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Twinship is not a Pathology! Understanding the Fundamental Structures of the Self

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Abstract:

This paper engages a common view that pervades theoretical interpretations of twins—the notion that twinship is a result of each twin being a failed self which results in a singular entity or a we-self. Put differently, there is a widespread view that the self-other distinction is absent or lost in twinship. I demonstrate this by examining twin studies mainly from the psychoanalytic tradition. From this, we see that this assumption is so widespread that twins are considered to lack individuality due to the alleged pathologically interdependent nature of their twinship. Hence many hold that twins form a unit identity which enables them to operate as one person. Yet, twin's first-person accounts do not corroborate this view. Rather, they see their twinship as a joint enterprise which includes a sense of self and other. Yet, rather than acknowledging this, the literature reduces twinship to a form of psychopathology. I argue that this is a consequence of the assumption that twinship can be fundamentally understood as a result of each twin being a failed self which results in a we-self. In order to dismiss this claim, I turn to the notion of the minimal self, which situates the self in the mineness of one's pre-reflective first-person experience. As a result, it will become evident that there is a self-other distinction in twin relations and their highly entwined but separate identities could not arise without this being so. I end by recommending, that these researchers broaden their understanding of selfhood by recognising the fundamental and basic experiential structures of the self. In turn, this will allow them to work from the position that twinship, rather than been the consequence of two failed selves, manifests due to the reciprocal engagement of two minimal selves or subjects of experience.

Keywords:

Twin Studies, Minimal Self, Normative Self, Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology

Introduction

I begin by outlining theoretical accounts of twinship mainly from psychoanalytic theory. From this I contend that these accounts are underpinned by a common assumption, that is, a twin is merely a sub-individual who can only function properly as part of a supra-individual unit. Or to rearticulate, twinship is the consequence of two failed or split selves which results in a single entity or we-self. Consequently, many researchers seem to hold implicitly and explicitly the view that, the self-other distinction is absent or lost in twinship. I contend that this is a radical and wholly unwarranted view and must be revised if we are to truly understand the phenomenon.

My contention is bolstered by twins' first-person accounts in which experiences of twinship certainly do not relate to this view. Instead a twin seems to be very aware of themselves as distinct from their co-twin, as well as, see twinship as a joint enterprise which includes a sense of self and other.

This indicates to me that those that claim that twinship is essentially constituted by a singular entity are essentially working with a false or limited account of selfhood, as it does not allow for a self-other distinction in twinship. Bafflingly, rather than recognising that there may be a problem with our normative model of selfhood, researchers instead assert that twins must be in some way flawed due to their alleged “pathologically interdependent” twinship. Hence, a large body of research particularly from psychoanalytic theory, emphasises how twins “fail” to achieve “the ideal” sense of self. In other words, twins fall outside the normative model of selfhood, therefore twinship can be considered a type of psychopathology.

In order to dismiss this, I turn broadly to phenomenology and particularly to the notion of the minimal self which locates the self in the mineness of my pre-reflective first-person experience. From this, the self – other distinction in twinship become apparent as one could hardly claim twins share their dual first-person perspectives with each other. This demonstrates that these scholars rather than pathologising twinship, must broaden their normative account of selfhood by recognising the fundamental and basic experiential structures of the self. In turn, this will allow them to work from the position that twinship rather than been the consequence of two failed selves, in fact, manifests due to the reciprocal engagement of two minimal selves or subjects of experience.

Twin Studies: Failed Selves Equal a We-Self

In what follows, I will reveal an assumption that I argue underpins much of the theoretical literature on twins and their relations. —namely, if twinship is a result of each twin being a failed self, then we can understand twinship as a singular entity or we-self. In other words, the self-other distinction is absent or lost in twins' relations. As a consequence, much of the literature on twins claim that twins form a unit identity and thus are prone to functioning as one person or supra-individual.

An instance of this is ego psychology in psychoanalytic theory which has explicitly concerned itself with the individuation process in twins. It argues the process of individuation, is one all children must ideally pass if they are to achieve personal autonomy. However, twins seem to present a number of problems for this theory. Twins, especially identical twins, are commonly said to find the task of individuation more difficult than other children.

