Transformative Practice and the Problem of Self-Thematization

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ABSTRACT: An understanding of transformative learning is inseparable from close analysis of selfhood and subjectivity in late modern cultural circumstances. While traditional approaches to transformative practice have led to valuable insights, they continue to embody modes of reflexive analysis that may limit rather than expand opportunities for personal change. Recent phenomenological investigations into varieties of self-awareness oppose many of the objectifying tendencies apparent in contemporary interpretations of the self, and cast further light on the meaning of subjective freedom and transformative learning.

RÉSUMÉ: On ne peut pas comprendre la notion d'enseignement évolutif sans l'analyse précise de l'identification du soi et de la subjectivité dans le contexte de la conjoncture culturelle moderne actuelle. Les méthodes traditionnelles de pratique évolutive, alors même qu'elles ont conduit à des points de vue intéressants, continuent de renfermer des modes d'analyse réfléchie qui, au lieu de favoriser l'ouverture d'opportunités pour un changement personnel, peut au contraire, la restreindre. De récentes enquêtes phénoménologiques sur des types de conscience du soi, mettent en opposition de nombreuses tendances objectives qui apparaissent dans des interprétations contemporaines du soi. De surcroît, elles expliquent avec plus de clarté les mots «liberté subjective» et «enseignement évolutif.»

What counts as learning that is truly *transformative*? Clearly, the term transformative means different things to different people and, like so many other terms in education and the social sciences, its interpretation varies across different discourses and theoretical frames. It also seems clear, though, that if transformative learning is to count as something more than any simple adjustment in personal perspective and to lead to deeper changes in personal efficacy and agency, it must be grounded in a deeper understanding of subjective experience and the relationships between self and others. In one way or another, then, attempts to answer

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the initial question all require further insight into the processes of selfhood and the integrity of the subject. Following a review of two more traditional approaches to transformative practice, I argue that recent developments in phenomenological analysis cast new light on such practice and, in particular, on the dangers of tying ideas about transformative learning to reflexive modes of self-thematization and identification.

Approaches to Transformative Practice

Two separate approaches to transformative learning and teaching practice have evolved, in which appeals have been made either to reason or to holistic experience. Miller and Seller (1990) state that the first of these approaches (closely related to a "social-change" position) can be traced back to the influence of Counts (1932) and Kozol (1967), who each emphasized the importance of values-clarification as part of a drive toward what they viewed as a necessary reconstruction of schooling. More recently, the rational social-change approach has been developed in the field of adult education by Mezirow (1991, 2000) and others, who have emphasized the close relationship between transformative learning and cognitive processes of critical reasoning in the reframing of personal perspectives. According to Mezirow, transformational educational practices derive inspiration from the cognitive revolution in psychology, and from the concomitant notion that individuals' rational explanations of what happens to them determine their actions and their life experiences (p. xiii). On this view, the key to transformative learning in adults lies in processes of critical reflection directed towards the reassessment of their prior assumptions. Transformative learning results when personal meaning schemes or explanatory perspectives are changed, and when these conceptual revisions lead to meaningful changes in decision-making and action. Although Mezirow includes *self-concept* among factors considered important to learning, this is defined as an interpretive frame that functions as a cognitive filter on reality. According to Mezirow's model, the teacher's central goals are to help learners to become more critically-reflective and to encourage them to "participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action" (1991, pp. 224-225).

This first approach is characterized by a positivistic emphasis on reason and logic as the basis for self-reflection, understanding, and social involvement. Mezirow (1991; 1995) recognizes the influence of Habermas on his thinking, and it is in Habermas's theories of communicative action

and universal pragmatics where the rationalist-cognitivist tradition perhaps finds its most fully elaborated expression. Habermas (1984) argued that language functions are tied to universal claims about validity and truth that go beyond the scope of local communities, and that speech is thematized in particular contexts of meaning. According to Habermas, particular kinds of thematization take place in the *lifeworlds* of human experience, and the subject becomes centred through processes of communicative action directed towards mutual understanding. In relating the theory of communicative action to transformative educational practice, Welton (1995) argues that Habermas's democratically-oriented theories lead to a "learning turn," and to a transformed vision of education in which "all of society is a school" (1995, p. 134). In such a school, the central task for learners becomes that of defending against colonization of lifeworlds of experience by external social forces, and of finding positive ways in which they can relate to the social systems around them. From this perspective, transformative learning is defined largely in terms of abilities for socially-based reasoning and judgement.

