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

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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.
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…”

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 ⇒ no agent ⇒ 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”.

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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


  “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 it 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?

- Phenomenologists 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