A Window to the (Dissolved) Self?

— Psychedelic Ego-dissolution as a Case of Minimal Self-consciousness

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Philosophy

Bachelor’s Thesis, 15 credits

Spring 2023
The legs, for example, of that chair – how miraculous their tubularity, how supernatural their polished smoothness! I spent several minutes - or was it centuries? – not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually being them – or rather being myself in them; or to be still more accurate (for “I” was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were “they”) being my Not-self in the Not-self that was the chair.

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the last decade the research has increased significantly in the field of psychedelics. This nascent field provides many questions and angles for philosophical work and discussion, especially within the philosophy of mind. One phenomenon of such interest is the reported experience of “ego-dissolution” (a.k.a Drug Induced Ego Dissolution, DIED). This notion refers to the feeling of an ego that dissolves, that you lose the experience of a self, meld to the surroundings or diminish as the person you are used to experiencing.

Along with this evolution in the discussions of psychedelics, there is a long and established tradition of discussing the self within the philosophical domain, involving many different approaches and theoretical attempts (Blackmore & Troschianko, 2018). Some of these theories can help us understand the complex phenomenon of psychedelic ego-dissolution and give us tools on how to grapple with it. It hence becomes essential to have a firm grip of how self-consciousness can be defined before one starts to grapple with how to assess a potential dissolution of the same thing.

In this essay, I will investigate and shed light on the obscure phenomenon of psychedelic ego-dissolution by showing how it can be accommodated and explained by Dan Zahavi’s experiential minimalism (Zahavi, 2014), one of the more influential theories of self-consciousness. I will argue that the ability of this theory to explain the phenomenon of ego-dissolution is a further point of strength of the theory. Zahavi proposes a definition of self and self-consciousness as an integral part of our experiences; this is what he calls “for me-ness”.

The researched data on ego-dissolutions, where subjects report of dissolving selves, is indeed an empirical challenge if one perseveres with such a notion of self-consciousness, which proposes that the self-consciousness is embedded in the experience. This since those reports give accounts of dissolving self-consciousness, the same time as having an actual experience.

My question here, however, is whether these accounts of ego-dissolution give us reasons to assess the subject’s self-consciousness as totally non-present in these situations. My thesis, is that we do not have such reasons and my argument is rooted in a definition of a self, and self-consciousness, as a perspectival, intrinsic part of an experience.

The presentation in this essay will proceed in the following order. In the two first chapters (2 & 3), I will provide a context of the discussion by presenting the emerging psychedelic scientific and philosophical discussion, and theorizing of the self, respectively. I will then, in chapter
four, present the phenomenon of ego-dissolution and the contemporary philosophical discussion surrounding it. Lastly in chapter five I will put the parts together and analyze the ego-dissolution and how it can be made understandable within a philosophical context, especially within the theory of experiential minimalism.
Psychedelic research has blossomed from the 2000s and some have coined it as a renaissance, referring to the vast research that was conducted before it was shut down in the seventies as a consequence of the war on drugs (among other things\(^1\)). Much research has been undertaken in recent years on the potential of psychedelic substances as an aid and medicine for depression, end-of-life anxiety, and different kinds of substance abuse. Psychedelic therapy is now in the 2020s a rapidly growing field and there are a lot of clinical tests going on. (Nutt, 2019; Sessa, 2016)

Psychedelic substances have been around for thousands of years and have been used in different cultures for several purposes, such as shamanic rituals. Psychedelics were mainly introduced to the west in the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century as Arthur Hefter isolated mescaline. About half a century later Albert Hofmann discovered LSD, 1943, and during the 1950s and 1960s there were serious and promising studies of psychedelics (Sessa, 2016; Pollan, 2019). In the 1990s the research got taken up again after much work by Rick Strassman, who researched the chemical DMT (Strassman, 2001). And with the development of fMRI in the early 2000s, psychedelic research started to get moving again, much thanks to the research of Robin Carhart Harris at Imperial Collage in London. One of the more researched and discussed psychedelic compounds today is the substance psilocybin, which is found in some species of mushrooms, in some popular jargon referred to as “magic” mushrooms.

