Self-understanding and Self-alienation: Existential Hermeneutics and Psychopathology

I. Project description

The overall project: aim, context, method
Humans are self-interpreting beings. Although this is a key insight in philosophical hermeneutics (Heidegger 1927; Taylor 1985), it remains an open question exactly what it means to say that human beings are ‘themselves’, or have an ‘identity’, precisely through the fact of self-understanding. To answer this question the present project adopts a negative approach by focusing on experiences of self-alienation. How can self-understanding be fundamental to being human if it can also be lost? What does the possibility of self-alienation show us about the role of self-understanding in being human? We suggest that adopting such a negative approach will turn out to be particularly illuminating in showing how the relations to oneself, to others and to the world are intertwined in being human.

The project has three parts. The first two parts combine empirical, methodological, and philosophical investigations into self-alienation in psychopathological and normal conditions. Guided by the underlying question of the role of self-understanding for human identity, these two parts are informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics. Interacting with these parts, part three aims to further develop an existential hermeneutics in dialogue with a so-called deconstructive hermeneutical approach to selfhood.

The project draws upon often overlooked resources in the field between psychopathology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existential thinking (in particular Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Binswanger, Blankenburg, Tellenbach and Theunissen). It will reformulate an existential approach to human identity which, through the interplay between empirical investigations and philosophical reflection, and in addition to giving a better understanding of human identity as such, aims to provide an improved basis for psychotherapeutic practice.

The project addresses the issue of human subjectivity by emphasizing the intertwining of activity and passivity, understanding and suffering, self-understanding and experience of the world. This is a central research field at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen, especially within ethics and philosophy of religion. It is part of the research strategy at the Faculty to open up this research field in interdisciplinary contexts.

Philosophically, the project aims to develop hermeneutics as a distinct approach to human self-understanding and self-alienation: First, while we emphasize the interplay in a human being between understanding oneself and being embedded in a normative, social world and although we acknowledge the historically-mediated nature of self-understanding, we do not focus primarily on self-alienation as a problem arising within certain social structures or in relation to concrete social technologies with a specific historical genealogy (Foucault 1972; Ehrenberg 1998). Rather, we want to show how human self-understanding is also an active response to conditions of self-alienation and therefore raises the question of the human condition as such. Second, a hermeneutical approach distances itself from a social philosophy which assumes that the subject is originally free from self-alienation and that this state can be methodologically employed as a philosophical anthropological norm for diagnosing self-alienation as a
social pathology (Honneth 2008). On the contrary, we precisely aim to explore the intrinsic intertwining of self-understanding and self-alienation. Third, while our hermeneutical approach shares central assumptions with the tradition of transcendental phenomenology such as the emphasis on the irreducibility of the first-person perspective, we refrain from adopting a transcendental conception of self-understanding that attempts to distinguish sharply between contingent and transcendental aspects of the self (Husserl 1913; Zahavi 1999, 2003). According to our existential hermeneutics, the basic structures of the self are neither given as immediate conditions nor as historically contingent constructs, but present themselves in mediated forms as fundamental but continuously changing ambiguities, challenges or problems in the vulnerable experiential life of the self.

Methodologically, the project combines two questions: what can we learn about selfhood from breakdowns in self-understanding, and how, conversely, can we come to a better understanding of such breakdowns when we attempt to understand selfhood in terms of self-understanding?

**Part 1 and 2: Self-experience and self-alienation in psychopathological, traumatic and normal conditions: an empirical investigation**

The first and the second part of the project empirically investigate how the sense of self may be disturbed in schizophrenia, affective illness, Alzheimer’s disease, interpersonal traumatic conditions following torture, and normal conditions, respectively. The first part phenomenologically explores a variety of experiences of self-alienation in a sample comprising the above-mentioned conditions. Building on the results from the first part, the second part then inquires hermeneutically into the relation between self-alienation and self-understanding in these conditions.

**State of the art**

In our everyday life we have for the most part a quite stable sense of who we are and what we take ourselves to be, e.g., in terms of our ethical and cultural values, our social relations, and our personal preferences. Rather than being preoccupied with the question about our own identity, we tend to let it slumber within us only to wake up when we are confronted with experiences so powerful that they draw our implicit self-understanding into question. In crises brought on by, e.g., trauma, severe illness or loss of beloved ones, the veil that usually hides our mortality from us is momentarily lifted and we may feel strangely distanced not only from others and our own ordinary engagement and interests in the shared, cultural world but even, in a very fundamental way, from ourselves. Coming to terms with oneself and understanding oneself in a situation of self-alienation are in that sense inherent aspects of the human condition.

