ARGUMENT
BIANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL

e-ISSN 2084–1043 p-ISSN 2083–6635
Published online: 24.11.2025

Vol. 15 (1/2025) pp. 27–48
https://argument.uken.krakow.pl/

Selfhood and autonomy from a dynamical perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins by identifying several dimensions of selfhood that either appear contradictory or come across as requirements that no embodied being can possibly fulfil. Over against the tendencies to loosen the demands as far as autonomy and unity of self, I propose that the inherent tensions are negotiable provided that a dynamical organization of the developmental process is acknowledged. The latter becomes clear once we adopt the standpoint of the regulatory theory — the application of the principles of the dynamical system approach to the problems of human development (Schore, 1997). On this basis, I offer an outline of a cyclical (phasic) model of selfhood. The model operates on the assumption that we are intentional beings, and purports to show that each stage of intentional activity creates problems only the next one can address. What the model tracks, essentially, are changes in affective (organismic) states associated with changes in the motivational system, beginning with its relatively random activation, through to the formation of explicit intention, to the latter's transformation through the integration of alternative perspectives, all the way up to reflective autonomy that defines boundary conditions for future pursuits.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy, self-regulation, prereflective awareness, global attention, dynamical systems, subjectivity, agency

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DOI: 10.24917/20841043.15.1.2

1. INTRODUCTION

Our commonsense notion of selfhood combines subjectivity, continuity of experience across different situations, with autonomous agency — an ability to act of one's own accord and make a difference in the (life-)world. For the sake of convenience, we will refer to a conception according to which the necessary conditions for the attribution of selfhood include being a unified locus of control over both external and internal contingency (agency) and an object of self-reference (subjectivity qua self-transparency; Lamore, 2022), a substantialist-individualist view of the self.

The substantialist-individualist view is open to challenge as soon as we consider that man is not a free spirit, bound only by the limitations of one's imagination, but an embodied being living in a complex, chaotic sometimes, environment, constantly interacting and transacting with other embodied beings under conditions of limited resources. The ensuing complexity can be pursued along several dimensions.

Concerning the modern ideal of personal autonomy and moral mastery which informs the substantialist-individualist view, critics were quick to point out that this ideal is a product of evolutionary and historical contingencies. One's self-consciousness is also heavily influenced by one's socio-cultural milieu so we are challenged to explain how one can transform one's social environment as opposed to being simply moulded by it (cf. Zahavi & Zelensky, 2023).

On top of that, the permeability of self complicates the issue of self-knowledge — the self-knowledge that the modern ideal deems necessary for a proper exercise of agency, one combining efficacy with accountability.

Realizations such as these have motivated attempts to relax demands on the self regarding the expected range of autonomy and the moral obligations which typically follow.

In the modern era, minimalist tendencies in the treatment of the self can be traced back to David Hume's conception of self a system of habits (1896, Book 1, sec. VI), often referred to as the Bundle Theory of the Self. Along these lines it is sometimes argued today that agency is primarily expressed through behavioural or conceptual precedent established in the course of implicit learning (Rust, 2024) as opposed to goal setting and performance assisted by self reflection.

An interesting viewpoint has been offered by Hans Joas (1998), who has been toying with the idea of self as a process of continuous development via social interactions. This view claims to be non-teleological in the sense that it does not entail any endpoint or ideal upon which all strands of developments

are supposed to converge (however asymptotically). I do not find it coherent, though, to speak of a 'non-teleological development'. There must, after all, be some boundaries and normative constraints at play in the process of development lest it be indistinguishable from mere (random) change. The challenge, as I understand it, is to explicate teleology and individual autonomy without invoking any unchanging substance or universal ideal.

Stanley Cavell (1990), for his part, objected to the treatment of self in noumenal terms, pointing out that human consciousness is dynamic, complex — even at times discontinuous (ibid.: xxxi). Nonetheless, the Emersonian concept of the 'unattained and attainable' self he has appropriated (ibid., xxxi, 8–9) likewise seems to threaten the unity of consciousness and make the form of organization in the process of self-constitution elusive.

Overall, the problem with minimalism in the treatment of the self is that it seems utterly impossible to evade the issue of autonomy and boundaries (constraints) when trying to speak coherently about the subject-matter (the self).

