

1

The Who and the How of Experience

JOEL W. KRUEGER

I. Introduction

Does consciousness require a self?¹ In what follows, I argue that it does not. I concede at the outset that this is a counterintuitive thesis. For, a central feature of conscious states is that their mode of appearance (i.e. how they are given) exhibits an irreducibly first-personal nature. My experiences are distinctly my own, given to me and only me. This first-personal ‘how’ of consciousness is what secures its phenomenal character. And it seems natural to assume that this how points back to a ‘who’: a stable, enduring, conscious subject at the receiving end of phenomenal states. But is the assumption that a how requires a who warranted? I will argue below that, just because the subjective character of consciousness gives rise to a *sense* of self—that is, the felt sense of being a stable who, or owner of conscious episodes—it does not follow that this who really exists in any autonomous or enduring sense.

First, I do some background work, briefly discussing the phenomenological notion of the ‘minimal self’ before then looking at a Buddhist conception of selfless subjectivity. Next, I examine the minimal self more carefully, along with what is sometimes termed the ‘narrative self’, and argue for the experiential primacy of the former. I then argue that the phenomenal character of consciousness, which the minimal self-model is supposed to

¹ I am grateful for conversations with the participants of the ‘Self-No-Self’ workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark, April 15–16, 2009, which greatly assisted my thinking about the issues discussed in this paper. I am also especially grateful to Mark Siderits for his critical comments on an earlier version of this paper, as well as the very helpful comments from two anonymous reviewers.

capture, does not require the existence of a stable, permanent, or unconditioned self (or ‘who’). At best, minimal self theorists (e.g. Zahavi 2005), who look to identify the self with the phenomenal character of consciousness, ought to speak instead of transient minimal phenomenal *selves*. An enduring who is thus neither necessary nor sufficient for a how.

2. Preliminaries: The Philosophical Importance of the Minimal Self

Why focus on the minimal self? There are three reasons. First, as developed (often implicitly) in phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty—and given robust articulation in the work of neo-phenomenologists such as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi—the notion has direct bearing on how we understand the very nature of consciousness *qua* consciousness: namely, the phenomenal or subjective character of conscious experience. The phenomenal character of experience refers to the ‘what it’s like’ quality of different conscious episodes that gives them their particular phenomenology: for example, what it’s like to sip a single malt Scotch, view a vivid yellow tulip, blush at the memory of a youthful indiscretion, or feel the smoothness of an oak table. The phenomenological notion of the minimal self, and the particular structural analysis of consciousness that the minimal self is a crucial part of (discussed below), are thus concerned with laying bare the defining feature of consciousness.

The second reason to focus on the minimal self in this context is that, according to its defenders, it links intimately, not just to the ontology of consciousness, but to the most basic form of self-experience: the experience of being a *subject* of conscious states, a *thinker* of thoughts, a *feeler* of feelings, an *initiator* of actions, etc. In other words, the minimal self captures the feeling of phenomenal interiority that is perhaps the central aspect of selfhood—the feeling that I, and only I, have this particular first-hand mode of access to the goings-on in my head at this very moment.² The

² As Galen Strawson notes, the realization that one enjoys privileged access to one’s interiority ‘comes to every normal human being, in some form, in childhood. The early realization of the fact that one’s thoughts are unobservable by others, the experience of the profound sense in which one is alone in one’s head—these are among the very deepest facts about the character of human life’ (Strawson 1999a: 2). But developmentally speaking, the experience of phenomenal interiority is probably even more basic than

minimal self looks to offer a characterization of this primitive form of phenomenal self-acquaintance.

The third reason for focusing on the minimal self is that, due to its subtlety and ubiquity—it is claimed to be an invariant structural feature of consciousness, meaning that every conscious entity is, or has, a minimal self—it is potentially an especially difficult self for Buddhism to get rid of. Philosophical discussions of the minimal self offer a subtle brand of realism about the self. Due to its place within a defensible characterization of phenomenal consciousness, the phenomenological notion of the minimal self presents a unique challenge to the Buddhist deflationary project of denying the ultimate reality of the self. Moreover, since Buddhist philosophy is deeply preoccupied with questions about the nature of self and subjectivity, the notion of the minimal self resonates organically with Buddhist philosophical concerns. It offers a fruitful point of contact for thinkers working from within the tradition of Western phenomenology and philosophy of mind to engage with Buddhist philosophy. Now, having clarified the reasons for focusing on the minimal self in this context, I want to examine next the notions of subjectivity and no-self as developed in Buddhist philosophy.

3. Self, Subjectivity, and No-Self in Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhism famously denies the existence of a fixed, permanent, or enduring self.³ According to the Buddhist tradition, both physical and mental phenomena arise, exist, and pass away within a vast, interrelated network of causes and conditions. This continual process of arising, existing, and passing away is the process of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), one of the core notions of Buddhist thought. Buddhism argues further that

Strawson concedes. Research on neonate imitation (discussed in more detail in section 4) suggests that newborn infants have an immediate sense of their own interiority, and there are reasons to attribute this primitive self-awareness to some nonhuman animals. One thus needn't possess the concept of interiority (which is generally thought to be an aspect of possessing a 'theory of mind') to have the experiential sense of one's interiority, of being the sort of thing (i.e. a self) with an inner experiential dimension unique to oneself.

³ I am indebted to both Georges Dreyfus (1997) and Matt Mackenzie (2008) for the discussion in this section.

all entities, events, and processes have no substantial reality outside of this dynamic matrix of dependent origination. So, things like chariots, pots, and persons are ultimately empty (*śūnya*) of fixed or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).⁴ Since the psychophysical complex of the person (or self) is subject to the same causes and conditions as everything else, it, too, is ultimately empty of intrinsic nature. This is the other core doctrine of no-self (*anātman*), the most well-known and controversial aspect of Buddhist thought. What is perhaps less well known, however, is that some Buddhist thinkers argue that the denial of the self does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a denial of subjectivity. These thinkers offer a model of consciousness that preserves its phenomenal character while nevertheless denying that the phenomenal character of consciousness is dependent upon the existence of a fixed, enduring, or unconditioned subject. This is not the place to survey the vast Buddhist literature on this topic. Instead, we can focus on two specific forms of self-awareness discussed in the literature, one broad and one narrow, and look at how they relate to an analysis of (no-)self and phenomenal consciousness.