In major mental disorders, experiences of self-alienation seem to be more pervasive and radical in nature (e.g., as expressed in delusional experiences of being dead, non-existent, or of having one’s own thoughts or body controlled by external forces). Although experiences of self-alienation have been found to be central to depression (Fuchs 2002), bipolar disorder (Mula et al. 2009), and schizophrenia (Henriksen et al. 2010), it has only recently become a theme in psychiatric research, mainly by our own contribution (Parnas & Sass, 2011). So far, only a few empirical studies, using the Examination of Anomalous Self-Experiences (EASE) scale (Parnas et al. 2005), have explored self-alienation as a multi-faceted phenomenon and its distribution in schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and healthy controls, respectively; the results from these studies suggest that patients with schizophrenia have four times as many anomalous self-experiences as bipolar patients, and that bipolar patients have twice as many anomalous self-experiences as healthy controls (Haug et al. 2012; Nelson et al. 2012; Henriksen & Parnas 2012; Raballo & Parnas 2012). Given that schizophrenia is the most severe mental disorder, it is perhaps not surprising that these patients tend to feel more alienated from themselves than patients from other diagnostic groups or people with no mental disorder. Yet, further clarification is needed to grasp the core and boundaries of the various forms of self-alienation in these conditions.
Self-alienation is also a prominent feature of Alzheimer’s disease, a frequent neurodegenerative, organic mental illness, which worsens as it progresses and eventually leads to death. In advanced phases of the illness, the patients and their families essentially become strangers to one another, i.e. the patients become unable to recognize their loved ones and their shared life fades into oblivion. In this condition, self-alienation seems to be centred upon a gradual decline of certain cognitive functions such as memory (especially recent memory), learning abilities, and language use (Fürstl & Kurz 1999), a decline that increasingly affects the patients’ whole personality and behaviour, e.g., in terms of mood swings, lack of interest in previous activities, and social withdrawal (Mckahn et al. 2011). Moreover, depressive, delusional, and hallucinatory symptoms belong to the clinical picture (Burns et al. 1990; Mega et al. 1996). Whereas research on Alzheimer’s disease has focused intensely on discovering its etiology (which still remains largely unknown), not a single study has to the best of our knowledge explored the nature and forms of self-alienation that is involved in this crippling condition, although such an exploration may provide important insights for caregiving and nursing.

Most interestingly, something akin to some of the frequent, non-psychotic experiences of self-alienation found in schizophrenia is consistently being reported by torture survivors, who describe a deep sense of disorientation, a pervasive feeling of isolation, and a loss of the sense of self and of being real (e.g., Rosenbaum & Varvin 2007; Basoglu 1992; Silove 1999; Printzlau 2012). Recently, researchers have argued for the centrality of such abnormal self-experiences following severe interpersonal trauma, using terms such as “mental defeat” (Ehlers et al. 1998), “annihilation of self” (Atwood et al. 2002), and “mental death” (Ebert & Dyck 2004). Yet, in contrast to schizophrenia, affective illness, and Alzheimer’s disease, where experiences of self-alienation, though in very different ways, seem to grow from within the disturbed subjectivity, self-alienation in torture survivors results from chronologically specifiable attempts to destroy their person by gross interpersonal violations of their humanity and dignity. In the literature, experiences of self-alienation are often perceived as the result of irresolvable conflicts between the victim’s conception of the world prior to and after torture (Basoglu & Salcioglu 2011; Janoff-Bulman 2002; Horowitz 1999; McCann & Pearlman 1990). We suggest, however, that the radical effects of torture are not fully explainable as confined breakdowns of certain cognitive mechanisms; rather, they should be investigated as resulting from a more global disturbance of the structure of experience that affects the self in various ways. Research into the mental health consequences of interpersonal traumatization has long been aware of what has been called “altered self-capacities” (Briere & Spinazzola 2005), yet the kind of more systematic phenomenological and hermeneutical exploration that we propose here has not been undertaken. Recently, Stolorow (2008) has argued that an incomplete understanding of relationality distorts our ability to see what is lost in interpersonal trauma. In our view, an exploration of self-alienation in torture survivors, emphasizing especially the interdependence of self-understanding and intersubjectivity, could prove scientifically, clinically, and therapeutically useful. Our approach will draw on philosophical resources (e.g. Lévinas 1974; Merleau-Ponty 1945) as well as existing work on the significance of intersubjective relationality in research on interpersonal trauma (Brothers 2007; Stolorow 2008; Guenther 2013; Wisnewski 2010; Mirdal et al. 2012).