Much headway in the conceptualization of the self has been made by a variety of authors advancing relational or dialogical conceptions of the self (including Arendt, 1978; Ricoeur, 1992; Fowler, 2004; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2016). In contrast to the minimalist conceptions, the notion that each self is an organized multitude and forms a coupled system with other selves (for instance, De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; De Jaegher & Froese, 2009), does not so much strip the self of uniqueness, sense of purpose and autonomy as it challenges the traditional, substantialist-individualist understanding of those features. The obvious problem that such a position engenders is that relationality implies some form of codependence. In other words, in the light of the relational view of the self, autonomy and agency apply primarily to the coupled system rather than the participating individuals. Aware of the problems stemming from the notion that self is constituted through interactions with other selves, Hanne De Jaegher and Tom Froese (2009), for example, propose to distinguish between interactive (collective) and individual autonomy. Nonetheless, insofar as the enactive approach tends to focus on interactive processes, the agent's capacity for independent action — action in a state of decoupling (see De Bruin & Kästner, 2012) — continues to pose a conceptual challenge.

Overall, however, the idea that unity of the self is to do with ordered complexity rather than simplicity, interweaves nicely with other ambitious projects such as those of Alisdair MacIntyre (1985), Charles Taylor (1989) or Anthony Rudd (2012) who tend to construe the unity of self as a function of the narrative organization of our lives. Narrative is here understood as a means whereby finite beings negotiate tensions and conflicts (cf. Ricoeur, 1967), including

conflicts of values and purposes arising from within and represented by alter egos (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2016). This view entails that the self simultaneously organizes itself and its lifeworld, and that organization is a telos rather than a given — something to be actively worked on rather than something always-already there — or both of these things, to some extent.

Taken together, relationality and (strong) narrativism (Rudd, 2009) suggest that selfhood is a matter of dynamical organization which transpires at once within individuals and among or between them. So, the dynamical, relational-narrative conceptions of self just mentioned provide a valuable starting point for the reworking of the concept of selfhood by suggesting that its many different and seemingly incompatible facets can be reconciled assuming that organization is an implicit telos of human activity, reaching ever higher levels over time.

This paper ought to be read as offering a specific contribution to our understanding of the dynamical organization of the self. I will show that rather than being merely an ad hoc assembly of functions and behaviours serving the needs of a specific moment (Strawson, 2011), a mental illusion (Dennett, 1993) or an aimless process (Joas, 1998), the self can be treated as a substance insofar as a specific kind of unity and teleology can be attributed to it. Drawing upon the dynamical system theory, I shall demonstrate that unity and teleology should be treated as boundary conditions of the self, meaning they need not be fully attributable at every stage of development, instead constituting an ultimate, and for the most part implicit, telos. This understanding implies that the teleology of self resides in each agent's ability to resolve conflicts of values and perspectives to achieve ever higher-order equilibrium states relative to certain areas of interest or concern. The orientation toward complexification distinguishes developmental processes from mere change and explains personal teleology without presupposing finality.

My ultimate goal is to propose a model which tracks the struggles of human agents to achieve ever-higher levels of dynamical organization vis-à-vis the environment. Specifically, we will show how different types of concerns and tensions arise and are addressed by agents during intentional activity that ultimately leads to an increase in autonomous agency.

2. THE DYNAMICAL SYSTEM APPROACH TO THE SELF

In the most general terms, the dynamical system theory can be characterized as an attempt to explain the phenomenon of self-organization (cf. Varela *et al.*,

1991), the apparent fact that biological systems in particular possess an ability to maintain a dynamical balance between order and contingency, or between the endogenous tendency to sustain form and the exogenous pressure for change.

The dynamic system theory and associated methodology are broadly used today in psychological and socio-psychological research on the assumption that interpsychic and intrapsychic phenomena are strongly interrelated, the interrelation being perhaps the most advanced example of the logic of self-organization (Vallacher & Nowak, 1997). As Wiltshire *et al.* put it (2015: 1), "The dynamical systems perspective and associated methodologies are of great utility here as these provide a means of characterizing social interaction and the accompanying social cognitive processes across sub-personal, personal, and supraindividual levels [...]."

Thus far, the dynamic system approach has been successfully applied to the study of human interactions in general (see, for example, Vallacher & Nowak, 1997; Dale *et al.*, 2014) and the dynamics of social judgement in particular (Vallacher *et al.*, 1994).

The dynamical system approach has also made its presence felt in personality studies. Recently, Sosnowska *et al.* (2019) proposed an integrated model of personality which conceptualizes the cohesiveness of personality in terms of the strength of the so-called personality attractor force whereby the psychic system, despite inevitable deviations from the dominant trajectory caused by all manners of contingency, oscillates around the core aka 'baseline personality'.