As Miller and Seller point out, the holistic tradition of thinking about transformative practice can be traced back to what Huxley (1970) called the "perennial tradition" of belief about universal interconnectedness running through both Eastern and Western cultures. Over the past few decades, the idea of interconnectedness has received some strong support from investigations in the natural sciences. As writers like Capra (1982) and Zohar (1991) have shown, for instance, perceptions of interconnectedness are compatible with findings from the New Physics and, as Prigogine and others have shown (e.g. Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), they are also consistent with descriptions of chaos and emergent order in the field of biology. Recent extensions of the holistic tradition can be found in the development of ecological theories, in which attempts are made to combine holistic perceptions of interconnectedness with scientific insights into processes of organic growth and adaptation. Some of the main characteristics of the ecological perspective are described by Spretniak (1999), who details the emergence of a new post-Enlightenment understanding of reality based on recognition that all life takes place in a dynamic matrix, and which opposes the modernist tendency to view human subjects in predominantly economic or commercial terms. These ideas are further articulated within the framework of *ecological postmodernism*, in which perceptions of dynamic relationship rather than fixed order or social construction become

foundational in the interpretation of truth and reality (pp. 72-75). As Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) further argue, ecological postmodernism reflects a view of the human self as being always embedded in the complex biological and semiotic web of life as a whole. In this way, the "I-subject" is no longer defined by its boundaries or separation from the systems around it but, rather, as one instance of a more general "we," or community of others (pp. 169-172).

Despite the many powerful insights generated within these two approaches, however, each suffers from some well-recognized theoretical and practical limitations. Some of the main criticisms of Habermas's social pragmatics have focused on his failure to justify the claim to universal validity, and on his over-reliance on social reasoning as a basis for understanding the broad range of subjective experience. As Taylor (1989) points out, the complexities of individual lives cannot be captured just simply by references to "moral-practical" or "cognitive-instrumental" dimensions of thought: What seems to be missing from Habermas's theories, he observes, is some account of the "subjective resonances" by which people also apprehend reality (Taylor, 1989, p. 510). As McCumber (2000) also argues, Habermas's conception of the lifeworld of meanings is one in which it becomes difficult to gain true subjective independence, and from which it is difficult to find any exit (p. 78). In general terms, the limitations for an interpretation of transformative learning inherent in Habermas's theories are similar to those found in many modernist attempts to ground subjective experience in processes of reasoning.

Although the holistic approach is more open to intuitive kinds of impression, this leaves it vulnerable to criticisms of being too open to metaphysical speculation and logical weakness. Actual attempts to develop curriculum and teaching practices for public schooling on the basis of holistic experience or transpersonal psychology have either failed or (as in the case of the Waldorf schools, for example) have survived only on the periphery of public education (Miller & Seller, 1990). One of the problems seems to be that the kinds of sensibility described by Huxley and others may not be broadly acceptable as foundations for transformative practice. As Wood (2003) points out, too, many ecologically-oriented approaches to transformative learning also invite criticism on grounds of their lack of analytical depth and rigor (pp. 211-215). In the end, it seems that a revitalized understanding of transformative learning and practice will depend upon a richer description of the dynamics of subjective experience than can be

provided by either of the more traditional approaches. This richer description begins with the investigation of the processes by which individuals' senses of self and personal agency are constructed in contemporary cultural conditions.