Today, there is a growing need for a systematic comparative exploration of manifestations of self-alienation across the major diagnostic categories such as schizophrenia, affective illness, and organic mental illness (e.g., Alzheimer’s disease) and for comparing these with apparently similar experiences of self-alienation found in torture survivors as well as with those experiences of self-alienation that occur in normal conditions. Do the seemingly similar experiences of self-alienation identified in these five groups have the same phenomenal quality? Or will they rather reveal quite different natures with diverse implications for self-understanding and for upholding a sense of self? Given the complexity, heterogeneity, and different etiology of these conditions, it is questionable whether potential differences in the experiences of self-alienation may be captured by the same method. It is more likely that a single method may elicit certain aspects of these phenomena while missing others, and that several methods must be applied to grasp the phenomena in their entirety. Clarifying these questions may provide a better understanding of the conditions,
offer insights relevant for psychotherapy and caregiving, and reveal aspects of normal existence that often are so taken for granted that they remain unnoticed.

The lack of this kind of comparative exploration coincides with the absence of any methodologically rigorous approach that takes into account the complexity of the phenomena of self-alienation and their relation to self-understanding. In our view, self-alienation is rarely, if ever, an isolated, readily definable experience but more often an amalgam of a variety of disturbing experiences (e.g., emotional, anomalous, and, in some cases, abnormal experiences), which are usually woven into the person’s sense of her identity, self-narrative, social relations, and patterns of behaviour, etc. A truly novel and methodologically rigorous approach must 1) account for the variety of forms of self-alienation that may manifest themselves in experiences of one’s own mental states, of others, and of the world; 2) operate with a notion of the self that, rather than conceiving it as a passive perceiver of its own experiences, acknowledges the activity or responsiveness of the self, i.e. that the self also understands or misunderstands itself in its responses, actions or inaction related to its experiences; and 3) account for the intrinsic connection between self-alienation at the phenomenal level and self-alienation at the structural level of self-relation. In the following, we propose such an approach. Following standard procedure for empirical investigations in medicine, part 1 and part 2 of the project will be approved by The National Committee on Health Research Ethics, Capital Region before commencing, and the participants will be recruited upon informed consent.

**Aim (Part 1)**
The aim of part 1 is to examine experiences of self-alienation in psychopathological, traumatic, and normal conditions, and to account for the possible qualitative differences in these conditions.

**Method (Part 1)**
We will use a novel psychometric instrument to investigate anomalous experiences that may contribute to feelings of self-alienation in a sample comprising patients diagnosed with schizophrenia (n=20), affective illness (n=20), and Alzheimer’s disease (n=20) as well as torture survivors (n=20) and healthy controls (n=20). The participants will be recruited at Psychiatric Center Hvidovre, the Alzheimer’s Foundation, and Dignity – Danish Institute Against Torture. The participants will undergo a qualitative, semi-structured, phenomenologically oriented interview eliciting anomalous self-experiences by using an extended version of the *EASE* scale (Parnas et al. 2005). Although the *EASE* scale is the most sophisticated scale available for the task of studying experiences of self-alienation, it primarily focuses on anomalous self-experiences (e.g., feelings as if one’s own thoughts are not generated by oneself or as if one’s own body doesn’t really fit).

Our hypothesis is that self-alienation cannot be isolated from our experiences of others and of the world; in fact, we suggest that the experience of self-alienation is closely linked to a situation in which psychologically sustaining relations to others have broken down at their most fundamental level. Therefore, we will extend the *EASE* scale with two new domains to include questions concerning intersubjectivity and objectivity. We will mainly import these domains from the scale *Examination of Anomalous World-Experiences* (i.e. domain 1: “Objects and space” and domain 3: “Persons”), which has been developed by Sass and collaborators, and which is currently undergoing the final scale calibration and reliability-testing before publication by, amongst others, members of our own staff.