At the most general level thus far, Leon De Bruin and Lena Kästner (2012) have offered a cyclical model of action and perception on which dynamical systems alternate between the trough of coupling, denoting maximum acceptable dynamics and novelty, and the crest of decoupling which represents the system at its most unidimensional and stable. This model is a direct response to the individual versus interactive autonomy problem mentioned in the Introduction and attempts to explain how it is possible for individuals to act autonomously despite being part of a larger whole. The model presupposes that for each social dynamical system (field), there is an acceptable range of deviations or variations, represented by the distance individuals can move away from the centre of a given field as established during coupling or synergy (cf. Vallacher *et al.*, 1994; Dale *et al.*, 2014) without threatening cohesion.

Barandiaran *et al.* (2009: 367), in turn, identify three conditions that must be met for a self-organizing system to qualify as genuine agent:

"(a) a system must define its own individuality,

(b) it must be the active source of activity in its environment (*interactional asymmetry*), and

(c) it must regulate this activity in relation to certain norms (*normativity*)."

They define agency as "an autonomous organization that adaptively regulates its coupling with its environment and contributes to sustaining itself as a consequence." (ibid.)

Based on the above, we can express the essence of the dynamical system approach as applied to psycho-sociological phenomena with two principles.

For one, the dynamical system approach entails there is a mutual dependency between the system and its parts. We could say that the organizational pattern of the system (its shape or form), depends on the form of its participants (i.e. parts of a system are themselves a dynamical system/field). We could also say that in this view the system's organization serves the individual expression of agency — the field must be sufficiently organized to be able to provide the proper environment for individuals to act within. A corollary to this is that if a system is unstable, it tends to sustain itself at the cost of the individuality/autonomy of subsystems, which gives it an implosive spin. A host of examples of such instability in the context of family dynamics is provided by Minuchin *et al.* (2006).

Second, we can see that according to dynamical system thinking, teleology drives normativity. Each system is defined by certain boundary conditions within which it desires to remain, the motivation to maintain proper limits being a primary reason for its activity.

Valuable as these notions are as far as exchanges between agent and its milieu are concerned, in my view they are in themselves insufficient to account for human agency. As we saw, the dynamical system approach conceptualizes autonomy and agency in terms of the oscillations of a coupled, agent–environment or self–other system. What we need to specify, though, is how and to what extent individuals control the tempo and direction of the system's transformations. The aspect of human agency that is not fully covered by the above-listed applications of dynamical system thinking is the progressive character of human autonomy, viz. the fact that it sustains itself by aiming to achieve ever higher levels of dynamical equilibrium, which requires conscientious effort.[1] In other words, these

[1] This is reflected in the mathematics typically employed in the modelling of the system's evolution: the reliance on differential equations (see e.g. De Bruin & Kästner, 2012) makes the system revolve around fixed parameters rather than truly evolve. New mathematical tools are

approaches do not pay sufficient attention to the fact that human agency is tied to b o t h the preservation a n d d e v e l o p m e n t of form.

The fact that human agents across their lifespan are growth-oriented — that they are dynamical beings not just horizontally but also 'vertically' — is well accounted for by the so-called regulatory theory, which is an application of dynamical system thinking to human development (Schore, 1997, 2015). More specifically, the regulatory theory is a combination of attachment theory and the dynamical system approach. In the next section, we will use the dynamics of bonding via interactions as a heuristic model for intentionality and agency. For now, let us look at the basic tenets of the regulatory theory on top of what is covered by the standard dynamical system approach, as presented above.

Overall, the regulatory theory follows the explanatory pattern presented by Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1985; cf. Eriksson, 1993), one which posits that in human development, phases of dynamic equilibrium — where one makes ongoing adjustments and smoothly assimilates the incoming data — are intercalated by crises requiring accommodation through which the system ultimately achieves a higher-order equilibrium. The regulatory theory, however, is less idealistic and abstract than Piaget's model, and puts more emphasis on the role of real-life interactions and events in delivering a developmental impulse, thereby activating dormant growth-tendencies.

According to this approach, the telos of development is autonomy *qua* self-regulation — the ability to exert conscious, deliberate control over one's affective states and thereby behaviour.

In a nutshell, according to the regulatory theory, early attachment experiences provide building blocks for the construction of the implicit self by providing the energy necessary to forge neural connections between subcortical, emotion-processing sites (the limbic systems) and the incipient right prefrontal cortex (Schore, 2015: 119). As a result, a basic rhythm of self-regulation emerges, understood as the ability to alternate between different states, orientations and activities during a single intentional activity (coupling versus decoupling, interpsychic versus interpersonal, observation versus pursuit, etc.). This rhythm amounts to an implicit, psychobiological self (ibid.).