Most researchers agree that identity formation, stemming from the individuation process or to be more precise from the dual individuation process, creates a number of complexities for twins (Burlingham 1952; Joseph and Tabor 1961; Leonard 1961; Lewin 2014; 2016).

More specifically, the view is that due to a lack of bodily boundaries neonate twins see their co-twin as an extension of themselves. Even upon developing the sensory capacities to distinguish their co-twin as separate doesn't aid in their development of selfhood due to their thinking that their mirror image is merely their co-twin (Leonard 1961; Lewin 2014).

Hence, Ainslie's (1997), Klein's, (2003) and Davis's (2014), research demonstrates, due to so-called unsuccessful individuation or "failure" to form a separate identity, many researchers believe a twin can be understood as a failed, incomplete, or split self. For these people:

These dilemmas stem not only from the confusion of each twin's identity but also from the nature of their relationship and the co-contemporarity twins share in early life. Looking alike combined with constantly being together leads to the conflation or collapse of each twin's identity into an over bonded, singular, or unit identity (Davis 2014, 35)

Due to the bond between them being symbiotic, each twin regards the other as being situated within a common boundary (Terry 1975, 124). As a result, twins are widely characterised as "individuality-burned freaks of nature" (Maddox 2006, np); as closed societies of two (Kamin 1974); or as problematic, "liminal beings," existing in a state of betwixt and between (Turner 1969, 48).

Therefore, many claim twins live on the fault lines of self and other (Davis 2014, 23; Neimark 1997). More precisely, twins embody a kind of fluid space where boundaries are not always delineated and borders between self and other are not always stable (Shildrick 2002; Stewart 2005; Joseph and Tabor 1961). It seems, as a result of their physical likeness and unique relationship, which consists of sameness, closeness and togetherness, the many aspects that constitute a self are moulded into what appears to be a 'we-self', "two personalities to some extent functioning as one" (Ortmeyer 1970, 125). Hence, it would appear, for these researchers, "within the we-self there is no self and no other" (Bacon 2010, 189). Twinship can be understood as a supra-individual unit that transcends self and other, and a twin is merely a third party that enables its functioning. Or put differently, twins are thought to be prone to operating as one person. In short, within a vast amount of academic research, twinship is represented as a we-self which emphasises that twins are pathologically interdependent (Klein 2003, 10).

Twin's Perspectives

Yet, twins' first-person accounts do not seem to corroborate with these views. In Prainsacka and Spector's study, rather than claiming to function as one person identical twins Jessica and June were very aware of each other's personality to the extent that June said:

I used to always wish that maybe I was a bit more like her sort of thing. I always wished I had a bit more of her personality than my personality. And I've gone through stages when I wished I looked more like her, because we don't feel that we look anything like each other (2006, 2745).

Still researchers, like Vivienne Lewin regularly as well as recently claim, in twins, “the sense of self is to a greater or lesser extent shared, or the boundaries between them is less clear” (2016, 36). In other words, due to the lack of a distinction between self and other twins are individuality lacking. Yet, many twins do not seem to feel this way, as identical twin Emma says: “even though we’re identical twins, we’re very individual” (Prainsacka & Spector, 2006, 2743). In fact, none of the Identical twin respondents in Prainsacka and Spector’s study reported any problems with the development of individuality (2006, 2745). The above, are not the only examples that contradict the predominant view of twinship. Consider this:

The blanket is our protective shell. It unites us in our own environment. Dually here means that both first memories are the same. But it also means that the memory narrative co-embodies and unites us and at the same time it closes us off from the outside world. We are the giggling lump under the blanket. Our memory entails a sense of self and other as collaborators in action but also a sense of self and other as insiders, under the blanket, and outsiders, our mother, our older sister and her friend (Davis and Davis 2010, 139-140).

Clearly there is a self – other distinction within this instance. For them, their relations do not constitute a failed self which results in a singular entity or we-self; rather according to them “Twinship for us was in many ways a joint enterprise. Like many twins, we shared a room, we shared a life and we were always together” (Ibid). *Prima facie*, the we-experience these twin share is quite obviously contingent on a self-other distinction, as the philosopher Dan Zahavi points out:

We-experience is not prior to or equiprimordial with self-experience or other-experience. Rather, paradigmatic cases of we-intentionality presuppose (without being reducible to) second-person perspective taking and reciprocal empathy. Self-other differentiation, the distinction between self and other, consequently precedes the emergence of, and is retained in, the we (Zahavi 2015, 100).