The first of these notions is the broader form of self-awareness captured by the term *ahaṃkāra*, which denotes ‘I-maker’ awareness, the sense of oneself as a single entity enduring throughout time. This is the sense of being an autonomous self, distinct from the flux and flow of ever-changing experiences. Additionally, the term also captures the egocentric structure of human existence—our tendency to act and make decisions which reflect our own self-interests (Mackenzie 2008: 247). The term *svasaṃvedana*, on the other hand, is a narrower form of self-awareness. It refers to the immediate acquaintance we have with both the *content* of our conscious states (i.e. the intentional object that an experience is an experience of, such as a perception of a tree, a memory of a childhood experience, or the image of a unicorn), as well as the *character* of our conscious states (i.e. the first-person phenomenal mode of access to the intentional content, such as the act of perceiving a tree, remembering a childhood experience, or imagining a unicorn). Put differently, *svasaṃvedana* refers to the ‘self-illuminating’ (*svaprakāśa*) character of conscious states. When I have an experience of, for example, the sound of a car roaring by on the street

⁴ A central debate within Buddhist philosophy concerns whether all things are empty of intrinsic nature, or whether there are some things (e.g. *dharmas*, or momentary, individual atoms or tropes) which have intrinsic nature. See Siderits (2007) for a clear introduction to this debate (and others) within the Buddhist philosophical tradition.

outside, I am simultaneously aware, in that single experience, of both the *object-as-given* (i.e. the sound of the car roaring by) as well as *my experience of the object-as-given* (i.e. the auditory experience of the car roaring by as *my* auditory experience). Every consciousness episode thus has a dual-aspect, Janus-faced structure. It involves, at the same time, a world-directed objective aspect (*grāhyākāra*) as well as an implicit,⁵ self-reflexive subjective aspect (*grāhakākāra*) (Dreyfus 1997: 345–53). But these two forms of self-awareness, *ahaṅkāra* and *svasaṃvedana*, are connected (i.e. they dependently condition one another), in that '*svasaṃvedana* yields mental states with at least implicit first-person contents—e.g. “I am aware of a cup”, “I am in pain”, etc.—which reinforces the *ahaṅkāra*' (Mackenzie 2008: 247). Yet *svasaṃvedana* is the more phenomenologically primitive feature of experience. It can be present without necessarily invoking *ahaṅkāra*. However, the converse is not the case.

The seventh-century Indian Buddhist thinker Dharmakīrti makes much of this distinction in developing his reflexivist view of self-awareness.⁶ Dharmakīrti claims that, 'If cognition were not itself perceived, perception of an object is never possible' (quoted in Mokṣākaragupta 1985: 51). Consciousness must thus be immanently self-reflexive, Dharmakīrti insists, since without the simultaneous awareness that one is aware, a given conscious state can't rightly be called *conscious*, as opposed to an unconscious state or sub-personal process. According to Dharmakīrti, a phenomenally conscious state is a state that the subject is aware of. So, unless mental state M is in some sense self-conscious, there is nothing that it is like to be in M, and M is thus not a phenomenally conscious state. Dharmakīrti argues that, therefore, self-awareness is a necessary feature of consciousness: it is a constitutive feature of its phenomenal character as conscious.⁷ But how do we account for this primitive form of self-awareness? What is its phenomenological structure?

Anticipating Sartre (1943/1956) as well as other more recent discussions (e.g. Kriegel 2003), one argument Dharmakīrti gives is the infinite regress argument.⁸ According to Dharmakīrti, the reflexive self-awareness central

⁵ This form of self-awareness is implicit in that it is not the result of a voluntary act of introspection or reflection. I will also characterize this form of self-awareness as 'immanent' to phenomenally conscious states.

⁶ Dreyfus (1997) offers extensive analysis. Dunne (2004) is an excellent introduction to Dharmakīrti's thought as a whole.

⁷ He writes, 'The [mind] understands by itself its own nature' (quoted in Dreyfus 1997: 340).

⁸ One also finds versions of this argument in Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Kant, and Brentano, among others. See Kriegel (2003).

to consciousness cannot be the product of some sort of internal monitoring, such as a second-order reflective act or separate act of introspection or perception that takes the original state as its object.⁹ Rather, on pain of infinite regress, reflexive self-awareness must be a first-order feature of conscious states. For, if an occurrent mental state *M* is only conscious (i.e. self-aware) when it is taken as an object by a numerically distinct second-order mental state, *M*^{*}, a regress threatens. In order for the second-order mental state *M*^{*} to be conscious, it would have to be taken as an object by a numerically distinct third-order mental state, *M*^{**}, and so on ad infinitum. Therefore, to avoid this regress, it must be that, when a subject *S* is consciously aware, *A*, of an object, *O*—and is, moreover, self-aware, *A*^{*}, of being consciously aware of *O*—the self-awareness (*A*^{*}) *that one is aware of O* is built into the very structure of that experience. More simply, *A*^{*} is an intrinsic or tacit form of ‘self-reference without identification’ (Shoemaker 1968) that does not rely on a second-order, meta-act of reflection or perception for its phenomenal character. Put yet another way, this form of immanent self-awareness is *nondyadic*. It does not have an intentional (i.e. act-object, or dual) structure, but is instead a pre-reflective self-consciousness, a nondyadic mode of awareness of one’s conscious acts and the way that different objects are given first-personally through those acts (Sartre 1943/1956: 119–126). According to Dharmakīrti, then, the immanent self-reflexivity of conscious states is what secures their phenomenal character. It is a form of givenness that gives conscious states their first-personal character as well as their ‘seeming’ quality, such as how the taste of a single-malt Scotch, or the warm associations summoned by a childhood memory, seem to the subject who has these states.

This is not the place to assess the strength of these and other arguments Dharmakīrti gives in support of his conception of *svasaṃvedana*.¹⁰ Rather,

⁹ Contemporary versions of these views, respectively, are defended by higher-order perception (or ‘HOP’) theorists such as Armstrong (1968) and Lycan (1997), and higher-order thought (or ‘HOT’) theorists such as Rosenthal (1993).

¹⁰ Dharmakīrti offers another argument for *svasaṃvedana*, which we might term the ‘feeling-tone’ argument. For Dharmakīrti, all intentional objects are given through an affective valence or feeling-tone—positive, neutral, negative—that colors how we experience these objects. But since this feeling-tone is an experiential property (i.e. a property of the subject, not the object), and since, moreover, the feeling-tone is always given simultaneously with the object, it follows that in every experience the subject simultaneously apprehends both the object *and* herself (i.e. via the presence of a subject-referring feeling-tone). We can thus conceptually distinguish two aspects of each mental state: its world-presenting objective aspect (*grāhyākāra*) and its subject-referring subjective aspect (*grāhakākāra*). However,

the point of this discussion is to indicate that within the Buddhist tradition there is room for a view that admits the reality of subjectivity, while nevertheless denying the ultimate existence of an enduring self. Dharmakīrti insists that conceding the subjective or self-reflexive character of consciousness is compatible with the core Buddhist notion of *anātman*. This is so, he urges, because *svasaṃvedana* is the phenomenally continuous, first-person perspective one has on the stream of one's own experience. But this first-person perspective or experiential dimension at the heart of consciousness is not itself a self. It is a feature of the *stream* of experience, and not a self standing *behind* the experience. As such, it is dynamic, relational, and perpetually in flux, dependently conditioned by the continually changing interplay of successive contents (i.e. the intentional objects of experiences) and acts (i.e. the first-personal phenomenal modes of access *to* successively changing contents). But again, there is nothing fixed, permanent, or unconditioned standing behind, or distinct from, this stream. There is simply the first-personal stream itself.