Psychedelic compounds constitute a specific class of drugs that acts mainly on the serotonin 5-HT2A-receptor. The effects produce a different “dreamy” awake state with enhanced colors, inner pictures, enhanced emotions, and a state where people seem more suggestable. The visual aspects of the effects of psychedelic compounds have traditionally coined them “hallucinogens”, and some researchers have called them “nonspecific amplifiers”. The effect lasts for a couple of hours depending on which kind of chemical it is (Nutt, 2019, Pollan 2019).

When it comes to philosophy, records tell that the ancient Greeks had ecstatic celebrations in their Elysian mysteries and further on in more modern history psychedelic substances and intoxication has been studied and discussed by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Henri Bergson

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\(^1\) Some theorists and scientists suggest that the war on drugs has been over-emphasized as the predominant reason to the shutdown of the research, when there actually were other contributing factors as well such as development in scientific methodology that made this kind of research hard to conduct, and obsolete with the old methods, see for example (Hall, 2022)
and William James (Hauskeller & Sjöstedt-H, 2022). After the research has been increasing in the last two decades some philosophical discussions about these substances have found their way out as well. In contemporary philosophy, the theme of psychedelics and its implications has been discussed from a variation of angles such as ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind (Letheby, 2021; Hauskeller, C., & Sjöstedt-H, P. (Eds.), 2022).

Psychedelics put difficult questions about the mind to the test. Researchers have grappled with how to understand the experience and some have come up with models which propose that psychedelics work by introducing some kind of raised level of entropy in the brain which makes different brain regions, that normally don´t communicate with one another, start to make contact and exchange information (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014). In this different state of mind, the Default Mode Network, which is the region in the brain responsible for much of the planning ahead, remembering, consider other people and evaluating oneself, gets more or less temporarily suspended. Since the DMN is acting like a hub responsible for connecting other brain regions together, this shut down could be likened to the conductor in a symphony deciding to leave, whereas the different parts of the orchestra in his/her absence instead starts to “jam” more freely without any designated leader (where these different parts/instruments of the orchestra could be likened to the brain regions) (Ibid).

In this different state of mind, the experience of ego-dissolution sometimes can occur to subjects on sufficiently high doses of psychedelic substances. We will investigate this experience soon, but first, I will present and explain a bit about the discussions and conceptions of the human self, which philosophy has grappled with.
3 THE SCIENCE OF SELF AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

3.1 Notions and distinctions

Before we immerse into the world of theory in this area, it’s proper to present some necessary notions, distinctions and definitions. For starters, there is a difference between the concepts of self and self-consciousness, where the latter is the awareness or consciousness about “the self” (Smith, 2022). One proposed comprehensive definition of the concept of the self by Bayne (2022, p 235) is that it is the answer to the question “What, most fundamentally, are you?”. Gallagher and Zahavi (2021, p. 234) also speak of a similar traditional view of the self as an “identity pole”, a principle of identity. This is a view of self that has also been defended more recently by philosophers such as Searle, who infer that the self has to exist since it is hard for perceptions to be made sense of if they do not occur from a point of view, as well as conscious experiences is hard to account for if they do not occur to a self (Searle, 2005, as cited in Gallagher and Zahavi, 2021, p 234). However, Gallagher and Zahavi (and Gallagher, 2000), propose two different views of the self; the self as a narrative construction (narrative self), and the self as an experiential dimension (minimal self).

These two concepts of self differ in many ways. The narrative self is thought of as a kind of created story for each living person, constructed by experiences, thoughts, interpretations etc. This self is dependent of narrative self-interpretations and constructed by these, and it is more of a self-realized achievement throughout life rather than something given. This narrative self also fills a temporal function to weave together all the experiences and events from different time periods into an understandable complete story. Even if this narrative story has some given conditions in its start; parents, social milieu, culture etc., it is open-ended and it is up to the specific person to bring it further and choose how to proceed. The narrative story becomes a (more or less coherent) leitmotif in our life, which is more of an “under construction”-project and includes our goals, values, and ideals (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 235f). Dennett puts it in a way that this self is “a center of narrative gravity”, not a substantial thing but something abstract, and he also suggests that we as humans are “spun” by this narrative tale, rather than the other way around (Dennett, 1991, as cited in Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 236).