We shall analyse the collected data in two steps: 1) Statistical assessment will provide an overview of the aggregation and constellation of anomalous experiences in the five groups and the significant differences between the groups. 2) Phenomenological methods such as epoché and eidetic variation will be used to illuminate the prototypical constellations in the groups and their essential features.

**Aim (Part 2)**
The aim of part 2 is to come to a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between self-alienation and self-understanding in psychopathological, traumatic, and normal conditions.

**Method (Part 2)**
The second part builds on and further develops the data gathered in the first part. On the basis of its results, we will select five participants from each group who manifest prototypical constellations of self-alienation that they are able to describe thoroughly for an additional, hermeneutical interview. The purpose of this second interview is to explore the reciprocal relationship between self-alienation and self-understanding. We will explore how the participants relate to and cope with their experiences of self-alienation as well as elicit the more global imprint of these experiences on their being-in-the-world.

The hermeneutical interview will be open-ended and semi-structured. It will follow Giorgi’s criteria of scientific inquiry and the basic steps for analysing narratives (Giorgi 1990; Giorgi 1985) and will be inspired by comparable scientific interviews aiming at clarifying the participants’ way of relating to themselves, others, and the world (Corin 1990; Corin & Lauzon 1994; Ehlers et al. 2000; Pelcovitz et al. 1997). Most importantly, the interview will include a novel set of questions with the purpose of rendering visible the relationship between self-alienation and self-understanding and how it is enacted in the participants’ existence. This set of questions will be developed in close interaction with the other parts of our project, thus bringing together insights from philosophy, psychiatry, and psychology, and drawing on the strong, clinical background of several of our group members. The key interpretative themes that will be developed in part 3 (i.e. subjectivity, normativity, situation, objectification, and alterity, see below) will play a central role in the formulation of this set of questions. Finally, the questions will undergo inter-rater reliability testing before the interviews are commenced.

Data analysis will focus distinctly on the participants’ first-personal accounts and strive to clarify the dynamics of self-understanding in a situation where its basis has seemingly been undermined. The hermeneutical analysis will move away from focusing on singular symptoms and constellations of anomalous experiences to a focus on experiences as meaningful phenomena, expressive of particular modes of presence and of relating to one’s own situation (Davidson 1994; Corin & Lauzon 1994), i.e. to focusing on forms of self-presentation (Selbstdarstellung, Gadamer 1960). Thus, the analysis will seek to illuminate the structures of meaning that organize the experiential life-world and to show the essential role of relatedness to others and to a shared world in the constitution of our experiences. In this connection we will also address the question of what it means to suffer from a ‘loss of world’ in order to better understand the difference between self-alienation caused by trauma and self-alienation caused by mental illness (Lear 2006; Briere and Spinazzola 2005; van der Kolk et al. 2005).

The hermeneutical analysis aims to account for the way in which experiential phenomena also express subjective attempts to come to terms with and understand the situation that the person finds herself in. Overall, the hermeneutical analysis will further develop the results from the first part and have important implications for the third part. At the same time, it will pave the way for a renewed dialogue with central themes in Kierkegaard (1844, 1849), Jaspers (1956),Binswanger (1956), Boss (1957), Blankenburg (1971), and Theunissen (1981, 1991, 1993).

**Part 3: Existential hermeneutics**

Interacting with the first two parts, the third part addresses the twofold question: How can self-understanding be fundamental to being human if it can also be lost? What does the possibility of self-alienation show us about the role of self-understanding in being human? If a person who finds herself in a state of self-alienation can express herself in saying that she does not understand herself, her self-understanding is not simply lost. Rather, she is lost in self-understanding. This indicates that self-understanding cannot be reduced to the question of whether a person has in fact understood herself or not. Does the very possibility of self-alienation point to the fundamental role of self-understanding in being human?

This third part explores the complex issue of self-understanding and self-alienation by focusing on five closely related themes: subjectivity, normativity, situation, objectification, and alterity.