Thus, while Dharmakīrti argues that consciousness is intrinsically personal, that is, it manifests in a first-personal *how*, or mode of givenness, it doesn't follow, he further insists, that there is a single, stable *who* serving as the recipient of this stream. Dharmakīrti's discussion of the self is in this way a deflationary realism. The sense of self at the core of phenomenal consciousness (*svasaṃvedana*) is indeed very real. This quality, for Dharmakīrti, is subjectivity: it is what makes consciousness the unique phenomenon that it is. And each act of cognition thus has this aspect of subjectivity. Additionally, the sense of being a self with a temporally extended, historically constituted identity (*ahaṃkāra*) is also real. But to infer that subjectivity (*svasaṃvedana*) entails the real existence of a stable phenomenal self, or to infer that *ahaṃkāra* refers to a permanent, stable historical self, is a mistake. This mistake arises, Dharmakīrti argues, from our tendency to reify the sense of self central to the phenomenal character of consciousness. That is, we reify either, on one hand, the self-reflexive, first-personal character of conscious states—falsely assuming that the mineness of experience picks out a permanent, substantial *me*—or, on the other hand, the broader form of 'I-maker' self-awareness that emerges over time, and which is fed by the

phenomenologically and ontologically, these aspects are nondyadically conjoined within the unified structure of each state. See Dreyfus 1997: 400–403.

first-person perspective of *svasaṃvedana*. To reiterate, we reify the *sense* of self intrinsic to consciousness (which is indeed very real) and mistakenly posit from this an enduring *substantial* self (which is not real). In the end, however, both *svasaṃvedana* and *ahaṃkāra* are impermanent phenomena. Neither picks out the ultimate reality of a stable enduring self, since each ultimately rests on a continuum of transient states.

Having briefly sketched a Buddhist conception of subjectivity *sans* the self, I next want to look at two contemporary philosophical models of self: the narrative self-model, which is the focus of the next section, and the minimal self, which will be introduced in the section thereafter.

4. Self as Story: Narrative Self-Models

There is no unequivocal use of the term ‘self’. Ulrich Neisser famously delineates five types of self: the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual self (Neisser 1988: 35). More recently, Galen Strawson (1999b) has distinguished twenty-one concepts of self! Surely there are even more. While this sort of conceptual proliferation might be warranted, given that the self is a multidimensional notion incapable of being reduced to a few restrictive categories relative to a particular disciplinary inquiry, some simplification can assist our discussion. Recent philosophical debates have focused on two notions of self that have particular relevance for understanding the nature of consciousness since they capture both the phenomenal character of experience as well as its temporal (i.e. synchronic and diachronic) unity and social situatedness. These notions are the ‘minimal self’ (Gallagher 2000; Zahavi 2005) and the ‘narrative self’ (Dennett 1991; Schechtman 1996; Damasio 1999; Hutto 2008).

A significant portion of our self-understanding as reflective creatures is structured by the symbolic mediation of narratives. Narratives help us organize and interpret our own experiential histories, share these histories with others, and meaningfully participate in the lives and experiences of others by entering into their ongoing narratives. One of our most distinctive traits is that we don’t just reason—we tell stories about how we reason (Hutto 2007: 1; MacIntyre 1981: 201). However, according to some theorists, narratives do more than lend dramatic texture to our lives. The

narratives we tell—narratives that we cannot *help* but tell, given the way our brains are hardwired (Dennett 1991)—play a significant role in shaping and even constituting the self. The self is thus a narrative construction.¹¹ Daniel Dennett famously writes: ‘Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source’ (Dennett 1991: 418).

What counts as a narrative remains a contentious issue within the current literature; I have no aspirations of settling the debate here. However, although a precise definition is unnecessary for present concerns, a glance at possible candidates will be helpful both for establishing the general contours of narrative approaches to the self as well as clarifying precisely how narrative accounts of self sit next to minimal accounts of self. To begin simply: narratives are constructed, and not merely discovered. Narratives are thus a uniquely human enterprise. Moreover, narratives are distinct from mere chronicles of temporally indexed events, such as the timeline of a person’s life (Danto 1965). What is constructed in narrative must be a relation between at least two events and/or states of affairs united by some relatively loose, non-logical relation (Lamarque 2004: 394). But this thin characterization of narrative says little of the temporal structure of narratives and nothing of their social character. Nor does it say anything about their role in constructing the self.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) offers an alternative. Although he fails to define ‘narrative’ explicitly in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre nevertheless develops a rendering that brings out the temporal, social, and self-constituting character of narratives. He writes:

The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships . . . What I am, therefore, is a key part of what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present.

(MacIntyre 1981: 205–206)

¹¹ Defenders of narrative accounts of self include both philosophers (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre 1981, Charles Taylor 1989, Daniel Dennett 1991, Paul Ricoeur 1992, Marya Schechtman 1996, Shaun Gallagher 2003, David Velleman 2006, Daniel Hutto 2008, and Anthony Rudd 2009) and psychologists (e.g. Donald Spence 1982, Jerome Bruner 1986, and Mark Freeman 1993).

As MacIntyre notes, the self is always embedded in a network of pre-existent socio-cultural narratives. These narratives have their own history, independent of my existence. But my own present self-understanding is very much a product of these narratives—and in this sense, the present self that I understand myself to be is shaped by stories others have told prior to my existence. Part of my narrative self-identity thus predates my existence. Additionally, I am not the sole author of the narratives through which I understand myself. My self-understanding is largely shaped by the narratives of other authors: '[W]e are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives . . . In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making' (MacIntyre 1981: 213). With the nod towards Aristotle and Engels, MacIntyre is emphasizing the point that the narrative self is a product, not simply of other story-telling individuals, but additionally of the unique time, place, and linguistic culture that constrain the sort of stories the narrative self hears and tells (Turner 1991: 184). Processes of self-understanding are in this way irreducibly social, culturally embedded affairs. And the self, as narrative construction, is thus dialectically linked with otherness.¹²

To focus the discussion somewhat, I would now like to differentiate two possible ways of parsing narrative accounts of self: what I will term, respectively, (1) the narrative enhancement account (NEA), and (2) the narrative constitution account (NCA). NEA is the less ambitious. It simply claims that some, but indeed not all, aspects or parts of the self are at least potentially enhanced or explicated by narratives. This weaker account accepts that, while some aspects of the self (e.g. cultural and ethnic identifications, gender representations, etc.) only emerge through the self's participation within different narratives, other more primitive features of the self (e.g. its neurobiological basis, core set of psychological characteristics or traits, its experiential status as a first-person perspective on the world, etc.) are fixed independently of any sort of self-narrative. Formulated this way, NEA does not claim that the self as a whole is constituted by the various narratives it spins. NEA allows for the prior existence of some sort of pre-narrative self capable of being narratively explicated or enhanced in the first

¹² Paul Ricoeur insists that 'the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought without the other' (Ricoeur 1992: 3).

place. MacIntyre, for example, seems to endorse NEA when he insists that, ‘It is important to notice that I am not arguing that the concepts of narrative or of intelligibility or of accountability are *more* fundamental than that of personal identity’ (MacIntyre 1981: 203).¹³ Again, the salient point is that, for NEA, the narrative self is a derivative notion dependent upon a more basic pre-narrative self.

On the other hand, the stronger account of narrative selfhood offers a constitution claim: namely, that the self is literally constituted by narratives. The self is ultimately nothing but a dense constellation of interwoven narratives, an emergent entity that gradually unfurls from (and is thus constituted by) the stories we tell and have told about us. As we’ve already seen, Dennett (1989, 1991) seems to hold this view. Again, recall his insistence that ‘like spider webs, our tales are spun by us; our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source’ (Dennett 1991: 418). Drawing inspiration from Dennett (among others), Marya Schechtman similarly characterizes her own ‘self-constitution’ view as the claim that ‘a person exists in the convergence of subjective and objective features. An individual constitutes herself as a person by coming to organize her experiences in a narrative self-conception of the appropriate form’ (Schechtman 1996: 134).

This brief characterization of narrative-self models hints at their theoretical richness for understanding the dynamic, relational, and situated nature of the self. However, our discussion in the previous section has already suggested a difficulty for NCA. Exploring this difficulty is the work of the next section.