The minimal self on the other hand is thought of as something present in experience, not some additional thing or superstructure, but a first-hand perspectival, subjective aspect of experience (Zahavi, 2018, p. 707f). The phenomenologists have traditionally referred to this notion of self
as “an aspect of phenomenal experience”, and it is a view that enables the subjectivity-in-the-experience without further references to any other thing. Gallagher & Zahavi (2021) describes this more as an experiential dimension; “An intrinsic aspect of an embodied agent in the world” (Ibid, p 238). To make the difference between the minimal and the narrative self here more understandable and clearer one might compare them with the two notions described below; “I” and “Me”, where the minimal self would be likened to the “I” – the self that experiences the world first hand, and the narrative self would be likened to the “Me” – the more reflective self which continuously evaluate the lived experiences.

One notion that could be important to bear in mind when discussing the self and potential “loss” of it is that the metaphysical question of whether a self really exists is not the same thing as discussing whether a subject experiences this notion (or feeling) of self. Letheby, (2021, p. 152) for example, suggests in his discussion of the self and potential experiences of its dissolution to remain neutral to the metaphysical question of the self. Instead, he proposes to focus on questions such as whether there can exist conscious experience without the phenomenal feeling of having a self.

3.2 Theories of self and self-consciousness

There is a long history of discussing the self in the philosophical community. Many different sets of notions for the self have been developed, and there is still no real consensus in the philosophic community on what a self is (Blackmore & Troscianko 2018). William James was one philosopher who discussed the self in the latter part of the 19th century and who introduced the distinction of “I” and “Me”, where the “I” referred to the self as a subject, and the self as “Me” referred to the self as an object (James, [1890] 1990). During the latter part of 19th century and the start of the 20th century there was also a strong tendency, for example, represented by Royce and Mead, to describe and define the self as socially constructed, a thing that only could come up and exist in relation to other people (Royce and Mead as cited in, Zahavi 2016, p 10). The phenomenologist movement with Husserl, on the other hand, perceived the self at first as something non-existent and separate from the actual experience (which he and the phenomenologist movement were mainly interested in); Husserl then came to focus on questions on the self as a stream of consciousness; merging the themes of temporality, self, and self-consciousness (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 231f, 237f).
Millière & Metzinger (2020) mention that within the philosophy of mind, traditionally, one predominant position has been what could be called the “ubiquity thesis”, which states that the consciousness of self is ubiquitous as long as a person is conscious. This idea suggests that as long as there is consciousness there is always a minimal sense of self involved in the experience. (Millière, 2017) also refer to this as the self-awareness principle and define it as “necessarily, whenever one is in a conscious state, one is minimally self-aware”. The idea of a, to all experiences, corresponding minimal self is also the view what the later phenomenologist school adopted, which corresponds to the idea that there can be no experience without an experiencer. This concept of minimal self could further be grasped as the common factor behind all the experiences, the experiencer (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 234). As I will develop further, Zahavi has defined this minimal self as the for-me-ness in the experience, which contrasts with a narrative self, where the former is more of an experiential dimension (Ibid, 236f).

Much of the discussion about the self, within philosophy, has in recent years been about whether it exists and which metaphysical status it then should be attributed. Within the realm of available theories, some have come up that compete with these described “self-in-consciousness”-theories, mentioned above. Thomas Metzinger is one prominent contributor whose theories could be sorted under what could be called neuro-skepticism or “no-self doctrine” (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2021, p. 232). Metzinger suggests that the self is merely an illusion and convenient construction people use in their daily lives, but at the same time, a construction that doesn’t refer to anything substantial in reality, on the physical level. Among other theories there is also the more modern social constructivist, postmodern, theory, which holds that the self is merely a social construction (Ibid).

There is also the emerging view of higher-order theories, such as the theory of predictive processing. These suggest that the self is created in a process “above” the immediate experience, for example, in complex organizing brain functions which act beyond the realm of conscious experience, but at the same time is responsible for the higher form of conscious awareness which could be argued to be somewhat unique for humans within in the animal kingdom. (Letheby, 2020).

After this overview of self and self-consciousness-theories, I will now proceed to one philosopher who has followed the tradition of the phenomenologist and worked further on their concepts – namely the Danish philosopher Dan Zahavi. I will give an account for his theory of self-consciousness known as experiential minimalism.
3.3 Zahavi’s experiential minimalism

Zahavi (2020, p 3) describes how he for some decades has been promoting and defending a view of the self, called experiential minimalism. Zahavi describes it as follows, in order to do justice to the subjective part of an experience, we must acknowledge that there is not just a “what it’s like-ness involved in this experience”, but rather a “what it’s like for me-ness”. This calls to attention that there is not something mere happening here, but it happens to me (or the specific person involved in the experience). This for me-ness is the minimal consciousness we have discussed earlier and the theory underlines that there is a subjectivity immersed in the experience.