What follows is that intentional activity always has a twofold goal. One acts with an intention to achieve a certain goal, but in endeavouring to do so, one simultaneously implicitly uses the current situation as an opportunity to achieve a higher level of dynamical equilibrium. For example, when a mother

being advanced, though (statistical mechanics) that allow for the evolution of the equations themselves (Koutroufinis, 2022).

hugs an infant, she satisfies the immediate need for safety. But with each occurrence of this sort, their attachment bond strengthens (Bowlby, 1982; Schore, 2015), and as a result, ever more complex implicit working models for interactions with the world become imprinted in the child's neural system. More specifically, by responding to the child's needs, the caregiver helps the child develop an internal infrastructure allowing her to manage her affective states, to more smoothly and efficiently transition from one energetical/motivational state to another and avoid both over- and underreacting to what is now a *class* of stimuli.

In other words, the larger goal behind every pursuit is complexification — an increase in the overall capacity to deal with conflicts and challenges, or a self-sustaining energetical economy (Schore, 1997). Complexification — an increase in ordered complexity — is achieved through the gradual internalization of diverse patterns of interactions, as a result of which a hierarchy of control centers in the brain develops (Brazelton & Cramer, 1991: Ch. 11).

There are good reasons to believe that this process starts in infancy, at a prelinguistic stage (Schore, 2021; Trevarthen, 1993) and continues in different forms throughout one's life. As Charles Fernyhough pointed out, for example, meaningful, linguistic interactions between human beings — interactions which amount to more than information exchange — produce, also by way of internalization, an internal dialectic he refers to as dialogical thinking. Dialogical thinking allows individuals to perceive a situation from multiple viewpoints simultaneously — as well as probably establishing a basal rhythm for a thinking process in terms of turn-taking (Feigenbaum, 2006). Overall, pattern internalization improves on executive control function so agents become more independent and other-oriented at the same time.

It is also worth emphasizing that according to the logic of self-regulation, the agent does not simply endure challenges to its equilibrium state but actively seeks stimuli to deliver a developmental impulse.

Another crucial aspect is that since self-regulation is a psychobiological process (Schore & Schore, 2008), the proper unit of self-regulation is an organismic state (Schore, 1997). This leads to a distinction between two forms of awareness or types of attention: focal and global. Ordinary cognitive operations, which imply a stable frame of reference and a well-defined object (be it a physical object or the self), confront us with a series of qualitative changes corresponding to shifts of attention and the periodical disintegration of the frame of reference (well-known 'gestalt switches'). It is worth noting that extreme minimalists such as Daniel Dennett (1993) and Peter Strawson (2011) seem to assume that one's sense of identity depends on mental processes

involving some such form of awareness. This leads them to conclude that the self is either controlled from below, by natural, entirely impersonal processes (Dennett), or that its scope of agency is severely limited (Strawson).

Yet, as previously indicated, self-regulation is inextricably tied to the advancement of right hemispheric, global attention — essentially a means of organizing the emotional signals coming from the limbic system into a meaningful whole. So-called global attention (Schore, 1997: 613; cf. Polanyi, 1962: 57–59; McGilchrist, 2010; Damasio, 1999, 2010) performs ongoing, nonlinear, holistic analyses of the changing relationships between different systems. Put another way, its role is to track shifts of focal attention, including the very process of object emergence from obscurity and one's bodily reactions to that — enabling one to properly connect one's current state with one's past and thereby make projects for the future. In a word, in healthy individuals, self-regulation utilizes the information of a current organismic/affective state in the form of a 'feeling' (Damasio, 1999: chap. 6), to choose appropriate behavioural and cognitive strategies. This form of coupling or matching constitutes the most critical expression of human autonomy.

Building on these insights, in the next section I will try to show that intentional activity follows a certain rhythmic pattern. An agent is challenged to identify, using both types of attention to a varying degree, the type of problem situation at hand and apply a strategy allowing him or her to move to the next level.

3. A CYCLICAL MODEL OF INTENTIONALITY

3.1. Preliminaries

As we showed in the previous section, from a regulatory perspective, being finite and situated inevitability implies conflict. Emotional regulation is essentially a form of energetical economy — it allows us to assess both the nature and magnitude of a challenge and respond to it by adjusting our energy levels accordingly. Put another way, self-regulation is a form of energy management understood as an ability to distinguish between different context-dependent motivational challenges (energy investment, spending, accumulation, and conservation).

The remainder of the paper is devoted to a reconstruction of a purportedly cyclical or spiral organization of intentional activity. For this purpose, we will be working with a coordinate system comprising two main phases, that

of coupling ('online') and that of decoupling ('offline'), each divided additionally into two stages, and separated by a chief pivot ('moments of meeting'). What we are trying to show is that each stage in the cycle can be understood as a response to an energetic-motivational problem created by the previous one, and the new stage itself generating new problems to be addressed at a still later stage (and ultimately in the next cycle). In that sense, each stage rationally constrains the one that follows it without either predetermining it or supernaturally, as it were, forcing it.