5. Pre-Narrative Selfhood

There is a difficulty with NCA that doesn’t plague NEA. It is this: the NCA ‘self as story’ story seems to weave an incomplete story of the self. Put differently, in order to be a narrative-telling creature—in order to cast oneself as the protagonist in one’s own narrative—one must already be the possessor of, in addition to the linguistic capacities needed to construct a

¹³ Actually, MacIntyre’s view here isn’t entirely clear. See Williams (2009) for discussion and criticism.

narrative, a more primitive pre-narrative, embodied first-person perspective on the world. Narrative selves must always already be conscious subjects, since a creature that lacks subjectivity cannot simultaneously be a creature that produces narratives *about* that subjectivity. But the converse isn't true. We can be conscious—again, we can be the possessor of an embodied first-person point of view on the world, including a pre-reflective sense of being an embodied first-person perspective—without simultaneously being a subject who produces narratives *about* this first-person point of view. Narratives are thus not essential to basic forms of subjectivity or minimal phenomenal selfhood in the way that embodied first-person perspectives are. And NCA is therefore pitched at too high an explanatory level, as variations of this approach overlook the minimal forms of phenomenal selfhood that pre-exist narrative selfhood. Indeed, narratives play a central role in practical reasoning, deliberation, and self-reflection, and in generating our sense of being a culturally situated social self with a unique experiential history. But the narrative self is not an essential phenomenal feature of our first-person perspective on the world. Rather, these two things dissociate both conceptually and experientially. The first-person perspective, or the subject to whom the world is given in a first-personal mode of presentation, is thus phenomenologically and ontologically prior to the narrative self. According to Shaun Gallagher, this minimal self is

[p]henomenologically, that is, in terms of how one experiences it, a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time. The minimal self almost certainly depends on brain processes and an ecologically embedded body, but one does not have to know or be aware of this to have an experience that still counts as a [minimal, or pre-narrative] self-experience.

(Gallagher 2000: 15)

This minimal self is the subject of experiences which provide pre-narrative fodder for later narratives (Menary 2008: 73). But again, the subject or minimal self that has these experiences pre-exists the narratives it later constructs.

It might help to mark a conceptual distinction between the notions of 'self' (i.e. the immediate, moment-to-moment experience of being a first-person perspective on the world) and 'person' (i.e. the broader experience of being an entity that endures through time). As we've already seen, we find a similar distinction made from within the classical Indian Buddhist

tradition¹⁴ which, to reiterate, recognizes two central forms of self-experience: (1) *svasaṃvedana*, or the immanently self-reflexive awareness consciousness has of itself, and (2) *ahaṃkāra*, or ‘I-maker’ self-awareness, which is the temporally extended sense of oneself as a single, enduring entity, ontologically distinct from the stream of experience.¹⁵ While the former is the more phenomenologically primitive form of self-experience, the latter is arguably the notion of self we think of when someone asks the question, ‘Who are you?’. When we consider ourselves as individuals with unique hopes, aspirations, and intentions—as singular individuals importantly distinct from others, and with a moral and existential status uniquely our own—we are thinking of ourselves as narrative *persons*, in an encompassing mode of ‘I-maker’ awareness.¹⁶

However, if we accept that this self/person distinction is a coherent conceptual distinction, it seems that, in order to be a person, one must already be a self, since one cannot have a holistic ‘I-maker’ experience of personhood (including the elements of one’s narratives, such as character, personality traits, memories, convictions, motivations, and the sense of a unified existential history spread out over time) unless one is already a subject of experience in some minimal sense. The minimal phenomenal self thus has persistence conditions distinct from those of narrative persons. Narrative self-models, in both their weaker enhancement form as well as their stronger constitution form, are more accurately understood to be models, not of selves, but of *persons* (Zahavi 2005: 129).

To underscore this distinction between self and person, and to reinforce the experiential primacy of some sort of minimal phenomenal self, we can look to a number of empirical studies. Consider first Antonio Damasio’s

¹⁴ For the sake of historical precision, it should be noted that not *all* schools of Indian Buddhism hold that cognition is self-reflexive (e.g. Mādhyamika thinkers such as Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650) and Śāntideva (fl. 8th century)).

¹⁵ To be clear, while Buddhism acknowledges a phenomenological distinction between the two forms of self-experience I am here distinguishing, the terms ‘person’ and ‘self’ are used somewhat differently within Buddhist philosophy. A person (*pudgalā*) is simply a causally continuous, psychophysical complex of different aggregates (*skandhas*) arranged in the right sort of way. And with the exception of the Pudgalavāda tradition of early Buddhism, most Buddhists believe that the person is ultimately reducible to this psychophysical complex, that is, the person has no independent existence over and above it. The self (*ātman*), as an experiential feature, is thus an aspect of this causal series, and is as impermanent as is every other aspect.

¹⁶ See also Albahari (this volume) for more on ordinary, and ultimately delusive, forms of self-experience.

(1999) discussion of David, a 46-year-old patient suffering from an unusually drastic form of memory loss brought on by a severe case of encephalitis. In the span of a few weeks, David's encephalitis caused major damage to his left and right temporal lobes. The result of this damage was that David lost both the ability to retain any new facts in memory, as well as the ability to recall 'virtually any thing, individual, or event, from his entire life'—meaning that 'his memory loss goes almost all the way to the cradle' (Damasio 1999: 115). David lives in an ever-shifting window of short-term memory: about forty-five seconds (Damasio 1999: 118). In virtue of his radical memory loss, David has lost the ability to construct any sort of narrative unity to his life and actions; he is incapable of forming a narrative self, or what Damasio terms an 'autobiographical self', which according to Damasio emerges from the 'extended consciousness' stretching across the whole of a person's life (Damasio 1999: 17).

Nevertheless, David retains a minimal self. David presents rich phenomenal consciousness. He 'fares perfectly well on the core consciousness checklist' (Damasio 1999: 116).¹⁷ David exhibits attentive wakefulness; his experiences are colored by various background emotions, and he articulates preferences; he acts purposively within the situations he enters into. In short, David has preserved an experiential self, and he is immediately aware of himself *as* an experiential self, aware that the content of his moment-to-moment experience is his. Yet David has completely lost the sense of himself as a historically extended, narratively structured person—precisely because, with the catastrophic erosion of his memory, he no longer has the ability to explicate himself as such.

Work on neonatal imitation also lends support to the self/person distinction as well as to the experiential primacy of the minimal self. Multiple studies indicate that neonates come into the world with a proprioceptive self: a minimal form of self-awareness emerging from very basic experiences of themselves as embodied and situated creatures. This minimal self-awareness enables neonates less than an hour old to imitate a range of facial, vocal, and gestural expressions (Meltzoff and Moore 1977, 1983, 1997; Kugiumutzakis 1985, 1999). These imitative episodes appear to be intentional, in that they are not merely reflexive but rather indicate a capacity to learn to match

¹⁷ 'Core consciousness' is Damasio's expression for our moment-to-moment sense of being an awake and experiencing subject (i.e. a minimal self) (Damasio 1999: 16).

the presented gesture (Meltzoff and Moore 1983). Neonate imitation presupposes three significant pre-narrative capacities, all of which themselves presuppose an experienced sense of minimal phenomenal selfhood: (1) the capacity for experientially distinguishing self and other; (2) the capacity for locating and using body parts proprioceptively, that is, without vision (since neonates haven't yet seen their bodies); (3) the capacity to recognize the presented face as of the same kind as its own face (neonates don't imitate non-human objects). As Shaun Gallagher notes, 'One possible interpretation of this finding is that these three capacities present in neonates constitute a primitive self-consciousness, and that the human infant is already equipped with a minimal self that is embodied, enactive, and ecologically attuned' (Gallagher 2000: 17). Of course, since neonates lack the linguistic capacities needed to construct and comprehend narratives, they have no sense of themselves as a narrative entity, that is, as a person. Nevertheless, neonate imitation research indicates that a minimal sort of self-experience, the sense of being a unified, embodied perspective on the world, is present from birth.