To make sense of this idea, Zahavi also discusses two other notions, pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness, which corresponds well to the notions minimal and narrative self – where one is the less self-conscious or observing faculty of the experiencer and the second is the more reflecting narrative superstructure on the ongoing experiences or events. Sartre has earlier suggested that these are two modes of consciousness where the former is more essential, and can exist independently without the latter (Sartre, 2003 p 126, as cited in Zahavi, 2014, p 11). He thereby meant that the pre-reflective self-consciousness must be considered to possess an elementary form of selfhood (Ibid). It is very much in this pre-reflective self-consciousness, or the minimal self, described above, which can be seen as the same thing, that we find the very “minimalism” of Zahavi’s theory. Zahavi proposes that self-consciousness is to be found at this level, before the self-reflective level, but still this doesn´t have to involve any self-reflection (Ibid, p 26ff). Zahavi proposes that it is reasonable to define a being, conscious (and immersed) in its acting and experiencing, as self-conscious – even though this individual doesn´t reflect upon itself or is being self-conscious of this act and experience in a more reflective manner (Ibid). The minimalism is here to be found in the fact that this consciousness of for example a sportsman immersed in his or her competitive act and in “the zone” – is enough to deem the person as self-conscious, even though he or she is not reflecting over the situation, using the narrative self-consciousness/narrative self.

I will now leave the descriptive theoretical part to immerse in my main argument, but before I address some parts again in my main argument, I will develop a bit more on ego-dissolution and the problem of assessing these experiences in relation to a self.
4 PSYCHEDELIC EGO-DISSOLUTION

4.1 The discussion of psychedelic ego-dissolution

Since the psychedelic experiences has been monitored and recorded closely within the research on psychedelic therapy, a large quantity of data is available. The psychedelic experience is complex with many facets; people tend to lose their ordinary sense of bodily awareness, colors can become stronger and the environment tend to be perceived as warped. One specific part of the repertoire of psychedelic experiences, at sufficiently high doses, is the experience of ego-dissolution. This is an experience of losing one ´s sense of self, merging with other objects, or being “one with the universe” (as the classic psychedelic description entails). This psychedelic ego-dissolution, usually it goes under the acronym DIED (drug induced ego-dissolution), has been studied and discussed by several philosophers (Milliere, 2017).

So, what is actually going on in a psychedelic ego-dissolution? Some psychologists and neurologists have monitored the brain during psychedelic sessions and episodes of ego-dissolution and tried to clear the case. They also made some significant findings; Lebedev et al. (2015) found an association between psilocybin-induced ego-dissolution and decreased connectivity between high-level cortical regions and the temporal lobe. Their overall findings indicated that the normal perception of self and self-consciousness might rest on these systems in the brain functioning in a normal way. Nour & Carhart-Harris (2017) on their hand concluded that their studies suggest that the disruption of the normal modular organization of the brain´s resting state functional network causes abnormalities in self-experience.

Nour et al. (2016) investigated the DIED-experiences by using questionnaires with the participants about their experiences. They looked at results from 1043 psychedelic experiences reported in questionnaires from different subjects on the Internet. The questionnaire involved questions like, for example, "All notion of self and identity dissolved" or "I lost all sense of ego", and the answers were compiled to an average score, or coefficient, for different experiences connected to the feeling of ego-dissolution.

Nour et al. found that this study validated the questionnaires as functional tools to measure DIED. However, these questionnaires have been criticized for not being able to separate the experienced dissolution of minimal self from the narrative self. Nour et al. state that this is an unfortunate shortcoming of these questionnaires. Lindström et al. (2022) further concluded that there is a large variety in what is being experienced as being lost in these kinds of experiences.
Interestingly, they recommend to avoid the term “ego-dissolution” and instead use more diversified terms about the self to better pinpoint what exactly is being dissolved and better inform us on what is going on.