Overall, the model describes an optimal distribution of energetical resources within a pursuit.

Critically, for a cycle to be productive — viz. for it to achieve its immediate goal and delineate new directions for future explorations — each phase must be allowed to play itself out to its full potential, but not beyond that. At critical points, conscientious effort is needed to take advantage of the opportunity to move on to the next level. The main takeaway, then, is that we express autonomy and exercise agency by responding to specific challenges at an appointed time.

In a nutshell, the cyclical model attempted in the next section helps us understand different facets and features of selfhood by assigning each of them to a particular phase and stage of a cycle of intentional activity. Connections between the stages will be explained in terms of energetic (motivational) economy, which will enable us to demonstrate that the unity of self does not reside in the unchangeability of an underlying substance but in our capacity for reconstitution under constantly changing circumstances, at an ever-higher level of complexity.

3.2. Phases and stages of goal-directed activities

Now, let's unpack the above claims relative to the purported stages of intentional activity. What we will be tracking, essentially, are changes in affective (organismic) states associated with changes in the motivational system, beginning with its relatively random activation in response to an environmental challenge, through to the formation of explicit intention, to the latter's transformation through an integration of alternative perspectives, all the way up to reflective self-understanding vis-à-vis other loci of agency (alter egos included).

Due to the space required for a more granular analysis, I will restrict myself to outlining the character of the first two stages along the lines of four categories: problem situation and phenomenology; organismic state; behavioural

strategy and form of agency; threats and challenges. The remaining two stages will receive even more cursory treatment.

3.2.1. Stage 1: Entanglement

A. Problem situation & phenomenology

It's a common misconception to assume that intentional activity starts when one is presented with a choice between alternatives. As we shall see, rational choice concludes a cycle rather than opening it. From a dynamical standpoint, the onset of any complex activity — to be distinguished from simple routines and instrumental acts — is associated with local/circumscribed disequilibrium state that forces one to solve the problem of novelty (Schore, 1997; Gray & McNaughton, 2000).

The initial instability of a dynamical system is to be understood in two complementary ways. The current state of the environment contains independent variables — the environment does not lend itself to our interventions without resistance. To be able to take advantage of the opportunity suggested by a situation one must allow oneself to be, to some degree, destabilized, with a view to letting new content (habits, ideas) be formed. For example, a freshman in college must temporally let go of her earlier explicit expectations to be able to discern what is most opportune; a therapist must avoid transferring his past experiences onto a developing relationship with a new client.

Conversely, the agent herself is a novel component with respect to the environment: she may need to disturb the flow of events to some extent to be able to act.

What all this means is that regardless of whether we have entered a situation as a result of rational deliberation and planning or based on impulse or upon being confronted with something against our intention and will, the proper onset of intentional activity is the moment when the state of the environment intersects, at a bodily/energetical level, with our needs, interests and capabilities to produce an opportunity. And this means that at this point we are taking actions whose full meaning and ramifications we are yet to fully understand.

In general, then, phase 1 of a cycle is an explorative one — rather than manifesting a preconceived intention: one is examining the world in terms of potential opportunities to act. Accordingly, this stage is defined by a maximum of instability, obscurity and ambiguity. Since there are many contenders for one's attention, the main task is to extract signal from noise in order to define a problem situation.

B. Organismic state

Stage 1, in representing the lowest trough of an intentional arc, is associated with a relatively low-energy state. However, the arousal level is bound to slowly increase. We can understand it as follows. The signal from noise extraction is at once a cognitive and energetic/motivational challenge. A stimulus can be defined as an object or feature that is thematically related to a goal or concern in question and has therefore an affective value — able to activate the reward system and increase arousal. At this point, however, since there are many contenders for one's attention, one must fall back on previously accumulated resources to examine these contenders. Overall, as far as the energetical economy is concerned, stage 1 is an investment phase, accompanied by a moderate stress level.

As we have said before, global awareness tracks the changing relationship between inside and outside. It is active throughout each stage of the process as a background scanner, but at this stage it is dominant, taking its most paradigmatic form of vigilance.

C. Behavioural strategy and form of agency

It is natural to act in fits and starts at this point for one is exploring options. More specifically, novelty dominance means there is not a cognitive map at one's disposal to help one immediately identify what is most relevant nor to clearly distinguish between favourable and unfavourable occurrences. One must hence rely on affect to guide one through. Note that affect (emotion) is a complex state (Schore, 1997: 613), combining bodily signals representing the level of arousal generated in response to a stimulus (salience) with an evaluative tagging of the stimuli from the perspective of the current need or interest (valence). So, as a rule, a heightened affect — typically a negative one at this point — represents an intersection of demand and supply, and thus signals potential points of significance — suggesting where to go (i.e. which path to further explore) and where not to go.