At this point, there are several potential responses that defenders of NCA might offer. Schechtman, for example, concedes a conceptual distinction between self and person but argues that narratives are nonetheless central to both categories (Schechtman 2007: 171). In order to constitute oneself as a narrative *person*, 'one must recognize oneself as continuing, see past actions and experiences as having implications for one's current rights and responsibilities, and recognize a future that will be impacted by the past and present' (Schechtman 2007: 170). A narrative *self*, Schechtman continues, is constituted by assimilating temporally remote actions and experiences into my present self-experience in such a way that these events 'condition the quality of present experience in the strongest sense, unifying consciousness over time through affective connections and identification' (Schechtman 2007: 171).

But the problem with Schechtman's distinction here is that, again, it is pitched at too high a level of explanation, passing over features of phenomenal consciousness and forms of self-experience that seem to be independent of narrative. It is also a strikingly disembodied account of self-constitution. Which of these two forms of narrative constitution, for instance, as defined by Schechtman, apply to Damasio's David? Certainly not the first, since David lacks a robust sense of having a created history that constrains his present actions and decisions. Similarly, while David's consciousness seems

to present a unified character, it's not clear that this phenomenal unity is the result of any kind of narratively structured process of 'affective connection and identification'. David's capacity for memory is simply too impoverished to speak this way: the unity of his phenomenal experience must thus be due to a different mechanism. Schechtman might respond by urging that, even within a short forty-five second window, David can still construct 'micro-narratives' that unify his experiences and allow him to make affective connections with temporally remote actions and events (e.g. the door he opened ten seconds ago while walking into the room, or the initiation of his reach to grasp a light bulb that needs changing). But this is an awfully strained way of using the term 'narrative', since the temporal extension and social character of these sorts of micro-narratives is exceedingly limited. Moreover, it's not at all clear that we need appeal to narrative to explain certain fundamental forms of embodied self-experience and skillfulness.

This becomes clear by returning to the neonatal imitation studies mentioned previously. Again, it's difficult to discern how Schechtman's distinction would be neatly applied to these cases. Far from a 'blooming and buzzing' model of experience, it now appears that even very young infants present a surprisingly rich form of self-awareness rooted in an ecological experience of their body and their body's practical relation to the world. They seem to grasp implicitly that they have a body, and they feel that this body can be made to do things, including imitate the expressions and gestures of others—despite neither having seen their body nor possessing any sort of linguistic or narrative understanding of it. This capacity points towards a range of embodied self-experience and skills (e.g. neonatal imitation, reaching for and grasping a cup, driving a car, responding to an opponent's volley while playing tennis) that operate without narrative intervention. Additionally, our ability to enact pre-narrative embodied skills so efficiently suggests that there exists a primitive form of bodily self-experience that is independent of narrative articulation. The young infant is immediately acquainted with its body and the things its body can do; the skilled driver and tennis player enact dynamically coherent, context-sensitive sequences of complicated motor actions that unfold without the explicit guidance of narrative scripts. This immediate acquaintance with oneself as an embodied perspective on the world is a phenomenologically minimal form of self-experience.

Schechtman might respond by arguing that some narratives operate unconsciously, that is, some narratives are *implicit* narratives that guide action and determine the appropriate responses in a given context, but that they do so without ever reaching the level of phenomenal awareness. In fact, she has done just this (Schechtman 1996: 115–117). But like the micro-narrative rejoinder, this, too, is a problematic move. For, pushing narratives down to the murky levels of subpersonal representation compromises their fundamentally public or social character, and transforms them into computational processes hidden away inside the brain (Menary 2008: 71). Additionally, it makes it more difficult to see why implicit narratives, if they have a subpersonal character, ought to be explanatorily prioritized over other kinds of subpersonal processes when it comes to understanding the constitution of the self. This is not to deny that Schechtman’s rich narrative account of self has significant explanatory value. Again, the point is simply that there exist more basic pre-narrative forms of self-experience that Schechtman’s account, and indeed NCA accounts more generally, can’t satisfactorily account for.

The take-away lesson is that personhood is a more articulated, but ultimately derivative notion, phenomenologically and ontologically dependent upon the experiential primacy of a minimal phenomenal self. The minimal self is therefore a condition of possibility for developing more articulated forms of narrative personhood: pre-narrative experiences give structure to, and provide content for, narratives (Menary 2008: 79). But narrativity is not essential to phenomenal consciousness the way that some minimal form of self-experience is. Now, having spent some time discussing aspects of the narrative self and arguing for the experiential primacy of the minimal phenomenal self, I want to investigate next the structure of the minimal self more carefully before then questioning whether it is warranted to speak of this form of self-experience as a substantial *self*.

6. First-Personal Givenness and the Minimal Self

As should by now be clear, the concept of the minimal self is motivated by the intuition that ‘even if all of the unessential features of self are stripped away . . . there is still some basic, immediate, or primitive “something” that we are willing to call a self’ (Gallagher 2000: 15). Unlike the narrative account of self, this intuition brackets considerations of the self’s historicity

and sociality, and looks instead to excavate a more fundamental dimension of phenomenal consciousness.¹⁸ According to its defenders, the minimal self is something I can fail to articulate (i.e. give narrative expression to), but something that I cannot fail to be (Zahavi 2005: 116). Every moment that I am conscious is another moment that I am, or have, a minimal self. This is a thoroughly phenomenological conception of the self, casting the self as an experiential dimension, central to the very structure of consciousness. Since Dan Zahavi is the most ardent current defender of this view, in what follows I will focus critically on his characterization of the minimal self.

There are a number of ways of arguing for the existence of the minimal self. One line of argument follows the discussion of the previous section: namely, the idea that narrative accounts of self (as well as other forms of self-experience similarly dependent upon having the appropriate reflective, linguistic, and/or conceptual capacities) are pitched at too high an explanatory level. These approaches pass over more subtle, but no less significant, pre-narrative forms of self-experience central to the phenomenal nature of consciousness *qua* consciousness. Damasio's discussion of David, as well as research on infant imitation, both indicate a minimal phenomenal self-experience present prior to, or in the absence of, narrative constructs. This is because 'every conscious state, be it a perception, an emotion, a recollection, or an abstract belief, has a certain subjective character, a certain phenomenal quality of "what it is like" to live through, or undergo, that state. This is what makes the mental state in question *conscious*' (Zahavi 2005: 119). The phenomenality of a conscious state, the argument goes, is independent of its narrative structure. Furthermore, it discloses a primitive kind of self. Any organism capable of phenomenal consciousness thus has a minimal self.