Problems of Defining the Self in the Late Modern Period

To many observers, the period of late modernity is one in which the human subject faces threats of becoming decentred, fragmented, or even obliterated. According to Giddens (1991), for example, this is an era in which it becomes difficult to protect the privacy and intimacy of individual experiences from the encroachments of global events. In environments saturated with information, and in which ideas about self-development and social systems are inseparable, human experiences naturally become homogenized. As traditional values wane, according to Giddens, thoughts and experiences are increasingly shaped by lifestyles, and opportunities for self-understanding become more limited and tied to multiple-choice decisions. All of this results in a sense of personal meaninglessness and worthlessness, in feelings of "existential isolation," and in a diminished sense of personal authenticity (Giddens, 1991, pp. 4-9). As Taylor (1991a) sees it, social fragmentation results in an increasing distancing between people and their political and social communities, leading to feelings of powerlessness (pp. 117-118). Hochschild (2003) further describes how feelings of disenchantment and depersonalization result from the commodification of human experience, and how the fragmentation of family life leads to "phantom relationships" between children and their parents (pp. 30-35; 163-171). Others, like Poster (2003) have recognized many of the challenges posed by the acceleration of virtual experiences, in which the real and the imagined are blended in ways that lead to fundamental "changes in the ethical environment" (p. 187). In sum, there has been growing concern about what appears to be a gradual erosion of the subject in late modernity, an erosion that leads to a diminished sense of personal freedom and agency. All of this suggests that truly transformative learning now depends, at least in part, on a recognition of these many kinds of obstacles to subjective independence. And this, in turn, depends on a deeper understanding of the social and psychological processes of self-awareness and definition.

Mainstream Theories of the Self

Among the well-known themes explored by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* were the consistency of the self through time and the stream of consciousness, the nature of self-esteem, and the presence of many selves within each individual person. According to James, selfhood is most fundamentally defined by the placement of boundaries between the "me" and the "not-me," or between what is "mine" and "not mine" (1950, p. 290). What makes individuals unique is the way in which they draw distinctions between their private spheres of influence and the spheres of others around them. For James, the "me" is indistinguishable from what the "I" possesses: it is the "sum total" of "all that a person can call his or her own" (p. 292). In his explorations of the inner dynamics of the self, James further distinguishes between *material*, *social*, and *spiritual* aspects of experience underlying a number of possible selves that are put into play in particular circumstances. The *possible self* that individuals pick out at any given moment is the one in which they have the largest functional investment and through which their self-esteem is most successfully maintained. According to James, a succession of selves are drawn together in subjective experience by an ego that is equivalent (i.e., co-identified with) the stream of consciousness. Within this succession, and in processes of human development more generally, the "I" is supposedly inherited from one state of being to the next, and any break in the succession leads to forms of inner schism and psychopathology (pp. 379-392). It was James, then, who first outlined the modern psychological theory of the self based on interactions between an "I-subject" and a "me-object." Recent elaborations of this psychological model appear in the work of Feshbach and Weiner (1991), who distinguish between the *self-as-agent* and the *self-concept*, or *self-as-object*, and Higgins (1987), who contrasts the *actual self* (the true assessment of selfhood) with the *ideal self* (the ideal imagined form of the self), and the *ought self* (the self that accords to normal social expectations). In all of these approaches, the principal functions of the subjective "I" are to make objective comparisons between various me-identities, and to contribute to a sense of temporal succession and coherence.

Following James, Mead (1934) contributed the idea of the "generalized other." Beginning with James's distinction between the self-as-subject and self-as-object, Mead argued that the term "self" should be used to refer reflexively to both of these aspects of individuals, claiming that people only really come to know themselves indirectly from the

standpoints of other individuals in the same social groups, or from the more generalized standpoints of groups as a whole (p. 138). According to Mead, communication only becomes possible once individuals can see themselves as objects in this way, a process that begins with the playing of rule-bound games in childhood (pp. 151-154). As they grow, he claimed, individuals develop sets of multiple selves based on the different forms of group-based social interactions in which they engage, and the unity of selfhood results from the sense of the generalized other that emerges from multiple experiences of the objectivized self. A noted limitation in Mead's account of the "I" is that it seems to focus only on individuals' responses to their communities to the neglect of their productive input. As Taylor (1991b) points out, this results in a "monological" interpretation of the self, rather than in a "dialogical" interpretation in which external social and moral perspectives are fully internalized.