4.2 Ego-dissolution as an empirical challenge

If we assume, as a consequence of the theory of experiential minimalism, that a sense of self accompanies all our phenomenal consciousness and everyday experiences, we soon get in to a challenge. This challenge can be formulated like this: How can one defend a theory which holds that the self always exists within our experiences, when people at the same time report of having their selves literally dissolved, and losing the whole sense of a self-consciousness?

How should one assess these reports described above and how big challenge do they pose? Henriksen & Parnas (2019) suggests that one thing speaking against this being such a challenge is that the ego-dissolving episode clearly take place as an experience in a first-person manner, indicating an intact minimal self. Billion & Kriegel, on the other hand, state the idea that if these subjects undergo an event that they describe as veridically ego-dissolving (with no self), we should not mistrust their reports without good reasons (Billion and Kriegel, as cited in Letheby, 2021, p 153).

Hence, there is no consensus on how philosophers who have looked at this assess this potential challenge. I will now move on to my contribution to this discussion, arguing how to assess this situation on the self within the ego-less experience.
5 PSYCHEDELIC EGO-DISSOLUTION WITH SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

As I have presented in the previous chapters, the psychedelic ego-dissolution could be considered an empirical challenge for any theory of self, and especially for one that holds that every experience is accompanied by some sense of self. I will now develop my argument on why this is actually not the case. I will do this by presenting an argument consisting of two premises and a conclusion, which looks like this:

P1 Ego-dissolutions are phenomenal experiences

P2 Phenomenal experiences cannot be made without some proper working self-consciousness

C: Hence, ego-dissolutions involve a certain self-consciousness

I will now develop on the premises and conclusion in separate chapters.

5.1 Why we should view ego-dissolutions as phenomenal experiences

The first premise might seem obvious, but it is anyway worthy of looking into a bit more in detail. One first step here might be to clearly understand what the terms “ego-dissolution” and “phenomenal experience” mean. Since I already have presented a somewhat developed picture of the characteristics of the ego-dissolution, I will here focus on defining the other term, phenomenal experience.

Grossberg, (2017) suggests a definition or description of phenomenal experience as something that involves qualia in some way. Qualia is the “sensational information” we experience, a phenomenon widely discussed within the philosophy of mind. The notion of qualia includes sensational events to the person, such as seeing, hearing, smelling, or sensing something. Thomas Nagel’s famous paper (1974) related qualia to “what it is like” to be something (a bat in his case), to experience what this creature experiences. One can also think about what it would be like to feel something, be in love, smell a vegetable soup or listen to a classical piece one really likes, for example. Hence, a phenomenal experience could be described as a personal event involving information from sense organs and other faculties, such as emotions.

Why should we then consider an ego-dissolution to be a phenomenal experience? Well, from the descriptions presented in the literature shown above, I would suggest that we have to sort the ego-dissolution event under the category of some kind of personal event. It isn’t something
happening “out there” in the external world, like a soccer game going on which you are not involved in (and maybe even doesn’t know is going on). The psychedelic ego-dissolution takes place within a person as an event, and the subjects who have experienced this report about what happened and different kinds of feelings and reactions related to this.

It would hence be hard not to see an ego-dissolution as a phenomenal experience, but at the same time maybe some efforts could be made on this. One attack angle might be to suggest that the nature of the event disqualifies it from being just that – an experience. A reasoning like this could suggest that the absence of a potential experiencer would disqualify it as an experience. For a comparison, one could think of a person in the situation of having dreamless, deep sleep. Such deep sleep would more be an event including the person but not giving them any experiential side of it, any qualia, thoughts, or internal subjective reactions. Hence, one could argue that there would need to be some kind “content” that the person absorbs, handles and has different reactions on, for a situation to be assessed as an experience.

There have been reports on psychedelic experiences that go off the scale when it comes to the experience’s potency, leaving the subject without any memory of the event. Some speculate that the brain “turns off” when the effects of some compounds get too strong or overwhelming. However, the problem with psychedelic ego-dissolutions on this level examined here is that subjects report the events and their reactions relating to these. It was “something it was like”, to borrow Nagel’s popular phrase. In accordance with the discussion above, these episodes of psychedelic ego-dissolution are hard to dismiss as experiences, on those premises.

