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Consciousness, Personal Identity, and the Self/No-Self Debate

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Plan for the talk

1. A brief summary of what is at stake in the self/no-self debate.
2. Review some challenges no-self theories face in explaining self-consciousness and self-knowledge.
3. Consider whether no-self theories can adequately capture the many facets of self-experience and self-knowledge.
4. Propose a new model for the structure of phenomenal consciousness.
5. Conclusion: Buddhism and Phenomenology: Allies or Rivals?

The Conundrum

- **Premise:** Buddhist conceptions of personal identity rest on the no-self view (akin to Hume's "bundle theory of self").
 - Hence, Buddhist conceptions of self-knowledge cannot rest of egological conceptions of self-consciousness.
- **Two Questions:**
 - How do mental states acquire their first personal character?
 - What makes self-knowledge possible for Buddhists?

The bundle theory of personal identity

“Any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; obvious or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every feeling—is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am’.”

The Discourse on the No-self Characteristic (Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, SN 21.59)

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception...”

Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* I. 4.6

A minimal self?

- If Hume and the Buddha are right, then introspective awareness reveals no such thing as a self as the locus of experience.
- Some philosophers of cognitive science have made similar claims (Metzinger, 2003)
- Two questions:
 - Does phenomenal consciousness entail the existence of a minimal self?
 - Is the minimal self the same as subjectivity, the first-personal sense of being the subject of one's thoughts and desires?

The no-self theory challenge

- Classical views:
 - the self as a ‘conventional designation’ (*Milindapañho*)
 - the self as lacking inherent existence (Nāgārjuna, MMK)
 - A critique of Buddhist personalism (*purgalavāda*) (Vasubandhu, AKBh)
- Contemporary interpretations:
 - a bounded self/ownership account of experience (Albahari 2006)
 - a neo-Buddhist defense of antirealism about the self (Siderits 2003)
 - the aggregates relate to each other in a person-constituting way (Carpenter 2014)

The self/no-self debate

- No-self theories fail to account for the ecological, dialogical, narrative, social, and embodied aspects of our conscious lives.
- Zahavi: no-self theorists target a fictional conception of the self.
- Current conceptions of the self are psychologically robust:
 - Zahavi: “Being a self is an achievement rather than a given....Selves are not born but arise in a process of social experience and interchange.” (*Self and Other*, p.11).
 - Ganeri: “My own preference is for a conception of self according to which the self is...a unity of immersion, participation, and coordination.” (*The Self*, p. 317).

Self, no-self, and the minimal self

- Being conscious from moment to moment entails that I am, or have, a minimal self.
- Call this the **phenomenological conception of the self** (Zahavi 2005)
- The minimal self is:
 - experiential
 - essential to the structure of consciousness
 - non-reflective
 - not captured by narrative accounts (does not depend on reflective, linguistic and conceptual capacities)

Engaging the no-self view

- What is the appeal of the no-self view?
- It allows for an exploration of:
 1. the structure of awareness and the problem of personal identity on empirical grounds;
 2. the question why self-awareness comes bound up with a sense of self;
 3. the structure of agency without assuming that such structure reflects an external relation of ownership between consciousness and its self-specifying features.

A Buddhist phenomenological project?

- Some Buddhists (e.g., Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita) defend views of consciousness similar to those current in the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, e.g.:
 - **reflexivism**: the thesis that consciousness consists in conscious mental states being *implicitly* self-aware.
- Without self-awareness we cannot account adequately for the phenomenal character of conscious experience.
- Question:
 - Can self-reflexive consciousness provide sufficient ground for a robust sense of agency and personal identity?

Reductionism and Consciousness

- No self \Rightarrow no agent \Rightarrow actions as merely causally related transient events
- An epistemic explanatory gap:
 - how does the efficacy of causal processes translate into reliable cognitions?
- It doesn't!
- Self-referential cognitions are just cases of deluded thoughts:
 - “I-thoughts” are the product of afflicted minds (*kliṣṭa-manas*)
- But conscious experience has phenomenal character.
- Have Buddhists failed to secure epistemic access to *why it is that there is something it is like* to be conscious?

Reflexivity and the no-self view

- Dharmakīrti: “The perception of objects is not established for one whose apprehension thereof is not established.” (PVin I, 54cd)
- But episodic theories of consciousness cannot explain its properly phenomenological features (agency, purposiveness, temporality, perspectival ownership).
- For Buddhists like Dignāga, Dharmakīrti and their followers, we can dispense with the no-self view so long as we recognize the reflexive character of awareness.
- Can we have reflexivity without a phenomenal self?

Phenomenality versus Intentionality

- A long debate in the Buddhist contemplative literature:
 - do advanced states of meditation lack intentionality, but not phenomenality?
 - is phenomenality basic or are all mental states intentionally constituted?
- The dominant view:
 - even rarified states of consciousness cannot lack basic givenness.
 - Kamalaśīla: consciousness can be modified but not voluntarily halted.

A Buddhist phenomenology of embodiment

- Meditative cultivation aims at non-conceptual thought, not at casting aside all mental activity.
- Consciousness persists so long as the body remains alive.
- Concepts like “life-continuum mind” (*bhavaṅga-citta*) hint at the intimate correlation between mind and life.
- Hence, Buddhism is host to a complex phenomenology of embodiment.
- Husserl: *life-world*.
- Merleau-Ponty: “I cannot understand the function of living body except by enacting it myself”.
- My view: “consciousness is a unified phenomenal field”.