An alternative and more fully dialogical view of the self has been developed by Hermans and Kempen (1992), following Bakhtin and Ricoeur. Inspired by the polyphonic novels of Dostoevsky in which characters were allowed their own free-play and authorship, Bakhtin (1973) argued that dialogue was prerequisite to the "genuine life of personality" in its own self-understanding. He was especially impressed with the ways in which Dostoevsky created different characters out of the internal voices of one person. This parallel staging of interior and exterior dialogues appeared to Bakhtin to match the kinds of complex interpenetrations between private and public spheres of thought that seem typical of everyday individual experience. For Ricoeur, dialogue plays an essential part in the development of the identity of the self through inner narrative emplotment (see, e.g., Ricouer, 1992, pp. 140-145). In their theory of the "dialogical self," Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that the metaphor of the polyphonic novel expands conceptualizations of the *I-me* relationship in a number of significant ways. First, it leads to an interpretation of the self in which individuals can successfully negotiate between a multiplicity of different worlds of experience, even though each in a sense has its own independent author. Second, the self can be understood *as* the polyphonic novel in its ability to integrate these diverse modes of existence through inner dialogue. Third, the *I* need no longer be considered to be some kind of overarching executive having the primary function of controlling its various *me*-constituents: it can be understood as moving in an imaginal space between different and often opposed inner selves. Fourth, the possibility

arises that different authors within the self are free to enter into dialogue with each other, leading to richer perceptions and experiences through multiple perspectives. Finally, the polyphonic metaphor reflects the idea that selfhood involves dialogue between different layers of conscious and unconscious processing (see Hermans and Kempen, 1993, pp. 46-47; 164-165). The images and metaphors of inner and outer dialogue support a dynamic view of the self centred on the reflective monitoring of its inner voices.

Although the dialogical model of the self is complex and dynamic, it leaves a number of questions about the integrity of the subject or its relation to others unanswered. First, the idea that the self involves processes of inner dialogue does not in itself explain the unitary experience of selfhood – of there being a critical reader of the text beyond the polyphony of its multiple voices. Although there may be several authors at work within the self, it seems, in the end, that there must be just one who can actually learn and change from the experience. Second, in the absence of a clearly differentiated independent reader of some kind, one not fully immersed in the writing of the novel, it is difficult to see how much learning could take place – let alone the kinds of transformative learning required for changes in personal meaning and action. Third, the equation of the self with the streams of consciousness expressed by the various authors raises a significant question of determinism, since the view of the self as being *just* its own flow of experience is one that undermines opportunities for critical distance or independent choice. It is in confronting these kinds of problems that a more detailed phenomenological analysis of self-awareness shows great promise.

Self-Identification and Self-Thematization

Before turning to recent phenomenological analysis, it is worth returning to some of the noted psychological characteristics of self-experience in late modern conditions. One psychological consequence of the kinds of encroachments on the subject described earlier is an increasing automaticity of thought and action. Automaticity results, in particular, from environments in which time is tightly managed and in which opportunities for personal reflection or contemplation are diminished. According to Giddens (1991), it results, too, from certain characteristic late-modern modes of self-identification. One characteristic of self-identification, he argues, is a tendency towards

reflexive self-construction implicit in the idea that individuals are what they make of themselves. Another is a tendency towards forms of *self-observation* in which individuals become aware of what is happening to them and of what they are thinking right now. Other tendencies include that toward reflexive awareness of bodily states and conditions, and toward *self-narrations* in which the self is made explicit. Overall, Giddens characterizes the late-modern self as one in which ideas about authenticity or truth-to-oneself replace a deeper sense of moral purpose or responsibility to others (pp. 74-80). One important aspect of Giddens' analysis for theories of transformative practice lies in his suggestion that reflexive forms of attention place restrictions on subjective experience – a suggestion that challenges notions of transformative learning centred on critical self-reflection. His analysis suggests that reflexive processes of self-identification effectively close the subject off to transformative understanding and change.

Recent Phenomenological Investigation: Varieties of Self-Awareness

Basic semantic analysis reveals that uses of "I" are essentially different from those of other pronouns like "this" or "that," for example, which are strongly dependent on particular contexts for their meaning. "I" carries a stable meaning wherever it goes, while "this" or "that" references are dependent on whatever happens to be in the field of perception. In statements like "I've just been through hell" or "I want you to open your books," "I" always refers indisputably to the same entity – the self who refers. It follows from this that "I" is not used to refer to an *object* in the same way as other referents. When people use the word "I," they mark both their existence and their presence in the situation of reference, and these features remain constant no matter what the context of communication. This implies a form of self-awareness that cannot depend on the apprehension of the self as an object, since this would lead to an infinite regress in which it would be impossible to establish which version of the self (subjective or objective) had priority (i.e., which was the "true" self). As Shoemaker (1968) pointed out, all of this leads to the further conclusion that self-awareness cannot be explained as a form of object-perception, but only as a special kind of awareness that is unmediated by objects (p. 559). This analysis opposes any notion, then, that existence of the *I-subject* ultimately depends on *reflexive* modes of self-identification.