Two key ideas are central to understanding Zahavi's formulation of the minimal self: 'first-personal givenness' and 'mineness'. I will look at these ideas in turn. Zahavi contends that we need to make a conceptual distinction between, on one hand, what the *object* is like for the subject, and on the other, what the *experience of the object* is like for the subject (Zahavi 2005: 121). Importantly, this is merely a conceptual distinction allowing us to grasp the world-directed structure of consciousness. For, within each conscious state, these aspects are unified parts of a coherent experience. Echoing Dharma-

¹⁸ Sartre argues that, 'pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness' (Sartre 1943/1956: 123).

kīrti's assertion discussed above, Zahavi argues that, when I have an experience of an object, such as visually perceiving a tomato on a table, part of my subjective experience is constituted by properties of the object (i.e. redness, smoothness, roundness, etc.). These properties play a central role in fixing the phenomenal character of a given state. But these properties, in fact, do not exhaust the phenomenal character. There is another, more subtle, phenomenological aspect present: namely, the phenomenal property of *experiencing myself experiencing*. Put differently, I experience these features of the object in a mode of first-personal givenness, a mode of disclosure that is a phenomenologically basic form of reflexive self-experience. Zahavi writes:

This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experience *subjective*. To put it another way, their first-personal givenness entails a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-referentiality . . . the experiential dimension does not have to do with the existence of ineffable qualia; it has to do with the dimension of first-personal experiencing.

(Zahavi 2005: 122–23)

Therefore, what makes a particular conscious state subjective is that it is always given in a first-personal mode of presentation: it involves a first-person perspective that is implicated within the very manner of how experiential content is manifest to the subject. This first-person perspective provides the structure through which the world presents itself within a given state. Again Zahavi:

Phenomenology pays attention to the givenness of the object, but it does not simply focus on the object exactly as it is given; it also focuses on the subjective side of consciousness, thereby illuminating our subjective accomplishments and the intentionality that is at play in order for the object to appear as it does.

(Zahavi 2005: 123)

Echoing Dharmakīrti once more, Zahavi insists that the dimension of first-personal experiencing does not involve any sort of higher-order act of reflection or perception.¹⁹ Rather, the minimal self is what originally

¹⁹ Zahavi is critical of higher-order (both HOT and HOP) theories of consciousness (Zahavi 2005: 17–20).

makes possible higher-order acts of self-reflection and objectifying thematization in the first place. Self-reflection necessarily presupposes a more phenomenologically primitive perspective (i.e. that of a minimal self), capable of initiating higher-order objectifying acts of self-reflection.²⁰ The first-person givenness of conscious states is thus immanently self-reflexive, that is, it is ‘an intrinsic feature of the primary experience’ (Zahavi 2005: 17). This is simply another way of saying that ‘[w]hen we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear’ (Zahavi 2005: 123). What is disclosed is the minimal phenomenal self.

What about ‘mineness’? According to Zahavi, mineness is a quality of the various modes of first-personal givenness (e.g. perceptual, imaginative, recollective, etc.) through which intentional content is given. Mineness reveals a conscious state’s being owned, that is, a state’s being immediately recognized as given to, or for, a particular subject (or minimal self). For ‘[w]hen I (in nonpathological standard cases) am aware of an occurrent pain, perception, or thought from the first-person perspective, the experience in question is given immediately, noninferentially, and noncriterially as *mine*’ (Zahavi 2005: 124). Once more, however, mineness is an invariant structural feature of consciousness. It is a ‘subtle background presence’ pervading various modes of first-personal givenness, and is not the product of an explicit act of self-reflection or self-perception (Zahavi 2005: 124). To clarify further: mineness is a qualitative feature of consciousness itself (i.e. an experiential property), independent of the properties (e.g. the redness or smoothness of a tomato on a table) that intentional objects are presented as having. Taken together, Zahavi argues that the twin notions of first-personal givenness and mineness offer us a minimal, but phenomenologically significant, rendering of the self that ‘is not something that stands opposed to the stream of consciousness, but is, rather, immersed in conscious life; it is an integral part of its structure’ (Zahavi 2005: 125).

Before turning to critical analysis, we can note that there is much to recommend Zahavi’s view. First, it is of immense historical-philosophical

²⁰ Consciousness, Mark Rowlands observes, is essentially a ‘hybrid entity’ that can be both *object* and *act* of experience (Rowlands 2001: 122). Zahavi insists that the modality of the former is dependent upon the modality of the latter—and thus that consciousness-as-act (of which the minimal self is an essential part) is phenomenologically primitive.

interest, unifying and deepening a common thread in the work of a number of prominent phenomenologists. More substantially, it helps us get a grip on a particularly elusive feature of experience that is difficult to pin down. Zahavi challenges the widely held view that phenomenal consciousness is genuinely diaphanous. For, if we are pre-reflectively aware of an occurrent phenomenal state as ours—if conscious states are immanently self-reflexive, in other words, as Zahavi (and, indeed, Dharmakīrti) argues that they are—consciousness thus contains more than simply the representational content of its intentional object(s). Each state harbors a pre-reflective self-awareness of the minimal self to whom the state is given. The phenomenal character of consciousness is thus not exhausted by the items that conscious states are conscious of: there is more to experience than its content. And any theory of consciousness worth its salt has to account for this subtle, but essential, feature of experience.

However, to put the objection simply (and this is really the heart of this paper): has Zahavi successfully shown that the minimal self is a *self*? Is his truly an egological conception of consciousness? Zahavi answers both questions in the affirmative. The minimal self, according to Zahavi, is an invariant structural feature of consciousness that remains constant throughout the life of the subject: ‘Whereas we live through a number of different experiences, the dimension of first-personal experiencing remains the same... it may be described as an *invariant* dimension of first-personal givenness throughout the multitude of changing experiences’ (Zahavi 2005: 132). On the face of it, this is an intuitive claim that seems to square with the sense that we are, in fact, the same self throughout the course of our respective lives. (Dharmakīrti, recall, also concedes the intuitive force of this sense of being a single stable self.) But, given his phenomenological characterization of the minimal self, is Zahavi justified in making this claim? I suggest he is not. Specifically, I want to challenge the idea that the minimal self is indeed a self—that is, if we take the self to be *invariant* (i.e. a singularly unified, enduring, and unconditioned thing that stays the same through the life of the conscious subject). In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that Zahavi is, at best, warranted in speaking of minimal *selves*, not a minimal *self*. In this sense, his account is actually compatible with the no-self view developed by Dharmakīrti.

7. Minimal Self as Stream, Structure, or Something Else?

To begin, the Buddhist would likely offer the following question to Zahavi: what aspect of our experience is *invariant*, exactly? What precisely stays the same? Zahavi's response is: the first-personal 'experiential dimension' within which phenomena are given. And this answer, Zahavi would continue, is enough to qualify his view as an egological theory of consciousness. There seem to be at least two ways of cashing out this idea, however, and Zahavi's discussion of the minimal self seems at times to conflate these two options. Yet I want to suggest that they need to be kept conceptually distinct—and moreover, that neither is adequate for establishing the invariant 'selfness' of the minimal self. For the sake of simplicity, I will speak of the minimal self characterized (1) as *stream*, versus the minimal self characterized (2) as *structure*.