It may be helpful here to adduce a phrase the therapist Michael Fordham once coined to refer to the proper attitude when dealing with a new patient, or a new situation more generally (Astor, 1995: Ch. 1). 'Thinking into feelings' consists in taking note of how the situation is affecting one, with a view to establishing a foundation for a relationship. More generally, at stage 1 it is not wise to commit to any specific take or course of action. Rather, one should act with an intention to explore how what presents itself fits with our needs, interests, skills and capabilities.

As one moves forward in a situation like this, all the partial clues are gradually put together at an implicit level, until they finally coagulate into a gestalt — a figure-ground representation, with an embedded hierarchy of significance (stage 2).

D. Threats and dangers

The main obstacle at stage 1 is our tendency to relieve tension by way of premature (forced) disambiguation (cf. Arnheim, 1988). As mentioned, this is a stage of caution — one is exploring options while avoiding overexposure. Obviously, overexposure may be outright dangerous when dealing with a potential predator. But it can also be problematic in a more subtle sense. For example, when a group of people meets for the first time and one of them acts too flamboyantly, that person may intimidate others and thwart their self-expression (especially if power relations are involved), which constitutes a loss of opportunity for all prospective participants.

In sum, stage 1 can be summarized as an attempt to occasion a transition from a state of entanglement and indeterminacy to a state of acuity and discrimination. It ends once — and on the condition that — a stimulus has been identified. Now a goal can be explicitly formulated and a provisional goal or point of reference established. The infant identifies the mother's face and now will attempt to engage with her; of the many topics that initially piqued a postgraduate student's interest, some will appear better aligned with one's current learning capacity than others, thus suggesting the best path forward in the given circumstances; the therapist gets a handle on where the patient may be coming from, etc.

3.2.2. Stage 2: Directed pursuit

A. Problem situation & phenomenology

If all goes well, we enter a stage of figure–ground polarization. In cognitive-perceptual terms, the figure has been marked off from the ground, which in turn allows action to be organized around a provisionally defined interest or concern (Arnheim, 1988). Initially, the signal is weak, so the task at this stage is signal enhancement.

B. Organismic state

The state of arousal increases rapidly at this stage — energetically costly stress responses die out and the reward centres in the brain get activated, giving rise to '*seeking*' behaviours (Panksepp, 1998: 51).

C. Behavioural strategy and form of agency

The stage exhibiting the greatest degree of (stereotypical) agency due to the direct involvement of the reward system. Yet, as we shall see in a moment, treating this stage as a model of agency would be reductive.

D. Threats and dangers

Because one is at this point oriented toward all kinds of reinforcers pertaining to the only just selected trajectory of activity, confirmation bias is likely to develop.

We can picture the situation thus. As a result of successful polarization/disambiguation, a very crude (see section 3.2.2) system of reference has been formed, comprising an object of interest or concern at some (phenomenological) distance from the agent and a line connecting the two within a phenomenological space. One's goal now is to strengthen the connection to facilitate approach and increase energy transfer between the world and the self (energy accumulation). One must therefore sharply contrast different items along the axes of significance and value.

Informal group formation and participation is the most common way of enhancing the ability to pursue goals at this stage. This may be achieved either in the context of direct exchange (e.g. bonds developed among students in a class around a shared interest), or through virtual identification with certain role models whom we can emulate to enrich our behavioural repertoire and thus enlarge the scope of agency. For either form of identification to be possible, one must initially accentuate similarities between oneself and others and downplay differences. In a word, mutual projections typically come into play at this stage, and if one is not careful, this may give one a false sense of personal autonomy concealing one's dependence on others and on favourable circumstances.

As the system of reference expands and free energy is produced, clashes between the system and other surrounding systems — those which preceded it (e.g. a family or a culture), as well as those that grew alongside it — become inevitable (Arnheim, 1988). In other words, as activity progresses, what was discarded or ignored during polarization is bound to emerge as a contender for the same status. In joint endeavours, for example, differences in motivations among individual people, thus far veiled under a superficial alignment of intentions, come to light and threaten to erupt into in-group conflicts. This kind of dynamic is convincingly illustrated in one of the instalments of the Avengers series, *Captain America: The Civil War*, which portrays a process whereby a profound divergence in internal visions and personal trajectories between

two leaders, until now obscured by the group's initial success, is brought to the surface by a series of external events.

