restores its own cohesion. This conflation and reification obscure Kohut's central and

most valuable contribution—illuminations of the phenomenology of self-experience in varying relational contexts.

Unlike the Kantian and narrative selves, experiential selfhood, at whose heart is the mineness of emotional life, is not an entity or a thing. It is a central dimension of personal experiencing and, as such, is exquisitely context dependent and context sensitive. Transforming such a dimension of emotional experiencing into an ossified thing automatically severs and isolates it from its constitutive relational contexts.

Selfhood and Finitude

The emphasis on the mineness of experience as being constitutive of experiential selfhood brings to mind Heidegger's (1927) conception of authenticity or *Eigentlichkeit*, which literally means ownedness or mineness. Authentic existence for Heidegger is owned, as opposed to disowned or unowned, existence. Does Heidegger's conception of authenticity as entailing ownership of one's existence deepen our understanding of how individualized selfhood is constituted within formative relational contexts? At first glance, Heidegger's idea does not seem to help us, as he appears to regard authentic existing as a singularly nonrelational affair.

For Heidegger, authentic existing is grounded in nonevasively owned being-toward-death. Torn from the sheltering illusions of conventional everyday interpretedness (*das Man*), one who exists authentically apprehends death, not as a distant event that has not yet occurred or that happens to others (as the “idle talk” of *das Man* would have it), but as a distinctive possibility that is constitutive of his or her very existence, as his or her “ownmost” and “uttermost” possibility, as a possibility that is both certain and indefinite as to its “when” and that therefore always impends as a constant threat. Authentic existing is disclosed in the mood of anxiety, in which one feels “uncanny”—that is, no longer safely at home in an everyday world that now fails to evade being-toward-death. I have shown (Stolorow, 2007) that Heidegger’s characterization of existential anxiety bears a remarkable resemblance to the phenomenology of traumatized states and that emotional trauma plunges one into a form of being-toward-death.

Heidegger claims that death as one’s ownmost possibility is “nonrelational,” in that death lays claim to one as an individual, nullifying one’s relations with others. One’s death is unsharable:

No one can take [another’s] dying away from him.... By its very essence, death is in every case mine.... Mineness ... [is]

ontologically constitutive for death. (Heidegger, 1927, p. 284).

Thus, in Heidegger's view, it is authentic being-toward-death as our ownmost, nonrelational possibility that individualizes and singularizes us, enabling us to seize ownership of and responsibility for our own existence.

The Relationality of Finitude

Heidegger's claims about the nonrelationality of authentic existing might seem jarring in view of his monumental efforts to recontextualize the Cartesian isolated mind and his insistence that human existing is always a "being-in-the-world" and a "being-with-one-another." I have contended (Stolorow, 2009c), however, that another view of authentic existing, in which it is relationally constituted, is implicit in Heidegger's conception of "solicitude." Authentic or emancipatory solicitude, for Heidegger, is a mode of being-with in which we "leap ahead" of the other, welcoming and encouraging his or her individualized selfhood by liberating him or her to exist for the sake of his or her ownmost possibilities of being. But recall that, for Heidegger, being free for one's ownmost possibilities also always means being free for one's uttermost possibility—the possibility of death—and for the existential anxiety that discloses it. So if we are to leap ahead of the

other, freeing him or her for his or her ownmost possibilities of being, we must also free him or her for an authentic being-toward-death and for a readiness for the anxiety that discloses it. Therefore, according to my claims about the contextuality of emotional life, we must be-with—that is, attune to—the other’s existential anxiety and other painful affect states disclosive of being-toward-death, thereby providing these feelings with a relational home in which they can be held, so that he or she can seize upon his or her ownmost possibilities in the face of them. And, as I have been contending, such attunement to the other’s distinctive emotional experience contributes to the consolidation of his or her core sense of individualized selfhood.

What makes such integrating attunement possible? Vogel (1994) points us toward an answer to this question by illuminating a dimension of the relationality of finitude. Just as finitude is fundamental to our existential constitution, so too is it constitutive of our existence that we meet each other as “brothers and sisters in the same dark night” (p. 97), deeply connected with one another in virtue of our *common* finitude. I have contended (2007) that our existential kinship-in-the-same-darkness is a condition for the possibility of forming bonds of deep emotional attunement within which the devastating emotional pain inherent to the traumatizing impact of our finitude can be held and integrated.