Like Dharmakīrti, Zahavi insists that the minimal self is distinct from the intentional object. It is on the act side of the consciousness-object relation. But the minimal self is not then distinct from our conscious acts themselves. Rather, Zahavi further insists that the minimal self is part of the very stream of our world-directed conscious activity. Just as it is not reducible to the narratives that develop subsequent to our experiences, the minimal self is also neither an ego-pole nor a distinct principle of identity standing behind, or apart from, the phenomenal stream (Zahavi 2005: 106). Again, it is located *within* the stream as 'an integral part of its structure' (Zahavi 2005: 125), that is, as 'a feature or function of its givenness' (Zahavi 2005: 106). The minimal 'stream self' therefore exhibits a relational dynamism as part of its character. It is constituted immanently within the activity of the mind's encounter with the world. This situatedness within the stream of consciousness is what allows the minimal self to account for the unity of experience, and is what leads us to ascribe past, present, and future experiences to a single, enduring subject.

But note carefully some of Zahavi's other descriptions. Of egological views (which he insists that his view is), Zahavi writes:

An egological theory would claim that that when I watch a movie by Bergman, I am not only intentionally directed at the *movie*, nor merely aware of the movie being *watched*, I am also aware that it is being watched by *me*, that is, that *I* am

watching the *movie*. In short, there is an object of experience (the watching), and there is a subject of experience, myself.

(Zahavi 2005: 99)

And in characterizing the non-egological, or no-self view, Zahavi continues:

In contrast, a *non-egological* theory . . . would deny that every experience is for a subject. It would, in other words, omit any reference to a subject of experience and simply say that there is an awareness of the watching of the movie . . . minimal self-awareness should, consequently, be understood as the acquaintance that consciousness has with *itself* and *not* as an awareness of the experiencing *self*.

(Zahavi 2005: 100)

Yet there is a tension here. Recall Zahavi's earlier claim that the minimal self is simply a 'feature or function' of the first-personal givenness or 'self-luminosity' (Zahavi 2005: 62) of the phenomenal stream. In fact, at one point Zahavi urges that, in order to understand his insistence that the minimal self be identified with the first-personal character of phenomenal consciousness, we ought to 'replace the traditional phrase "subject of experience" with the phrase "subjectivity of experience"' (Zahavi 2005: 126). This is because the former seems to imply an autonomous, stream-independent ego—which Zahavi denies—whereas the latter adequately captures the sort of immanent stream self Zahavi endorses. The minimal self thus is, simply, *the subjectivity of experience* (which includes the various features that Zahavi carefully analyzes). But if this is all that the minimal self is, it seems that Zahavi is really endorsing the sort of non-egological view he claims to be opposing! Nothing in this characterization of the self-luminosity of the phenomenal stream is in conflict with Dharmakīrti's view—except for the final step Zahavi wants to make in reifying the stream self into something permanent and invariant.²¹

To the question, 'Where is the minimal self?', Zahavi clearly answers, 'In the stream of consciousness itself'. But if we now return to our earlier

²¹ To be fair, Zahavi himself notes that the simple distinction between egological and non-egological views of consciousness (e.g. Gurwitsch 1941) is far too crude, and therefore that more subtle ways of characterizing the relation between consciousness and self-consciousness are needed (Zahavi 2005: 146). However, Zahavi's stated desire to pinpoint various 'invariant' structures of experience (e.g. the *ipseity* of the 1st person experiential dimension)—coupled with, moreover, his argument that these structures qualify as a minimal form of selfhood—would seem to indicate that Zahavi sees himself as aligned with the egological camp, even if his particular approach is more nuanced than traditional egological views (see Zahavi 2005: 99).

question, ‘What aspect of experience (i.e. the stream self) is invariant?’, it is not clear that Zahavi has a ready-to-hand answer. For, if the minimal-self-as-stream-self is composed of the same aspects of the phenomenal stream, it is every bit as impermanent, that is, empty (*śūnya*) of fixed or intrinsic self-nature (*svabhāva*) as is the dynamically flowing, relationally constituted stream itself. Put otherwise, the stream exhibits a dependently conditioned (*pratītya-samutpanna*) nature, dynamically constituted by the ongoing interplay of successive acts and contents. The minimal self, as the phenomenal stream, simply refers to the dynamic coherence of the phenomenal stream *in the first-personal givenness of its flowing*. But there is nothing fixed, stable, or enduring about this stream (or indeed, the stream self)—save for its fundamental impermanence. It seems, then, that the Buddhist could charge Zahavi with what Thomas Metzinger has called the ‘error of phenomenological reification’ (Metzinger 2003: 22): mistaking the mine-ness, or immanently self-reflexive character of experience, for a stable or permanent me. Likewise, Dharmakīrti would invoke the image of a candle, asserting that it is a similar mistake to infer the sameness of the candle flame at each moment from the enduring presence of illumination. Though the self-reflexive character of individual conscious states provides a persistent source of illumination, the self-reflexivity behind this illumination is, in fact, the property of distinct, impermanent, ever-flowing states.²²

A presupposition of Zahavi’s resistance to non-egological views seems to be the assumption that such views must eject subjectivity from their characterizations of consciousness to render them truly ‘selfless’. And Zahavi rightly resists any model of consciousness that looks to jettison its phenomenal character (e.g. Dennett 1979, 1991). But as should now be clear, this presupposition is not warranted. Dharmakīrti, who certainly argues for a no-self view of consciousness, is quite insistent that subjectivity nevertheless needs to be at the center of any model of consciousness. He simply resists Zahavi’s final, reifying move of identifying subjectivity with a permanent self. For Dharmakīrti, the self-reflexive character of occurrent phenomenal states does, indeed, refer back to a phenomenal self: a subject or first-person perspective to whom the content of these states is phenomenally manifest. But again, this phenomenal self is dependently conditioned by, or arises from, the dynamic interplay of successive acts and objects, which means that

²² But see Fasching (this volume) for a response to this objection.

it has no intrinsic self-nature. It isn't some *thing* distinct from this interplay. It is the interplay itself. As such, it is fundamentally impermanent, arising and passing away within the continual stream of ever-new acts and contents. Thus, Dharmakīrti would likely be content to speak of numerically distinct minimal selves: dependently conditioned, temporary subjects that arise, exist, and pass away within the span of an occurrent episode of consciousness. And if this analysis of Zahavi's view of the minimal self is correct, it seems that Zahavi, too, is warranted only in speaking of a plurality of numerically distinct, minimal phenomenal selves.²³ For the first-personal givenness of experience, according to Zahavi, is phenomenally conditioned by experiential phenomena (i.e. objects of experience)—and vice versa. Experiential phenomena are never given anonymously, but always first-personally. Thus, first-personal givenness and experiential phenomena are necessarily co-given. But since experience is always in flux, an ever-flowing stream of (first-personal) acts and first-personally given experiential phenomena (i.e. objects)—and since, moreover, the minimal phenomenal self is identical with its experiences, as Zahavi argues—it follows that the stream self is constantly changing. In other words, there is no numerically identical minimal phenomenal self. Rather, there is simply a phenomenal continuum of minimal selves, each ensuring that experiential phenomena are manifest in a mode of first-personal givenness.

But this is not the end of the matter. For at times Zahavi also seems to characterize the minimal self, not in terms of its stream character, but rather its structural character, that is, the minimal self understood purely as a *formal structure* of consciousness. For instance, he writes that, 'As long as we focus on the first-personal mode of givenness of the stream of consciousness, we are dealing with a kind of pure, formal, and *empty individuality* which the subject shares with all other subjects' (Zahavi 1999: 165). But if the minimal self is merely an empty structural feature of consciousness, how is the phenomenal character of experience individuated? How does subjectivity become *my* subjectivity? For a purely formal feature of consciousness—whether it be minimal selfhood, intentionality, its field-like structure, or something else—cannot in itself exhibit phenomenal character. Formal features are conditions of possibility for consciousness to occur the particular

²³ This would also bring Zahavi closer to Galen Strawson who, as Strawson himself notes, shares some affinities with the Buddhist view of the self (Strawson 1999a: 18).

way that it does; they cannot be given *to* consciousness, much the same way that an eye cannot see itself. These features need to be phenomenally ‘filled in’ via the dynamic interplay of acts and contents.