If we-experience or the we-self requires a distinction between self and other then, in my view, and as we will see, there must be a clear self-other distinction in twinship.

In order to explicate this, I turn to Zahavi’s notion of the minimal self which situates the self in the mineness of my pre-reflective conscious experience. As a consequence, I will assert there is no fault with twins with respect to a pathological lack of selfhood. On the contrary, such accounts have reduced twinship to a singularity because they have overlooked the fundamental and basic experiential structures of the self.

Moreover, this will allow us to reconceptualise twinship. Rather than claiming that it is the consequence of two failed selves that results in a unit identity or we-self, I will instead claim that twinship is a consequence of two minimal selves. Therefore, rather than claiming that twins have a unit identity that is the result of their failure to achieve selfhood. I will instead claim, twins have two highly entwined but separate identities which manifest due to each twin being a subject of experience or minimal self. Therefore, the normative model of selfhood utilised by existing theoretical accounts of twinship is too narrow and should be broadened.

Minimal Selves

We will now turn to the notion of the concept of the minimal self in order to further demonstrate inaccuracy of the claim I contest. I will here propose that twinship could not arise in the first place without each twin being a minimal self. To rearticulate that positively, I advance the position that twinship is contingent on self-experience and other-experience, and therefore, the self-other distinction is always retained in twin relations.

One could argue that a sufficient means for clearly defining self and other, lies in the givenness of my conscious experience. In other words, what one needs is an account that expounds a minimal or core self based on the mineness of my experience. Zahavi holds a similar view, as he considers the minimal self to be a necessary precondition for more robust accounts of selfhood (Zahavi 2007; 2009; 2014). For him, all consciousness has egological content, which crudely translates as a first-person perspective. Put differently, my tacit attentiveness to a specific conscious experience includes, by its nature, a tacit awareness of one’s self as the subject of that experience. Essentially, when a subject’s intentionality is directed toward something such as x, the subject will be tacitly aware of themselves perceiving or thinking about x. Zahavi uses the qualitative maxim of “what-it-is-likeness”, stating that “experiences have a subjective ‘feel’ to them, a certain quality of ‘what it is like’ or what it ‘feels’ like to have them” (Ibid, 116). Moreover, he states “this is also the case for perceptual experiences, as well as desires, feelings, moods, and thoughts” (Zahavi 2005, 116).

The point of using the what-it-is-like maxim is that “the various modes of givenness (perceptual, imaginative, recollective) differ in their experiential properties” (Zahavi 2005, 124). For instance, what it is like to see a dog happily wag its tail is different from what it is like to hear a cat chasing a mouse or then remember these events. Crucially, Zahavi introduces the notion of a self to account for the quality of mineness that these different modes of givenness share. Simply put, when I have a conscious experience, it is “given immediately, non-inferentially and non-

critically as mine" (Ibid, 124). For example, when I see words appear on the screen in front of me as I type, I am tacitly aware (of the mineness) of my seeing.

Notably, Zahavi is not stating that conscious experience is something I possess such as a house or a car. Instead, he means one has a pre-reflective and non-conceptual mineness or consciously experienced ownership of various modes of givenness. Put differently, tacit awareness of mineness is a means of elucidating the claim that, in being conscious of x, one is tacitly aware of oneself as being conscious of x. He discloses this pre-reflective and non-conceptual "sense of mineness with a minimal, or core, sense of self" (Ibid, 125). The idea of this, "is to link an experiential sense of self to the particular first-personal givenness that characterizes our experiential life; it is this first-personal givenness that constitutes the mineness or ipseity of experience" (Ibid, 125).

Experiences are given at least tacitly as my experiences, as experiences I am undertaking. In other words, experiences are not merely characterized by certain qualitative features, they are also categorised by the fact that they exist for a subject or a self; they feel like something for somebody. The first-personal givenness of experiences therefore involves a basic form of inherent self-reference (Zahavi 2007). Hence, he claims:

Any account of self which disregards the fundamental structures and features of our experiential life is a non-starter, and a correct description and account of the experiential dimension must necessarily do justice to the first-person perspective and to the primitive form of self-reference that it entails (Zahavi 2009, 560).

