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CORE SELVES AND DYNAMIC ATTENTIONAL CENTRING: BETWEEN BUDDHAGHOSA AND BRIAN O'SHAUGHNESSY

Jonardon Ganeri

Buddhist philosophy of mind is fascinating because it denies that there is a self in either of the two ways that have traditionally seemed best to make sense of that idea: the idea that the self is the owner of experience, and the idea that the self is the agent of actions including the thinking of thoughts. It is in one or both of these senses that experience might be said to have a subject. In Buddhaghosa's philosophy of mind, neither agency nor ownership is permitted any role; what does the explanatory work is, instead, attention. Attention replaces self in the explanation of cognition's grounding in perception and action; attention replaces self in the knowledge we have of our own minds and the awareness we have of the minds of others. Buddhaghosa is emphatic that there is no self as normally conceived: "The self of the sectarians does not intrinsically (*sabhāvato*) exist" (Vibh-a. 77). Again, "[the Wheel of Existence] is devoid of any self as an experiencer of pleasure and pain conceived as 'this self or mind which speaks and feels' (M.i.8). This is how it should be understood to be without any maker or experiencer" (Vibh-a. 190); and, "For this is said with reference to such feel as is accompanied by clear comprehension of [the question]: 'Who feels? Whose feel it is? For what reason do these feels come to be?' Herein, who feels? No being or person feels. Whose feel is it? Not the feel of any being or person." (Vibh-a. 263). Instead of the self there is only the "minded body" (*nāma-rūpa*):

In many hundred *suttas* it is only minded body that is illustrated, not a being (*satta*), not a person (*puggala*). Therefore, just as when the component parts such as axles, wheels, frame poles, etc., are arranged in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage 'chariot', yet in the ultimate sense when each part is examined there is no chariot,—and just as when the component parts of a house such as wattles, etc., are placed so that they enclose a space in a certain way, there

comes to be the mere term of common usage ‘house’, yet in the ultimate sense there is no house,—[similarly for ‘fist’, ‘city’, ‘tree’ etc],—so too, when there are the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging, there comes to be the mere term of common usage ‘a being’, ‘a person’, yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no being as a basis for the assumption ‘I am’ or ‘I’; in the ultimate sense there is only minded body (Vism. 593–4 [xviii.28]).

The self being denied here is “[the self] that speaks, that experiences’ and so on again are modes of firm adherence to the eternalist view itself. There it is the speaker (*vado*) because it speaks. It is said that it is the doer of verbal action. It is the experiencer (*vedeyyo*) because it experiences: it is said that it becomes aware of and experiences” (Ps 71; Jayawickrama 2009, para. 35). The argument from grammar is swiftly refuted: “It was also asked: ‘Since there is no experiencer of it, whose is that fruit?’ Herein: ‘For mere arising of the fruit/The common term ‘experiencer’ is used,/Just as one says ‘It fruits’/when a fruit arises on a tree.’ For just as it is simply owing to the arising of tree, fruits which are one part of the states called a tree, that it is said that ‘the tree fruits’ or ‘has fruited’, so it is simply owing to the arising of the fruit consisting of the pleasure and pain called experience, which is one part of the aggregates called ‘deities’ and ‘humans’, that it is said that ‘a deity or a human being experiences or feels pleasure or pain.’ There is therefore no need at all for another [i.e., separate] experiencer” (Vibh-a. 164; Vism. 555 [xvii.171–2]). “[The words] ‘I feel’ are merely a conventional expression [used] with regard to the occurrence of that feeling. In this way it should be understood that ‘he knows: I feel a pleasant feeling’ while discerning thus that ‘it is feeling that feels by making the basis its object’.” (Vibh-a. 264). The basic idea here is that a sentence containing a non-agentive active verb (as in “The door was banging in the wind”) replaces a sentence with an agent (“The postman banged the door”) (for discussion, see Ganeri 2012, chapter 15).

What concept of self is rejected when self is rejected? We should understand this to be a rejection of any concept of personal or psychological identity based on agency or ownership: there is no “doer”, as an agent of speech; and there is no “owner”, a possessor of feelings and experiences. The “self of the sectarian” is a self that owns experience and that performs actions. Although the only actions mentioned here explicitly are speech and bodily movement, presumably they stand in for the standard Buddhist triplet of words, deed, and thought: the self denied is neither a speaker of words, nor an agent of acts, nor a thinker of thoughts. Buddhaghosa does

not clarify how these two dimensions in the concept of self—agency and ownership—are related to one another. Can one have an owner of experience that is not an agent of actions, or an agent of actions that is not an owner of experience? Is the analysis of that self which we call a “being” (*satta*) or a “person” intended to be a conjunction or a disjunction of the two defining features? The first quotation suggests, but only barely, that agency is due to ownership; but the idea is not expanded upon.