Husserl's investigations of the *I-subject* were closely tied to his description of the pure Ego. He argued that the Ego should be recognized as "the active and affective subject of consciousness" that is related through experiences to all objects, and as a transcendent entity that is given together with consciousness. According to Husserl, it was the active Ego within the stream of experience that brought about *cogito* (or the "conscious act of awareness," or intentional "glancing" towards objects of attention). Unlike other phenomena, the Ego escapes attempts at reductive analysis because it can never be removed or disconnected from the subject's intentional acts, thoughts, or imaginings. In this way, the subject exists for him- or herself with "apodictic necessity" and in "absolute Reality." The "glancing towards" objects is passively pre-given and presupposed within the cogito and in processes of grasping ideas (see, Heinsen, 1982, pp. 147-169). For Husserl, the "character of subjectivity" was to be found in the life of the Ego as it engages in attentional processes.

Zahavi (1999) clarifies and extends Husserl's ideas in his study of the varieties of self-awareness. As Zahavi points out, according to basic phenomenological analysis self-awareness comes about when a person's subjectivity "reveals itself" (p. 15). Since logic dictates that self-awareness cannot be a relation between a subject and an object, it always in a sense lies beyond its own grasp. This implies that previous models of reflexive self-awareness are insufficient to the task of explaining subjectivity, and that a further distinction needs to be drawn between *reflective* and *pre-reflective* processes. In the reflective mode of self-awareness, some image or idea about the self does, indeed, become available to consciousness. This ideation, though, must *depend* on a prior, pre-given awareness of self from which the subject can recognize these reflected conceptualizations (pp. 10-40).

Some good illustrations of these levels of self-awareness can be found in the various ways in which subjects understand their own bodies. Following Henry (1963; 1990), Zahavi further describes bodily self-awareness as a form of "self-affection" in which the body is apprehended not through the gaze of the Other, but simply by, or in itself. Most bodily acts, it seems, are not thematized through any kind of objective account. On some occasions, though, the subject becomes more aware of the body and its various parts and sensations. Bodily self-awareness, then, comes about at a number of different levels, including a level of "immediate, non-articulated, prereflective self-sensitivity," a level of "thematization and articulation," and a level of even more explicit, or "theoretical" self-

description in which bodily states can be described and explained in objective detail. This last objectivized level of understanding shares much in common with the inter-subjectively accessible impressions of the self that are available of the self to others, and of others to the self. Intersubjective experiences, though, would themselves be impossible without the presupposition of the idea of selves-in-relationship, and this realization leads in turn to the conclusion that relations between the self and others depend on a pre-given "dynamic and differentiated openness to alterity" (Zahavi, 1999, p. 137).

How is it, then, that a sense of self is established, maintained, or lost, and how is it that an experience becomes indubitably "mine" or "yours?" One way of exploring these questions more closely is to look at so-called pathological cases in which subjects report feelings of depersonalization or loss of self. Following Schilder (1951) and Sass (1994), Zahavi argues that what may actually happen in cases of schizophrenia, where subjects often report feeling that they are being controlled by others, or even that it is others who are thinking their thoughts, is that rather than *losing* the centred "I," patients may actually be suffering from forms of *ultrareflection*. On this account, depersonalization results not from a *loss* of self-awareness but, rather from forms of compulsive objectivization and self-thematization in which "the subject is so obsessively preoccupied with his experiences that they are gradually transformed and substantialized into object-like entities, which are then experienced as alien, intrusive, involuntary, and independent. (Zahavi, 1999, p. 155)

It seems, then, that intensive forms of self-observation and reflection may serve only to disintegrate the self and to fragment subjective experience. In the absence of a spontaneous level of pre-reflective self-awareness, the subject, according to Zahavi, becomes "lifeless and unreal." On this view, many so-called pathological phenomena, and especially those relating to descriptions of depersonalization, can be understood as disorders of self-awareness rather than, as some alternative recent accounts would have it, as disorders of neurochemistry and neurotransmission (1999, pp. 155-156).