This for Zahavi is the minimal primary structure on which more robust forms of self can be based. All conscious experience includes self-awareness, yet this is not the self-expounded in the Cartesian sense. The self does not occur apart from or above experience, and for that reason it is not something that might be encountered in separation from experience. He states, the self is:

Immersed in conscious life; it is an integral part of its structure. More precisely, the (minimal) self is claimed to possess experiential reality, it is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is in fact identified with the first-personal givenness of the experiential phenomena. This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something quite incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences (Zahavi 2007, 184).

Instead, one has a sense of self; this is a primary and permeating part of one's experiential life. Indeed, without a sense of self there is no experiential dimension.

One cannot deny that twins have exceptionally entwined relations, however, it is based on a much more minimal or core self which entails a first person perspective, which crucially does not allow for the intersecting of each twin's conscious experience or first person perspective. This is because, whatever their feature, whatever their object, all experiences are subjective, because they feel like something for somebody. More precisely, Zahavi, in a discussion of clones demonstrates what happens when we adopt the first-person perspective:

Although my mental and physical characteristics are qualitatively identical to those of my 'twin', there will still remain a crucial and all-decisive difference between me and him, a difference that would prevent any confusion between the two of us. What might that difference consist in? It obviously has to do with the fact that only my experiences are given in a first-personal mode of presentation to me, whereas the qualitatively identical experiences of my clone are not given first-personally to me at all, and are therefore not part of my experiential life (Zahavi 2011, 68).

Essentially by expounding a minimal or core self, which is located in the mineness of my unique first personal perspective, Zahavi draws a clear distinction between self and other.

As touched upon above, the we-self is considered by many to be a form of psychopathology, which arises as a consequence of each twin's failure to achieve selfhood. Or put differently, many hold that the self-other distinction is absent or lost in twinship. However, when one comprehends self-experience and other-experience within the context of the minimal self the self-other boundary clearly emerges.

Twin A and Twin B might have similar physical attributes and harmonising psychological characteristics, however, no one could claim that each twin's first-person perspectives are shared. As Katalin Farkas says: "Given the difference between our mental lives, perhaps it [is] better to say that the phenomenology of my conscious thought is different from [my twin], [...] because [it] involves a different subject" (Farkas 2008, 276). In other words, there is a rudimentary phenomenological difference between what it is like to be Twin A and what it is like to be Twin B. To claim the opposite, would be to claim one twin has direct access to the first-person perspective of their co-twin (and vice versa), which is impossible. *Ipsa facto*, this certain dimension of inaccessibility is precisely the reason why the other is an-other, "because he or she is also a self, with his or her own irreplaceable first-person perspective (Zahavi 2007, 189). To claim the opposite is actually quite a radical step, and one which I have clearly revealed is wholly unwarranted. As Husserl puts it, "had I had the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and instead become a part of myself" (cited in Zahavi 2011, 9).

Conclusion

It is vital that I stress, twinship although highly entwined, is not based on a failed self, which results in a singular entity or we-self.

The highly entwined relations that twins engage in and what is misinterpreted as a “we-self” couldn’t manifest in the first place, without two spatially and temporally distinct subjects of experiences. Or put differently, a highly entwined twinship can only arise as a consequence of each twin first being a minimal self, therefore, the self - other distinction is always maintained in twin relations. Scholars who claim the opposite to be true, have merely been working with a limited or unsatisfactory account of what a self is. Thus, it would seem, we need to reconsider our normative model of selfhood as it clearly does not account for twins. Instead, because a twin falls outside of what a self ought to be, we assume the fault must lay with the twin rather than our normative model, and in turn, we end up characterising twinship as a form of psychopathology. Therefore, it seems fair to argue that, those who misconceptualise twinship as a singular entity or we-self have done so because they overlook the fundamental structures of the self.

As an alternative to these accounts, I put forward the more modest hypothesis that, the self-other distinction precedes twins highly entwined relations and is always maintained thereafter. In other words, twin’s identities although highly entwined are nevertheless separate and unique.

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