In a word, polarization creates imbalances that may be handled either defensively or adaptively. Defensive strategies that are likely to be employed to prevent explosion (viz. an open conflict potentially leading to disintegration), as we all too often witness in many a social context, consist in a tightening of core identity through exclusion and sharp demarcation. This in turn produces a close system where rigidity of interactions thwarts growth (Minuchin *et al.*, 2006; Tronick & Gold, 2020).

3.2.3. Moments of meeting and the transition to decoupling phase

Defensive strategies attempt to manage resources by increasing the homogeneity of an agent or group in the hopes of warding off the designated outsiders and dissidents, and as such are tantamount to going against the current of progressive differentiation that characterizes the first phase. By contrast, an adaptive, optimal response to the imbalances created at stage 2 is to produce enough energy to push a given system uphill toward a higher equilibrium state by way of integrating the different values and perspectives that have been thrown into sharp relief during directed pursuit. This integration can only take place during the so called 'moments of meeting', viz. situations "...in which the participants interact in a way that creates a new implicit, intersubjective understanding of their relationship and permits a new "way-of-being-with-the-other."" (Stern, 1998: 300).

During moments of meeting, expanded, coupled states of consciousness (Tronick, 1998) are formed. Importantly, these states are not goals in themselves but serve a specific function. The energy produced during synergistic exchanges makes it possible for the pattern or structure which has constituted itself during an interaction to become imprinted in each of the participants, prompting complexification of their individual psychic structures (Schore, 2001: 13; Schore, 2021), thereby increasing their capacity for independent action.[2]

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[2] Mother–infant synchronizations (Trevarthen, 1993) are an exemplary form of occurrences that quite literally construct the child's psyche — and transform the mother's — by forging new connections in the brain (Schore, 2015: 119, 135). 'Talk' therapies, insofar as they are effective, appear to rely on a similar mechanism of intense right-brain-to-right-brain synchronizations (Dumas *et al.*, 2010; cf. Stern, 1998; Tronick, 1998; Schore & Schore, 2008).

D.A. Stone's (2013) case study affords an excellent example of how a profound divergence of perspectives can be transformed into a complex unity obtaining both between participants and within each of them. In an experimental setting, a group of professionals — including a nurse, a lawyer specializing in health care law, a management scientist, and a process engineer — were brought together at a joint session to discuss the hospital's hypothetical pain management policy. Initially, their respective takes on the problem were so deeply at odds with each other as to make it appear they were referring to different objects. Subsequently, however — during what can be compared to group therapy offering a non-competitive setting for agents to reveal to each other and to themselves their operative assumptions — participants managed to work out a shared frame of reference allowing them to perceive their own unique practices in the context of a joint enterprise.

In other words, exactly opposite the pole of entanglement (stage 1), where self-boundaries are necessarily blurry, we have the pole of complementarity where self-awareness is at its height due to a contrast provided by other selves relative to a shared goal or value (e.g. patient well-being).

Put yet another way, the main product of synergistic encounters is the emergence of a self–object–other system (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) which transforms the previous crude and egocentric system of reference by means of triangulation — the mediation of complementary perspectives — and enables one to think as another does (ibid.: 184). This transformation makes for a safe decoupling in the second phase of the cycle as one now may, so to say, act with the image of another person — or, rather, of oneself in relation to them — in mind and regulate one's conduct accordingly. Take, for instance, the aforementioned nurse. Were she simply to adopt the perspective of the lawyer as presented to her initially, she would neglect her duty to her patients. Conversely, if when dealing with her patients she simply ignores the lawyer's concerns, she isn't acting in their best interest either — a lost lawsuit would be a serious setback for the hospital. But, if in contrast to both these scenarios, she keeps the lawyer's perspective in mind while planning, performing and reporting her medical activities, she would be able to help the lawyer come up with an ingenious legal strategy, in case one were needed along the way. Overall, the triangulation of her self-understanding via the internalized perspective of another person should allow her to take more risks for the benefit of her patients.

Importantly, the 'other' involved in triangulation must be understood broadly, as any interest or agenda oriented toward the same object but in some sense incompatible

with one's current perspective, position, or agenda, which means it may well be one's own our alter ego (e.g., me as a career-oriented professional versus me as a parent or a colleague). The whole point of integration via triangulation is to turn a limitation/obstacle into a rational constraint shaping one's perception and future conduct.

We may say that integration enables treating other agendas and perspectives as boundary conditions of one's own activity. From now moving forward, participants are motivated to adhere to the emergent normative constraints not because of sanctions, but in virtue of the fact that these constraints make the very goal appear larger (i.e., multivariate), clearer, and hence both more worthwhile and achievable than before, without the pursuit becoming depersonalized.