All in all, my view on this case is that it would be considered somewhat fruitless to try to deny those episodes of ego-dissolutions the status of phenomenal experiences. Accepting this status, however, gives place to other important and interesting questions. If those are phenomenal experiences, could they still “pass” as such without needing a subject, or more specifically, a self-conscious subject?
5.2 Why phenomenal experiences entail certain self-consciousness

Prima facie, it might seem fairly obvious to some readers that a phenomenal experience would come “bundled” with some consciousness about the experiencer’s self and the actual experience. However, this is a complicated discussion with many details, and we shall see as we unpack this that it mustn’t be that obvious, depending for one thing on the theoretical angle one prefers to understand the situation from. However, as promised above I will provide a justification for why I consider the soundest position to hold here, is that a phenomenal experience also entails some level of self-consciousness.

So, in what way could we start to build a rationale for the view that phenomenal experience entails self-consciousness? One logical place to start, and one I make use of in this essay, is of course Dan Zahavi’s theory of experiential minimalism. So how could this then be put to use? My argument here has many parts and I will go through them in order and try to make the case as clear as possible.

Zahavi’s theory suggests that an experience always have to come with a consciousness of the person having the experience, not just consciousness about the ongoing event “itself”. The tricky, and maybe unexpected, turn here is that the experiencer is suggested to be self-conscious in this situation, in not just in a conventional, reflecting way, but also on the pre-reflecting level. Earlier, I described the notions of minimal self and narrative self as a way of analyzing the experiential world, a way that has been accepted and adopted in this discussion as a theoretical tool, by other theorists and scientists that just Zahavi. It might seem logical for some to expect that the self-consciousness part lies in the narrative self, whereas the minimal self just accompanies experiences unreflecting, hence is not self-conscious. But Zahavi’s twist here is to propose that a kind of self-consciousness (also) must lie within the minimal self.

This works by proposing that experiencing an event where the minimal self is primarily involved, for example, a person engaged in an athletic performance being totally “in the zone” (as described above), is to be self-conscious to a certain degree. Here Zahavi takes help from his own notion of “for-me-ness”, proposing a kind of superstructure on Nagel’s famous phrase, suggesting that having an experience introduces a quality to the situation, of “what it’s like for me”. It would hence be impossible just to act out an experience and not be there as an experiencer, and it would as well be impossible to have an experience without being somewhat conscious about oneself at the same time, within the frame of a minimal self.
Zahavi hence takes a position that it is conceptually aligned and logically connected, that if a person is involved in an event, however non-reflecting at the moment, that person also must be conscious of themself, being in that situation, performing that very task. This entails that you couldn’t just have an experience or “mindful” event, totally turned to the event without also being conscious, that this very experience happens to me (from your view). I here interpret Zahavi as building a case by pointing at a logical necessity of a (self-) conscious actor in the act. That an act can’t make sense on its own, but it needs a subject. And when the subject engages with the act, they become conscious of the situation, which involves a self-consciousness of being an actor in the act.

So, what does all this mean to the discussion of ego-dissolution? If we apply Zahavi’s idea here to the situation of the subjects experiencing a psychedelic ego-dissolution, we should be able to draw similar conclusions as in for example the athletic performance case. This would give that a subject having an experience of psychedelic ego-dissolution would still be considered self-conscious in the aspect of that the minimal self still engages in an experience, however non-reflecting from a narrative person – or even in this case in a situation where this narrative person is reported to have dissolved. Hence, one could look at this situation as that the experience (of ego-dissolution) must still have an experiencer, and in the line of Zahavi’s reasoning, this experiencer must be conscious of this experience and their own partaking in it (even if this is in a non-narrative manner, but as a consequence of the minimal self’s engagement in this). Hence the subject must here employ some kind of self-consciousness to the situation of an ego-dissolution.

So, what kind of objections could one raise to this kind of reasoning? Zahavi has received some objections to his idea of a minimal self with a self-consciousness. The American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus has proposed that this minimal self experience would rather be akin to a bodily ongoing auto-pilot without a mind. Dreyfus has even gone so far as to comparing Olympic swimmers to sleepwalkers, to enhance his point of a non-conscious functioning (Zahavi 2014, p 25). Hence, Dreyfus denies the capacity for the minimal self to possess any self-consciousness. This main objection that Zahavi’s theory meets often goes under the name of the anonymity objection and I shall here develop a bit more on it, together with an answer on why I don’t think it passes the test.