1. **Subjectivity**
In order to give an account of the fundamental role of self-understanding in being human, we must ask: how does self-understanding play into experiences of self-alienation? Our suggestion is to look more closely at the subjectivity implied in saying that a subject experiences herself as alienated from herself. A claim to be tested in the dialogue with the first two parts of the project is that a person, while being in the condition of self-alienation, cannot be reduced to ‘the alienated self’. Suffering under the condition of self-alienation, she responds to her own condition. In responding to the way she is situated, she already understands herself as thus situated. Such an implicit self-understanding goes into her experiencing herself as alienated.

This approach reinterprets a fundamental assumption of the tradition of existential philosophy and hermeneutics, namely that the subject does not begin to understand herself only when she turns her self-conscious gaze upon herself as an object of reflection (Kierkegaard 1849; Heidegger 1927). Rather, she already understands herself at a pre-reflective level by relating to her practice in terms of her own possibilities and she articulates an implicit self-understanding by developing the possibilities for these practices. Pre-reflective practices, including everyday tasks, affective modes of experience, and our comportment in relations to others in a shared life-world, thus express an implicit self-understanding. The empirical investigations of part 1 and 2 invite us to further examine this fundamental assumption of existential hermeneutics. What can we learn about the structure of self-alienation by inquiring into practical, affective and cultural dimensions of the life-world practices of the person who is suffering from the condition of self-alienation? And conversely: how can the investigation of self-alienated life-world practices allow us to critically re-examine and develop the hermeneutical model of self-understanding?

The dialogue with psychopathology concerning the notion of subjectivity enables a critical reinterpretation of Heidegger’s idea that the dynamics of self-understanding require a subject that is able to claim ownership of her practices. Importantly, ownership includes a dimension of emotional responsiveness that is irreducible to cognitive evaluation (Ratcliffe 2008). Without the ability to assume her practices as her own, the subject cannot even at the pre-reflective level respond to the demands of these practices as meaningful, i.e. as expressing her own possibilities. Therefore, Heidegger claims that a potential breakdown of the world-relation is involved here (Heidegger 1983). Can the analyses of self-alienation in psychopathological and traumatic conditions provide us with a more precise understanding of the relationship between lack of ownership and ‘loss of world’, or perhaps differentiate between different levels of breakdown? On the one hand, we seek to avoid interpreting ownership as a challenge to the subject that it can meet through willful commitment or choice. On the other hand, we do not assume that ownership or commitment is a condition of the possibility of having an experience as it is claimed in a transcendental interpretation of Heidegger (Crowell 2007). Rather, the aim is to explore the phenomenon of ownership as an irreducible structural problem in the dynamics of self-understanding. Our suggestion is that the empirical parts of the project will help elucidate how ownership is not merely an unchanging condition but can in fact to various degrees become distorted.

2. **Normativity**

The possibility of nevertheless reducing the person who is in the condition of self-alienation to that condition lies both with the person herself and with others who are seeing her. This suggests that the claim that she ‘cannot’ be reduced to this condition has a normative character. How should we account for the normativity implied in speaking of self-alienation? The key notion will be the dignity of the other person – also viewed as a dignity she can re-claim when suffering from the condition of being victimized (Grøn & Brudholm 2011). This means that dignity is an achievement that can to some degree be lost and constituted anew in a dynamic process of self-understanding.

We aim to further clarify the normativity that is at stake in self-understanding by reinterpreting the teleological structure that has traditionally been ascribed to practical understanding (e.g. by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics*). This structure seems to be phenomenologically validated in our everyday experience in so far as our practical comportment exhibits a goal-directedness which is brought to light when we ask ourselves why we are engaged in a particular action. Traditionally, the teleology of our practical understanding has been anchored in a supreme telos, ‘the good’ or
‘happiness’, which has been understood in a number of quite different ways, e.g. as a life in accordance with reason or (far later than Aristotle) as an authentic appropriation of oneself. Gadamer rejects the idea of a substantial goal for practical reason and instead sees the teleological horizon of our understanding as an irreducible and ambiguous openness for experience (Gadamer 1960; Thaning 2013a). This idea of openness has been productively reinterpreted in recent contributions to hermeneutical philosophy (Figal 2006, 2009a, 2009b). Does the rejection of the traditional idea of an ultimate telos and the reconsideration of the concept of openness leave room for what might be called a problematic conception of teleology? Therapeutic practice seems to presuppose at least a minimal or thin notion of teleology in so far as it is implicitly concerned with questions such as: does this form of therapy bring the patient closer to rehabilitation? How far from being rehabilitated is the patient at a given point? The decisions of health care professionals and the self-conception of patients seem to involve an implicit conception of ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘improvement’ with a teleological structure. The dialogue with rehabilitation research can help us to reconsider the teleology of practical reason and clarify in what sense the telos is to be understood as a problem. Can the telos be understood both as a continuing interpretive challenge for professionals and patients and as an irreducible implicit horizon of the therapeutic practice? Such a revised approach to the teleology of practical reason leads us back to the question of the normativity of human dignity.