The most significant implication of Zahavi's analysis for transformative educational practice lies in the distinctions he draws between thematized and more purely subjective modes of self-awareness in the life of the subject. The analysis suggests that orthodox conceptualizations of self-reflection may themselves undermine, rather than strengthen the subject. Following Husserl, Zahavi refers to

reflective forms of self-awareness as *mundane*, and as typically involving either a *personalistic* attitude, in which the subject apprehends itself as one among many others, or a *naturalistic* attitude in which the self appears as a causally determined object among other objects. The key finding in the analysis is that when they become overwhelming, processes of reflective mundanization lead to a weakening or alienation of the self. In the end, what matters most for the subject is that it avoids being closed off by these restrictive modes of reflexive self-identification. Zahavi's analysis suggests that subjectivity manifests itself in different ways, and that the critical freedom and independence of the subject depend on maintaining an essential openness to the varieties of self-awareness, and to the multiple and changing interpenetrations between the self and the Other. It suggests, too, that subjectivity must always involve something going beyond reflective self-awareness and that can never be completely thematized. It is only through an understanding of these dynamics of selfhood that the subject is able to resist submersion and alienation within the processes of its own identification (see Zahavi, pp. 200-207).

Conclusions

To date, approaches to transformative educational practice have centred on various forms of reflective analysis through which the self, supposedly, becomes more aware of its cultural and ideological conditioning. As critiques of late modern conditions like those of Giddens suggest, though, increasing tendencies towards reflexive forms of self-identification threaten to undermine experiences of authentic selfhood and transformative learning. These tendencies are particularly apparent in contexts of heightened consumerism, economic competitiveness, and virtual reality, in which distinctions between objects and subjects collapse in vortices of self-thematization.

It was Husserl who first identified the need to undertake a thorough analysis of self-experience in which the idea of reflexive self-attention itself became a matter for rigorous reappraisal. Zahavi's extensions of Husserl's ideas suggest that the freedom and independence of the subject depend not so much on awareness of various "me's" or multiple personalities within the self, or on dialogue between inner voices, as they do on recognition of different levels and modes of self-awareness. This new phenomenological investigation of self-awareness suggests, too, that true subjectivity can be preserved only when self-thematizations are understood to be part of the continual flow of experience, and not as the

beginning and end of self-definition. It is only by preserving the idea of a subject existing beyond reflexive analysis or self-identification that learning that is truly transformative becomes possible.

How, in the end, might these emerging thoughts about the nature of selfhood and subjectivity have an impact on teaching and learning? My main purpose in this paper has been to outline a critical and phenomenological account of the self that goes against the grain. As I see it, the crucial distinction between accounts of the self that depend on one or another mode of self-*reflection* (in which "subjective" and "objective" modes of the self are understood to be operative) and the emerging phenomenological account developed most clearly in the work of Zahavi (1999) lies in the idea, on the one hand, that the self can best be understood in terms of a stable opposition between its own *subject-I* and *object-me* aspects and the idea, on the other hand, that this opposition itself results from the stream of cultural conditioning. Following this latter interpretation, an interpretation implicit both in Giddens' critique of modernity and Zahavi's extensions of Husserl's work, the self is understood to be always *under construction* and, even more significantly, never fully-knowable in terms of simple subject-object dynamics. On this view, the nature of the *subject-I* can never be closed off, as it so typically becomes in contemporary cultural conditions: on the contrary, conceptualizations of selfhood and subjectivity must remain open to the possibility of multiple levels and forms of self-awareness occurring within everyday experience. All of this suggests, then, that educational practices that are founded on more orthodox interpretations of critical self-awareness or critical self-reflection, interpretations that are themselves grounded in traditional I/me or author/text distinctions, serve to place limits on transformative learning. According to the view presented here, teaching practices that are truly transformative now depend on transcending notions of the self as being fully-knowable in these ways and, following Giddens and Zahavi, on a less fully-specified view of the self that is less vulnerable to the constraints of reflexive self-definition. For transformative practice, this emerging perspective on selfhood implies a need for greater recognition in curriculum and teaching of the ways in which selfhood and personal agency are eroded not only by powerful external manipulations of the idea of self-as-object, but also, and even more perniciously, by the foreclosures of self-experience that come about within the reductionistic view of the self implicit within the traditional subject-object dichotomy.

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