The anonymity objection wants to deny the very existence of a for-me-ness on the pre-reflective level, and suggests that this is a thought error comparable to the “refrigerator fallacy” – the belief that the light is always on in the refrigerator, just because there’s always light when we
open the door. As in the case with consciousness, it would mean that the consciousness is not there all the time in the background, but would rather become actualized in the specific act of reflecting. The pre-reflecting level should hence be characterized by *anonymity*, no *for-me-ness*, nor any subject is present there to be conscious of the situation.

Zahavi answers this by further underlining that his theory wants to focus on the self-presentational character of the experience as well as the perspectivalness of the experience. Hence, he suggests that however you might want to toss and turn this, it’s hard to get away from the fact that there is a certain perspective to which those phenomenal, pre-reflective events are directed, namely the subject. I find this a compelling view as well and I find it reasonable to use (or invent) a notion like “*receivement*”, to underline a vital point of the situation. If you put such high standards as Dreyfus above, to qualify for self-consciousness – namely to be reflecting over your *person* in the act, above the act in itself – it might get some troublesome consequences.

When discussing qualia for example, once again thinking of some *muga*-experience, being totally in the now – in the experience, if you taste that slice of cheese totally involved or listen to that classical piece, it’s hard to make that situation work without a somewhat conscious experiencer receiving the qualia. It takes two to tango here, undeniably. How should you make sense of qualia without a subject receiving it? One might again here turn to the Buddhist-lingo of “becoming one with the experience”, as some sort of objection to this, but on the technical level I find it hard to make this work. When “melding” with the cheese-taste, there is a world of experience, a *receivement* of the qualia, making this fantastic scene. You are not reflective of your narrative self in that moment; you might have forgotten yourself. But you would reasonably be considered to be on the peak of your consciousness of the experience of cheese, on the optimum of your awareness as an *experiencer*. It’s hard to have this experience without that experiencer-part. And in my view, you are not in need of a narrative self, a thought of personal identity here in order to have a consciousness of your own part in the experience, and hence become self-conscious.

If someone says: “*Bam! And suddenly all there was, was the music*” about an amazing experience with some piece of music, that is not to be taken literally. What lies beneath the words, presupposed in the meaning should be “Suddenly all there was [*for me*], was the music”. Obviously, an interaction and an experience of this kind would never be able to take place if this music was all alone and not experienced by anyone, or our experiencer in this case. Not any more than you could experience the sound of a falling tree in the woods if you’re not there.
It would be a reasonable position to take, that the experiencer is indirectly always part of the experience. And since this person experience the situation through for example different kinds of qualia, they are always experiencing themselves in this situation. It’s an interaction where you can’t interact if you miss one part.

To turn to our topic at hand and interest ourselves more in psychedelics than cheese or music, something similar can be said about the situation. Like the music and the cheese experience, the ego-dissolution is also experienced together with experiential attributes and qualia. Some subjects have (not too differently compared to the music expression above) in some of those situations exclaimed: “Suddenly I became one with everything”. And in the line with the reasoning above it takes two to tango here as well; the experiencer doesn’t seem to have been dissolved\(^2\) – in that case it would be hard to unpack, recollect or make a sense of this whole event. Something/someone registered something, to speak with Zahavi there was a “perspectivalness” to the situation as well as a “self-presentational character” to it. The subject receives all kinds of sensory inputs as well with an experience of the self being put aside or dissolved, but it is still an experience with an experiencer. Hence the ego-dissolution situation bear resemblance to those other examples above, even if the ego-loss aspect makes it a more dramatic one, which also seem to present itself like a paradox.

Let’s return to the objection side for one last notion. An angle of the anonymity objection has been raised by Michael Tye, also questioning Zahavi’s claims, by what Tye calls the “transparency thesis” (Tye, 2008). Tye’s idea with this is that all our qualities within our experiences are the qualities of the external world we are experiencing (Ibid, p xiii). Hence, the experience itself would be transparent and just “world-presenting”. This of course denies any kind of experiencer’s self-consciousness, or for-me-ness, in the act of experiencing, and Tye’s theory is a form of representationalism (Ibid).