Following the formation of a shared, integrated vision, one is tasked with articulation and implementation thereof, which amounts to independent articulation and examination of its consequences and practical application (stage 3).

Finally, there comes a point in an endeavour when the totality of the process must be reflected upon for lessons to be drawn. At the last stage, one is finally able to take stock of all that has occurred thus far, funnel these reflections into self-knowledge and prepare for the next cycle of action, where further perspectives can be explored. What we see here, then, is the development of two-fold strategy, with one trajectory consisting in elaboration and implementation of the achievement and the other in pinpointing of the ensuing obligations to others and a delineation of further areas of interest and concern. Initially, our tendency to destabilize the environment and expose ourselves to novelty is instinctual and reflects our temperamental dispositions, but over time we learn to express autonomy by deliberately taking calculated risks. That is, we learn to rely on our ever-developing ability to assess the prevailing conditions so as to avoid both impulsivity and overcautiousness when confronted with novelty.

It goes without saying that sketchy presentation isn't sufficient to draw ultimate conclusions concerning the nature of self or the range of autonomy and accountability. Yet, I believe it does provide an interesting framework for future investigations by showing that the many, often conflicting, ideas and demands concerning selfhood can be organized in a coherent manner and potentially negotiated in practice. The model shows, on the one hand, that our pursuits have an invariant structural-dynamic organization or rhythm built into them and are oriented toward ever higher equilibrium states. On the other hand, it entails that at critical junctures of the process each of us faces

unique challenges. It is impossible to achieve higher orbits of selfhood without meeting these challenges within appropriate timeframes.

4. CLOSING REMARKS

This paper conceptualizes the self in terms of a life-long regulatory process, oriented toward increasing complexification (i.e., ordered differentiation). Admittedly, such a process is shaped by many subpersonal factors such as the evolutionary history of our species as well as our own individual 'prehistories' (ancestry, prenatal and early childhood development). But it also presents each individual human being with unique, time-bound and time-sensitive challenges standing up to which requires a developed and constantly developing self-awareness, the development of self-awareness being itself a purpose of the regulatory process.

This paper argues that it is most accurate and convenient to conceive of awareness as a continuum of organismic states spread out between two poles: focal, fixed mode of attention that we use when dealing with specific, well-defined problems and concerns, and global, fluid attention which tracks our changing relationship with objects. The idea is that in our everyday functioning, we repeatedly — cyclically, in fact — switch between these two modes of attending without ever reaching either extreme, that is, without one mode ever existing with at least some shadowy presence of the other (cf. Spreng *et al.*, 2010).

As we have said, in the first phase of intentional activity our attention closely examines what is going on at the margins, that is, at the border area between the agent and the environment. The point of it isn't merely for us to be able to *in actu* contemplate the unfolding experiences as uniquely ours. What the negative experiences do is they link subjectivity with agency, not, however, by dictating a 'rational' choice based on an ordered set or preferences, but by suggesting a cognitive-behavioral strategy most fitting in given circumstances, i.e., vigilant approach in the case of uneasiness or confusion (stage 1), stepping back to gain a fresh perspective in the case of displeasure (stage 2).

In contrast, at the last stage of activity, when the affective state is levelled due to one's having achieved a new equilibrium relative to a problem or concern — i.e., when the amount of challenge and novelty is minimal — it becomes possible and prudent to reflect on the totality of one's experience in a given cycle and try to interpret it into a reflective self-understanding. In short, the

quality and scope of the cycle-concluding self-reflection is directly proportional to how mindful our pre-reflective attending has been.

Thus, the dynamical, regulatory approach implies that self is neither fragmented into many linear narratives, each organized around a single purpose, for instance (Strawson, 2011), nor effortlessly coherent, as the substantialist-individualist view insists. Rather, it is an entity which coheres in the process of intentional activity by gradually and often rather painstakingly integrating different values and perspectives, both those representing other people's agendas and one's own alter egos. As shown, each cycle of activity potentially redefines one's range of autonomy relative to the current level of internal complexification, i.e., one's self-awareness vis-à-vis others (relationality) in the context of larger purposes (self-transcendence).

More specifically, developed self-awareness charts both the boundaries and points of connection or convergence between different agendas or viewpoints within a system one is a part of. This, in turn, allows one to control the extent and nature of one's engagement with the world. In other words, although it is true that individuality expresses itself properly only via a relationship, one nonetheless has a say as to which relationship to engage in and at what level. Accordingly, the model redeems the intuition linking autonomy with personal responsibility and mutual accountability but specifies that the scope of one's responsibility and accountability is in direct proportion to the range of autonomy one currently enjoys as measured toward the end of the pertinent cycle.

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