Critchley (2002) points the way toward a second, and to my mind essential, dimension of the relationality of finitude:

I would want to oppose [Heidegger's claim about the non-relationality of death] with the thought of the fundamentally relational character of finitude, namely that death is first and foremost experienced as a relation to the death or dying of the other and others, in being-with the dying in a caring way, and in grieving after they are dead.... With all the terrible lucidity of grief, one watches the person one loves — parent, partner or child — die and become a lifeless material thing. That is, there is a thing — a corpse — at the heart of the experience of finitude. This is why I mourn.... [D]eath and finitude are fundamentally relational, ... constituted in a relation to a lifeless material thing whom I love and this thing casts a long mournful shadow across the self. (pp. 169-170)

Authentic being-toward-death entails owning up not only to one's own finitude, but also to the finitude of all those with whom we are deeply

connected. Hence, I have contended (2007), authentic being-toward-death always includes being-toward-loss as a central constituent. Just as, existentially, we are “always dying already” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 298), so too are we always already grieving. Death and loss are existentially equiprimordial (Agosta, in press). Existential anxiety anticipates both death and loss.

Recently I encountered unexpected support for my claim about the equiprimordiality of death and loss in some works by Derrida. In *Politics of Friendship* (Derrida, 1997), for example, he contended that the “law of friendship” dictates that every friendship is structured from its beginning, *a priori*, by the possibility that one of the two friends will die first and that the surviving friend will be left to mourn. In *Memoirs for Paul de Man* (1989), he similarly claimed that there is “no friendship without this knowledge of finitude” (p. 28). Finitude and the possibility of mourning are constitutive of every friendship. Derrida (2001) makes this existential claim evocatively and movingly in *The Work of Mourning*:

To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable,

that one of the two of you will inevitable see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other.... That is the ... infinitely small tear, which the mourning of friends passes through and endures even before death.... (Derrida, 2001, p. 107)

[This is] the mourning that is prepared and that we expect from the very beginning.... (p. 146)

From the first moment, friends become ... virtual survivors. Friends know this, and friendship breathes this knowledge ... right up to the last breath. (p. 171)

Consider, with regard to the relationality of finitude, the emotional impact of collective trauma, such as the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (2009b). As we watched the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapse right before our eyes and witnessed the instant death of more than three thousand people, did we experience terror only about our own finitude and the possibility of our own deaths? Or were we terrified as well, or even primarily, for the lives of those we loved—our children for example?

It might be objected that being-toward-loss cannot be a form of being-toward-death because, whereas the uttermost possibility of death is “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 307), loss does not nullify the entirety of one’s possibilities for being. Yet, I would counter, in loss as possibility, all possibilities for being in relation to the lost loved one (other than imaginary and symbolic possibilities) are extinguished. Thus, being-toward-loss is also a being-toward-the-death of a part of oneself—toward a form of existential death, as it were. Traumatic loss shatters one’s emotional world (2007), and, insofar as one dwells in the region of such loss, one feels eradicated. Derrida (2001), once again, captures this claim poignantly and poetically:

[T]he world [is] suspended by some unique tear ... reflecting disappearance itself: the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up.... (Derrida, 2001, p. 107)

[A] stretch of [our] living self ... a world that is for us the

whole world, the only world ... sinks into an abyss. (p. 115)

My effort to relationalize Heidegger's conception of being-toward-death is captured in my poem, "Finitude" (2009a):

If we're not self-lying,

we're always already dying.

If we're not self-deceiving,

we're always already grieving.

The answer to the existential quiz?

"Good-bye is all there is."

Conclusions

I have contended that attuned relationality, the other's attunement to and understanding of one's distinctive affectivity, including the horror and anguish that derive from the traumatizing emotional impact of our finitude and the finitude of all those with whom we are deeply connected, is a central constituent of the relational contexts that facilitate and sustain a sense of individualized selfhood and of the often excruciating mineness of our experiential life, indeed, of our very being. In the course of developing this

thesis, I have delineated two constitutive dimensions of the relationality of finitude—our kinship-in-the-same-darkness and our being-toward-loss.

Grasping the relationality of finitude holds, as Vogel (1994) alludes, significant ethical implications insofar as it motivates us, or even obligates us, to attune to and provide a relational home for others' existential vulnerability and pain. Imagine a world in which this ethical obligation has been universalized. In such a world, human beings would be much more capable of living in their existential anxiety, rather than having to revert to the defensive, destructive, de-individualizing evasions of it that have been so characteristic of human history. A new form of identity would become possible, based on owning rather than covering up our existential vulnerability. A new form of human solidarity would also become possible, rooted not in shared ideological illusion but in shared recognition and understanding of our common human finitude. If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light. As individualized, finite human beings, finitely bonded to one another.