Rune Johansson, nevertheless, has proposed that we can see *citta* as a sort of “core self”. He says that “*citta*, generally translated ‘mind’ [is] the core of personality, the centre of purposiveness, activity, continuity and emotionality. It is not a ‘soul’ (*atta*), but it is the empirical, functional self. It is mainly conscious but not restricted to the momentary conscious contents and processes. On the contrary, it includes all the layers of consciousness, even the unconscious: by it the continuity and identity are safeguarded. It has a distinctly individual form” (1969: 30). It “is by nature a centre of emotions, desires and moral defilements. It is partly conscious, partly unconscious. It has also intellectual capacities and is capable of being transformed” (ibid. 107). It is “not simply the mind and also not simply personality but something of both: the organizing centre, the conscious core of personality, often described as an empirical and functional self (but not *atta*), perhaps ultimately analysable into processes” (ibid. 131). In his earlier 1965 article, *citta* is “a centre within personality, a conscious centre for activity, purposiveness, continuity and emotionality” (1965: 179); insofar as it is not “an inner core...very much similar to all individuals” but rather “an individually formed centre” (ibid. 174), it “comes very close to the psychological concept of personality” (ibid. 178). Johansson notes that “only once is it explicitly denied that *citta* is the self (S.ii.94), while it is very often denied that *viññāṇa* and the other *khandhā* are the self” (ibid. 168).

The concept *citta* is certainly not that of “being” or “person” (*satta*). Is the redescription of *citta* as “core self” consistent with the evident denial of self? It could be, as long as *citta* is neither the owner of feelings and experiences nor the agent of acts of speech, deed, or thought. It does seem right that *citta* does not own the *cetasikas*: they are concomitants, not properties, of *citta*. It seems right too that *citta* is not an agent cause, for although it is a cause, it is itself causally conditioned, so it is not the “uncaused causer” that the idea of an agent cause implies. Its claim on selfhood consists simply in its being a “centre”. Harvey agrees with much of Johansson’s description,

but corrects him on two points: neglecting to emphasize that *citta* is “not only active but also acted upon” and suggesting that *citta* is a “basis” for the aggregates, when in fact “it is equivalent to one of those components, namely discernment, in its aspect as deployed, directed and directing in various ways” (1995: 114–5). Yet Johansson does say that *citta* is capable of being transformed, and although it may not be the “basis” of the concomitants, it is nevertheless not itself a concomitant but a part of the “*citta-cetasika*” complex; it is not itself mindedness (*nāma*).

Is it then nothing more than the *cetasikas* “arranged in a certain way”, a point of reference in common usage alone? Certainly aware of the chariot metaphor and of general Buddhist rhetoric against self, Johansson must have had more in mind than this in what he surely intended as a provocative claim. What function or aspect of *citta* might one point to as source of entitlement to describe it as self? It is not Zahavi’s “minimal self”, because the minimal self experiences and feels, indeed experiences and feels with a sense of “mineness” (Zahavi 2005). Yet is anything even more minimal than the minimal self rightly described as a self? In fact, in what Johansson himself describes as the “dynamic psychology of early Buddhism”, it is far from clear that there is anything properly described as an “organizing centre”, as opposed to an ever-evolving organization in which various components exercise various sorts of control. The main justification for this claim seems to be that *citta* is held apart from the concomitants individually, and neither can it simply be identified with the second-order property which is their organizational structure.

The most promising way to understand the idea is by appeal to the idea that attention consists in the systematicity or structuring of the stream of consciousness (O’Shaughnessy 2002; Wazl 2011). Specifically, Wazl says that “consciously attending to something consists in the conscious mental processes of structuring one’s stream of consciousness so that some parts of it are more central than others” (2011: 158). The claim that *citta* is a core self might now be rephrased as being that *citta* consists of those parts of one’s stream of consciousness (*santāna*) that have been made more central in the course of consciously attending. So, then, *citta* is not a mere collection, nor is it the mere totality, but rather it is, at any given moment, those specific elements which attention centralizes. We need not endorse Wazl’s claim to have identified the essence of attention in order to agree with him that in attention there is a structuring of the stream of consciousness; and insofar as what is distinctive of attentional

structuring is that it enables a centre/periphery distinction to be drawn in relation to the stream of consciousness, we can use that distinction to explicate the idea that *citta* is a core self. In this case, what is meant by “self” is “those aspects of the structure of the stream of consciousness which dynamically take centre stage when there is attention”. The core self is the way attention shows up in the organization of the stream of consciousness. So the notion of self as agent of actions and owner of experiences is replaced with a notion of self as attentional centring. This fits nicely with the prominent idea, in early Buddhism, that *citta* can be modified and transformed in the training and cultivation of skills of attention. The reason it is possible to modify *citta* by training one’s attention is simply that *citta* consists in the way attention structures the stream of consciousness. And it fits nicely too with the central claim of this book, that attention replaces self in the grounding of cognition. The “core self”, *citta*, is a surrogate self, something that performs many of the principal cognitive tasks of the “self of the sectarians” but has none of the metaphysical baggage, and cannot properly be called “self” if it is fundamental to the functional role of that concept that it provides experience with ownership and agency.