3. Situation
The fact that the recognition of dignity lies both with the person herself and with others indicates that the situation to be considered is not only that of the person herself (her condition). It also includes how others situate themselves in relation to her. The situation itself is inter-subjective. However, the aim is not only to show that a hermeneutics of subjectivity implies a hermeneutics of inter-subjectivity. It is also to outline an existential analysis which focuses on how humans, in existing, situate themselves in relating themselves to others and to a world more or less shared with others.

Clarifying the notion of the ‘situation’ in terms of both being situated in and understanding the situation is a crucial aspect of the whole project. Drawing especially on Kierkegaard’s notion of existing as relating oneself to situatedness in time (Kierkegaard 1846; Grøn 2013) and the intertwining of Befindlichkeit and Verstehen in Heidegger (1927), we seek to further develop the notion of a “hermeneutical situation” (Ruin 1994; Grøn 2007). How we are situated is also a matter of how we understand our situation. In understanding, we respond to the situation to which we are subjected. But this does not mean that we simply understand ourselves in responding to our situation. Rather, understanding ourselves is at issue in responding to the way we are situated. If self-alienation is finding oneself alienated in seeking to understand oneself in relation to others and the world, what needs to be brought to light is also the relation of understanding and suffering. Rather than conceiving the self as a passive perceiver of its own experiences, we should focus on the intertwining of passivity and activity implied in the notion of the self as responding in being subjected to time and history.

4. Objectification
A further aim in this third part is to investigate self-alienation as a form of objectification of meaning. In the reading of Heidegger and Kierkegaard we seek to develop, the subject is continuously in danger of taking her identity as if it were a distinct entity whose content could be articulated propositionally or at least appropriated in certain emphatic forms of authentic practice. Such self-objectification can take very different forms and degrees ranging from an ever present tendency to entertain a ‘picture of oneself’ to more severe distortions of self-understanding. Since the practices in which the subject is involved express her understanding of herself, self-objectification is also at stake when the subject articulates the meaning of her practice in propositions or judgements. In such a theoretical appropriation, the subject may attempt to explain or understand her practice in a way that isolates its meaning from the context in which it is experienced (Heidegger 1927, 1961; Gadamer 1957; cf. Thaning 2013b). This ‘appropriation’ of meaning may convince the subject that she has grasped what her practice means while she in fact diverts herself from the task of understanding herself in what she is doing – a task indicated in Kierkegaard’s reformulation of
the Socratic principle: understanding oneself in existence (Kierkegaard 1846). We will seek to develop the idea of theoretical self-alienation by drawing upon recent psychoanalytic philosophy which addresses this issue as a core phenomenon of psychoanalytic literature and method (Lear 1999, 2001, 2005). The dialogue between hermeneutics and psychoanalysis can serve to clarify the guiding idea of hermeneutics to the effect that self-alienation is to be analysed as a disturbance of meaning (cf. also Angehrn 2010 on the idea of a negative hermeneutics of the self).

5. **Alterity**

Finally, the key issue of selfhood and alterity, which runs through all three parts of the project, is to be reconsidered from the perspective of a deconstructive hermeneutics, with the aim of developing further the notion of an existential hermeneutics. Variations on the figure of “the Other in the Same” (e.g. Lévinas 1974; Derrida 1997) is a significant motif in philosophical thinking during the second half of the 20th century. Within a certain trajectory of French thought, these variations have been translated into *deconstructive* approaches to selfhood and subjectivity (Critchley & Dews 1996). In what sense can a human being experience herself as *an-other*? Does this motif presuppose that there already exists something other within the self, or that the self is always something other than itself? As the term suggests, deconstruction is not a merely negative procedure. It is also a “constructive” approach in that it designates a need to continually revise our notions of subjectivity and selfhood. Accordingly, rather than “overcoming” subjectivity, a deconstructive hermeneutics questions traditional conceptions of the subject by “putting subjectivity on trial” (Cadava et al. 1991).