This seems to be a bit of a tricky one, so how would one answer to that? Zahavi categorizes this line of thought as phenomenal externalism and admits that it could have its relevant points. However, he points out a problem in that it focuses narrowly on the perceptual side of the experience, leaving out all other kinds of nuances an experience could have. Zahavi exemplifies that Tye’s description of an orgasm in such a scheme would be described simply with a phrase

\(^2\) Expanded self is another term to grapple with in this case, besides ego-dissolution. However, that discussion is too complex to go into here and need its own investigation. But this shows that there are different ways and possibilities to interpret a situation like this.
such as ‘sensory representations of certain physical changes in the genital region’ (Tye 1995 as cited in Zahavi 2014, p 32).

I find Zahavi’s point valid here as well. The example above undeniably gives some associations to the old joke about the behaviorist who, after just having sex with his wife, says to her: “That was great for you; how was it for me?”. One property of such an externalist account as Tye’s theory seems to be that it doesn’t match too well with complex experiences and advanced forms of qualia. And if we, as here, are dealing with psychedelic experiences, those are often reported by subjects vivid, complex, and with many nuances.

But the main issue here is whether the hallucinations and experiences during a psychedelic event are about anything external. The phenomenon of hallucinations is a somewhat classical problem in perception discussed by many philosophers (Crane 2021). It seems to be able to pose a challenge to representationalist accounts, such as Tye’s, in particular. Even if the hallucinations during psychedelic experiences are not really the types of hallucinations most discussed in the literature above, they seem very problematic to representationalist accounts because they do not seem to represent anything external. How would you assess a psychedelic, hallucinatory experience or ego-dissolution as a totally “transparent” experience, just presenting the qualities of an external object? Perhaps Tye’s theory has less explanatory power in these more “inner” experiences. One could speculate whether an externalist view could account for inner experiences and perceptual distortions as well, maybe with some help from neuroscience. But for now, this transparency objection does not seem to succeed as a serious challenge to an experiential minimalist account for psychedelic experiences.

Another problem with Tye’s idea, especially problematic within the discussion of ego-dissolution, is asking oneself where a proposed consciousness of the situation lies. If it is like Tye says, there is no chance to place it within the pre-reflecting realm with the perception of the experience, but instead, the consciousness would be on the meta-level with the narrative and reflecting self. However, one reasonable way of understanding what goes on within those ego-dissolving experiences is, in my mind, that if anything dissolves, it would be the ego on the narrative self-level. How could any awareness of this ego-dissolving experience, in that case, exist if the narrative self is dissolved and gone, and the pre-reflective level is unable to any conscious property? Hence, the strategy of the transparency objection does not seem to succeed.

To conclude this review, I find that Zahavi’s argument in his experiential minimalism with considerable success, could be applied to the situation of the psychedelic ego-dissolution. This
situation seems to bear resemblance with other kinds of experiences in that it is a perceived experience involving qualia and some kind of internal way of taking part of the event. Hence this would suggest that the premise that phenomenal experiences entail certain self-consciousness, is a warranted one.

5.3 Concluding that ego-dissolutions involve a certain self-consciousness

The conclusion of this reasoning leads up to the idea that there is some form of self-consciousness in an ego-dissolution, however paradoxical this may initially sound. Accepting that the psychedelic ego-dissolution is an experience and that it is experienced with an experiencer entailing a minimal self, hence leads to the conclusion that some self-consciousness is still there.

A critical notion could, however, be that this modus ponens reasoning strongly emphasizes the second premise and if someone would deny this second premise, it would turn this modus ponens into a modus tollens, arguing for the exact opposite. That argument would depend on a solid argument against this second premise. This thesis has argued in favor of the second premise and presented reasons why such a position as denying this premise would be hard to defend.
6 CONCLUSION

I have described and discussed the psychedelic ego-dissolution and proposed as my thesis that what is going on is not a total dissolution but at most a partial dissolution of the self and self-consciousness. My strategy of showing this has been to use Dan Zahavi’s theory of experiential minimalism and the established dual notions of minimal self and narrative self. From my investigation, I have concluded that the whole self-consciousness is not dissolved in those situations, since the minimal self-consciousness is still intact. One likely answer to what is going on in those ego-dissolving experiences could be that it is a dissolution of the narrative self/self-consciousness. However, that is merely a concluding thought from me and would be up for another examination to look into and, in that case, establish more firmly.
REFERENCES