Are there phenomenal primitives?

- For Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers, these features tell something about the structure of the mind:
 - e.g., vividness serves as a criterion for dissociating imagery from perception
- The Buddhist reductionist project **is not incompatible** with the view that there are phenomenal primitives:
 - irreducible features of experience.
- Not all Buddhists agree (e.g., Candrakīrti).
- Garfield, following Candrakīrti, argues against the existence of such features.

Critics of reflexivism

- Garfield (2014, p. 209):
 - “It may well be that the phenomenological project as prosecuted by Dignāga and Husserl, and as resurrected by Coseru and Zahavi, may be misguided for a simple reason: There may be nothing that it is like for me to see red, because I don’t. Instead of a single locus of consciousness contemplating a distinct world of objects—like a Wittgensteinian eye in the visual field or a Kantian transcendental ego—to be a person, from a Buddhist perspective, is to be a continuum of multiple, interacting sensory, motor and cognitive states and processes...My own access to them is mediated by my ideology, my narrative and a set of fallible introspectible mechanisms.”

The two-aspectual model

- Dignāga's **two-aspectual model**:
 - a solution to the debate about the primacy of either “intentionality over phenomenality” or of “phenomenality over intentionality”.
- Three distinct claims:
 1. we are directly aware of events in our mental lives;
 2. each mental event has a dual aspect: it has both subjective and objective characteristics;
 3. each mental event is reflexively self-conscious (*svasaṃvedana*).
- The aim:
 - provide a descriptive account of experience that explains its epistemic salience.

Immersive Subjectivity

- Dignāga's two-aspectual model provides an account of "immersive subjectivity".
- Similar to:
 - Zahavi (2005, 82): "I am acquainted with myself when I am captured and captivated by the world."
 - P. F. Strawson (1992, 134): "our desires and preferences are not, in general, something we just note in ourselves as alien presences. To a large extent they are we."
 - Wittgenstein (1973): "It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking,' and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking'. (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar.)."

A subjective ontology?

- Critics of the two-aspectual model take Buddhists like Dignāga to be arguing for a subjective ontology that is incompatible with the no-self view.
- A legitimate concern:
 - not all self-intimating cognitions are epistemically warranted.
- The reflexivity thesis is meant to capture the presentational character of conscious cognitive states, not their intentional content.

Whose consciousness?

- Phenomenologist argue that the phenomenal character of consciousness is irreducible:
 - we cannot describe pain in non-sentient, impersonal terms
 - hence, the **phenomenal description thesis**
- Is reductionism about persons compatible with phenomenal description thesis?
- For some Buddhist (proto-)phenomenologists (e.g., Dignāga) it is.
- The Buddhist phenomenological project is not constrained by metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and the self
 - a new causal model

Consciousness and causality

- For Buddhists consciousness is part of the causal web:
 - it makes present, illuminates, and makes known
 - a different conception of causality
- Two models:
 - **perceptual**—mental states and our awareness of them stand in a causal relation (they are ontologically discrete).
 - I see ‘blue’ because I am sensitive to light.
 - **acquaintance**—awareness is constitutive of the mental state’s features (mental states are structural features of consciousness)
 - I see ‘blue’ because I am conscious that I am seeing.

A kind of structure

- Two principles:
 - **momentariness**: discrete flickers of consciousness
 - **causal interdependence**: e.g., *perception* and *object as perceived* are co-constitutive features of, e.g., visual awareness
- Structural features of phenomenal consciousness:
 - intentionality: mental states about about an object of their own
 - self-reflexivity: mental states are tacitly self-presenting
- Are these structural features enough for thought like “I am in pain”?
- Do we need normative or ownership criteria for self-ascription of mental states?

Some pathologies of self

- Are the structural features of consciousness enough for personal identity?
- Pathologies of the self suggest that the unity of consciousness can be disrupted:
 - anosognosia: blind to one's blindness
 - schizophrenia: splitting of the mind
 - identity disorder: multiple personality
- How are these states intelligible to the individual whose states they are?
- Because they are experientially given as having a distinct intentional content and phenomenal character
- Conscious experience is neither featureless nor unstructured.

No self, no structure

- For Zahavi et al. no-self, non-egological theories:
 - deny the mineness of phenomenal experience
 - talk about experience without any reference to subjects of experience
- For HOT, representationalists, and some critics of reflexivism (both within Buddhism and without), reflexivism entails:
 - solipsism
 - confronts us with the problem of other minds

What is at stake?

- The two alternative scenarios are problematic:
 - The reductionist no-self view ignores the phenomenology of first-person experience.
 - The irreflexivist argues against the unity of consciousness.
- Can we have subjectivity without a (minimal) self and conscious thought without a unifying principle of awareness?
- Are there other less (or more) curious alternatives?

Conclusion

- Yes!
- One alternative locates subjectivity in the stream of experience itself as an invariant minimal self.
 - it takes seriously the phenomenology
 - it offers a unifying, **invariant**, principle: the minimal self
- The other takes self-reflexivity to provide a basis for self-knowledge (Dharmakīrti's account).
 - it takes seriously the phenomenology
 - it offers an unifying, but **variant**, principle: the reflexive character (*svasaṃvedana*) of each individual mental state