Taking a deconstructive approach to selfhood as the point of departure, we reconsider the question: if a self is intimately structured by *alterity*, what does it mean that it is a *self*? Can we capture what it is to be a self through concepts such as “sensibility,” “openness,” “affectivity,” “responsibility,” “responsiveness” and “substitution”? These notions suggest that a self is placed in a heteronomous relation of an ever deferred constitution. In deconstructive hermeneutics, the motif of “the Other in the Same” does not so much designate a question of *becoming oneself* as an attempt to formulate the insight that a self is always already subjected to the other in a *nondialectical* relation (Lévinas 1947; Blanchot 1969). It could be argued that a philosophical hermeneutics understands selfhood in terms of a *dialectics* of becoming oneself through another. Taking deconstructive hermeneutics into account, we seek to critically revise the notion of a dialectical relation between the self and the other. In particular, we want to reconsider the question of a normative teleology implied in the notion of becoming oneself. Can the normativity of this teleology be interpreted in terms of the claim to being open-ended, as suggested above?

Moving one step further, we will explore how far a deconstructive approach can help differentiate between forms and levels of self-alienation. What is implied in the transport of psychopathological terms, such as “trauma,” “psychosis” (Lévinas 1974), “schizoidity” (Lacan 1973; Deleuze 1969), “auto-hetero-affectivity” (Derrida 2008), and “double bind” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986; Schürrmann 1996), into a deconstructive thinking about selfhood? Taking these implications into account, we will reconsider the question: how far is it possible, on the one hand, to differentiate the concept of self-alienation into a *structural*, an *existential*, and a *normative* form, and, on the other hand, to differentiate *experiences* of self-alienation into *non-pathological* and *pathological* experiences?

Addressing these questions, we also want to reconsider the relation between experiences of self-alienation and experiences of existential limit situations (cf., e.g., Blanchot 1955 and Lévinas 1948 on death, and Nancy 1988 on birth). The language in which experiences of self-alienation are described is also a language in which humans can articulate experiences that are ‘profound’ in the sense that they are both subjective and to some extent common or even shared. How should we take this intertwining of subjectivity and communication into account when dealing with experiences of self-alienation? Raising this issue, we are led back to the question of method.

**Concluding perspective on parts 1-3: the method and the question**
Our empirical material offers a unique opportunity to specify how self-understanding is at play in relation to others and to a world that is more or less shared. Exposure to psychopathological and traumatic conditions reveals various forms of a fundamental, social, and biological vulnerability of the human being. Our guiding idea is to systematically use the interplay of the empirical analysis and the philosophical reflection on selfhood in order to understand vulnerability as an intrinsic part of selfhood. However, an existential hermeneutical approach also requires that we reflect on the character of the concepts with which we seek to understand the human being in the various situations in which she finds herself. What do they let us see, and what do they conceal? What is implied in saying that what we seek to grasp when using these concepts is a human existence which is singular and yet an existence in communication with others?

Our suggestion is to reformulate in tandem the notion of ‘formal indication’ in Heidegger (Kisiel 1994; Gron 2007) and Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘indirect communication’ (Nordentoft 1972; Gron 1997). Pointing to the situation of communication, both notions suggest that the appropriate method in dealing with others is also a matter of recognizing the limits of method. Existential concepts can only formally indicate what is in question. Communication that concerns the other in her existence presupposes that she is able to understand for herself what is being communicated. But this presupposition is also normative in nature in that it can be ignored. Thus, method in this field is also itself about subjectivity, normativity and situation (cf. above).

Method and question go together: What do self-alienation and self-understanding mean when we seek to capture the differences in the phenomena between the various groups included in the empirical investigation? Our assumption is that the shared key interpretative themes – subjectivity, normativity, situation, objectification, alterity – can capture phenomenal differences between forms of self-alienation that are thematized in the first two parts, and that this will be illuminating for a theory of human subjectivity which will allow us to come to a better understanding of what it means that humans are self-interpreting beings.

References


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