Jennings (2012) has argued that many aspects of attention can be unified under the rubric “attention is a process of mental selection that is within the control of the subject”, that it is “subject-directed mental selection”, where a subject is “that to which we attribute such capacities as consciously experiencing, knowing, thinking, planning, and perceiving” (2012: 537). Let us ignore the possibility that our attribution practices might themselves be what produce the “subject”, and take it that she is simply articulating the concept of the “self of the sectarians”, the experiencer and the doer. The claim is then that the subject directs the selection processes in attention. This is the heart of the disagreement between the two concepts of “self” in play: one claims that the centre/periphery distinction within the structure of the stream of consciousness is directed by a subject external to itself; the other identifies the centre with the self. In the second view, attention is itself intentional, not requiring direction from the outside. It contains its goals and plans within itself, as it were. As restricted to the case of selective attention, then, a first element in the claim that attention replaces self in the grounding of cognition is that dynamic attentional centring is sufficient for action-planning, perception, and other cognitive tasks.

Let me turn to reflect on the very important discussion in O’Shaughnessy’s *Consciousness and the World* (O’Shaughnessy 2002).

O'Shaughnessy begins by arguing that attention is necessary for consciousness, or, more precisely, that consciousness "necessitates the accessibility of the perceptual attention" (2002: 10). Attention is necessary for consciousness because consciousness has a necessary truth-orientation; it is a "reality-detector", and indeed that is what it means to say that consciousness puts us in contact with reality, that "whereas dreams merely putatively are of Reality, consciousness is 'in touch with' Reality" (ibid., 12). There are already echoes here of two claims Buddhaghosa has made, that engagement (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*) are concomitants (O'Shaughnessy speaks rather of *commitments*) of consciousness. As for the nature of attention, O'Shaughnessy says that a natural and appropriate imagery can easily turn into a myth. The natural imagery is of attention as mental 'life-blood', as "a sort of mental 'space' of awareness present in the mind, which is occupied exclusively by the experiences it enables to exist" (ibid., 285), for "if (say) emotion or thought or perception are to so much as *exist*, attention needs to be available" (277). The point of the imagery is that it captures that sense in which attention is limited ("occupied"), a sense that O'Shaughnessy illustrates with the example of driving a car through a narrow pass, one's attention to the driving precluding one from attending to a difficult conversation at the same time. O'Shaughnessy cautions that this imagery can easily be misunderstood, for it may lead to the impression that the experiences which attention enables to exist are one thing and the "mental space" of awareness is something else:

The myth in question takes the following form. It is of a mental existent (which I shall call S), a particular mental 'space' that is of type awareness (in some sense), which coexists with and is distinct from contemporaneous experiences. Those experiences relate to that awareness-space, not as its objects, but as its occupants, and that property enables them to exist (285).

Or again:

That to which these various expressions refer ["the attention", "awareness"] is something that is closely akin to a psychic space. And yet as we have just seen in the recent discussion of the mythical S, it cannot be something that, like the space of a canvas or stage, precedes and outlives its occupants (288).

Instead of falling into the myth, O'Shaughnessy says that we should realize that "what we have in mind in speaking of 'The Attention' ... is nothing less than Experiential Consciousness itself... To repeat, it is

what we frequently refer to as ‘the stream of consciousness’ (of literary fame)” (288). ‘Experiential Consciousness’ is O’Shaughnessy’s term for the stream of consciousness (15). His idea is that to find our attention occupied by a certain given experience is for the experience to partly constitute the attention, much as a single piece does a jigsaw puzzle; what is occupied by experiences is, as he puts it, a *system* of those experiences, the system being the network of interrelationships which experiences need in order to exist (288). He concludes:

Denuded of the above of array of [systemic] properties, they [sc. experiences] would be like so many psychological atoms wandering in a void. Endowed with them, they constitute a continuous ongoing phenomenon which is a sort of circle or centre of awareness. This awareness is the Attention (289–90).

I need hardly add that “the mythical S”—this unspeakable nothing whose possible existence is acknowledged not even in the index of *Consciousness and the World*—is the self. For O’Shaughnessy, as for Buddhaghosa, attention replaces self in the explanation of perception, thought, and emotion. What O’Shaughnessy does brilliantly is to demonstrate how the natural imagery of attention is what itself gives rise to the Myth of Self as Detached from Experience; the “self of the sectarians” is a bad attempt to formulate a good insight about attention. Of course nothing can prevent us, should we so wish, from stipulatively *defining* the word “self” to mean the attention, and this I think is just what the claim that *citta* is “core self” ultimately comes to.

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