Zahavi recognizes this objection. He says that, as a formal feature of consciousness, the minimal self’s phenomenal character

only manifests itself on the personal level, in its individual history, in its moral and intellectual convictions. It is through these acts that I define myself; they have character-shaping effect. I remain the same as long as I adhere to my convictions. When they change, *I* change. Since these convictions and endorsed values are intrinsically social, we are once more confronted with the idea that the ego in its full scope and concretion cannot be thought or understood in isolation from the Other. The ego is only fully individualized when personalized, and this happens only intersubjectively.

(Zahavi 1999: 166)

But the problem with this reply is that it seems to appeal to a narrative conception of self to explain how the unique particularities of my identity are constituted. And this is fine, except that narratives, too, are by definition impermanent. They are the result of multiple authors, and are constantly being retold and revised. Moreover, I am rarely the sole author of my own self-narrative, and thus my identity is, to a very large degree, dependently conditioned by others. My narrative self thus constantly develops and changes, taking on new elements while abandoning other outmoded or forgotten elements. As Zahavi puts it, ‘Therefore, I, we, and world belong together’ (Zahavi 1999: 166). The narrative self depends on others for its existence: it is relationally constituted. Put otherwise, it lacks intrinsic self-nature, as the Buddhist would argue, and is thus empty of fixed or permanent character. Additionally, appealing to narrative self-models to explain how subjectivity is individuated still encounters the challenge discussed earlier: namely, a failure to explain pre-narrative forms of phenomenal self-experience. So, a story of the pre-narrative minimal stream self is still needed to explain how the structural self is individuated, phenomenally speaking. But as I have just argued, this way of characterizing the self cannot establish the self’s fundamental invariance, either. So it seems that, by appealing to either narrative or minimal self-models (including the latter understood either as stream or as structure), we’ve yet to pinpoint the resting place for a stable, permanent, or enduring self.

8. Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, I have attempted to show that Buddhist philosophy offers a characterization of consciousness that (1) foregrounds its phenomenal character, but which (2) denies that this phenomenal character entails the existence of a fixed, enduring, or unconditioned self. I then examined two contemporary self-models: the narrative self and the minimal self, and summoned empirical research in support of my claim that the latter is dissociable from, and, indeed, experientially prior to, the former. Finally, I've looked more closely at Dan Zahavi's lucid defense of the minimal self, and offered reasons for thinking that, while his discussion rightly explicates several core features of phenomenal consciousness, it nevertheless fails to establish the necessary existence of a stable, fixed, or enduring self that stays the same throughout the life of the conscious subject. Buddhism claims that we are fundamentally empty persons—despite strong and persistent forms of self-experience that seem to suggest the contrary. It remains to be seen, of course, if this claim is ultimately true. But if the above analysis is correct, it's a view at least worth taking seriously.

References

- Armstrong, D. (1968), *A Materialist Theory of Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Bruner, J. (1986), *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Damasio, A. (1999), *The Feeling of What Happens* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt).
- Danto, A. (1965), *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Dennett, D. (1979), 'On the Absence of Phenomenology', in Donald F. Gustafson and Bangs L. Tapscott (eds.), *Body, Mind, and Method* (Dordrecht: Kluwer).
- (1991), *Consciousness Explained* (Boston : Little Brown and Company).
- Dreyfus, G. (1997), *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- Dunne, J. (2004), *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy* (Boston: Wisdom Publications).

- Freeman, M. (1993), *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, and Narrative* (London: Routledge).
- Gallagher, S. (2000), 'Philosophical Conceptions of the Self: Implications for Cognitive Science', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4: 14–21.
- (2003), 'Self-Narrative, Embodied Action, and Social Context', in Andrzej Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium (Festschrift for Paul Ricoeur)* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press).
- Gurwitsch, A. (1941), 'A Non-Egological Conception of Consciousness', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1: 325–338.
- Hutto, D., ed. (2007), *Narrative and Understanding Persons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (2008), *Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Kriegel, U. (2003), 'Consciousness as Intransitive Self-consciousness: Two Views and an Argument', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33: 103–132.
- Kugiumutzakis, G. (1985), *The Origin, Development and Function of Early Infant Imitation*, PhD thesis, psychology, Uppsala University, Sweden.
- (1999), 'Genesis and Development of Early Infant Mimesis to Facial and Vocal Models', in Jacqueline Nadel and George Butterworth (eds.), *Imitation in Infancy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lamarque, P. (2004), 'On Not Expecting Too Much from Narrative', *Mind and Language* 19: 393–408.
- Lycan, W. (1997), 'Consciousness as Internal Monitoring', in Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere (eds.), *The Nature of Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- MacIntyre, A. (1981), *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press).
- MacKenzie, M. (2008), 'Self-Awareness without a Self: Buddhism and the Reflexivity of Awareness', *Asian Philosophy* 18: 245–266.
- Meltzoff, A. and K. Moore (1977), 'Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates', *Science* 198: 75–78.
- (1983), 'Newborn Infants Imitate Adult Facial Gestures', *Child Development* 54: 702–709.
- (1997), 'Explaining Facial Imitation: A Theoretical Model', *Early Development and Parenting* 6: 179–192.
- Menary, R. (2008), 'Embodied Narratives', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 15: 63–84.
- Metzinger, T. (2003), *Being No One: The Self-model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

- Moksākaragupta (1985), *Bauddha-tarkabhāṣā*, edited by Badri Nath Singh (Varanasi: Asha Prakashan).
- Neisser, U. (1988), 'Five Kinds of Self-knowledge', *Philosophical Psychology* 1: 35–59.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992), *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Rosenthal, D. (1993), 'Higher-order Thoughts and the Appendage Theory of Consciousness', *Philosophical Psychology* 6: 155–166.
- Rowlands, M. (2001), *The Nature of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Rudd, A. (2009), 'In Defence of Narrative', *European Journal of Philosophy* 17: 60–75.
- Sartre, J. (1943/1956), *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press).
- Schechtman, M. (1996), *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- (2007), 'Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View', in Daniel D. Hutto (ed.), *Narrative and Understanding Persons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Shoemaker, D. (1968), 'Self-reference and Self-awareness', *Journal of Philosophy* LXV: 556–579.
- Siderits, M. (2007), *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.).
- Spence, D. (1982), *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Strawson, G. (1999a), 'The Self', in Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (eds.), *Models of the Self* (Exeter: Imprint Academic).
- (1999b), 'The Self and the SESMET', in Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (eds.), *Models of the Self* (Exeter: Imprint Academic).
- (2005), 'Introduction', in Strawson (ed.), *The Self?* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Turner, J. (1991), 'To Tell a Good Tale: Kierkegaardian Reflections on Moral Narrative and Moral Truth', *Man and World* 24: 181–198.
- Velleman, J. D. (2006), *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Williams, B. (2009), 'Life as Narrative', *European Journal of Philosophy* 17: 305–314.
- Zahavi, D. (1999), *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- (2005), *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).