

Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, Dan Zahavi: *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, & Indian Traditions*, OUP 2011.

Jan Westerhoff

Amongst its many other merits this collection of essays demonstrates the growing maturity of the study of the Indian philosophical tradition. Much of the good scholarship done on non-Western, and in particular on Indian philosophy over the last decades has attempted to show that these texts hailing from east of Suez contain interesting and sophisticated discussions in their own right, discussions that have to be understood against the Ancient Indian intellectual and cultural context rather than evaluated by how closely they can be seen as conforming to current fashions in the Western philosophical debate. While this approach has helped much in alerting us to the difficulties of forcing an ancient intellectual tradition on the procrustean bed of the philosophical interests and concerns of the current day, it brings with it the danger of shutting this tradition off under the bell jar of merely historical concerns. Many of the best scholars of Indian philosophy today set out to show why Ancient Indian philosophical debates are not just of historical, but also of systematic interest, and that both, scholars of Indian thought and contemporary philosophers can learn something from bringing both traditions together in a discussion. They aim to show that in the same way in which Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus have important contributions to make to the inquiry into topics that interest today's Western philosophers, so have thinkers like Śāṅkara and Dharmakīrti. The present volume is an excellent example of how successful such an approach combining philological accuracy and philosophical acuity can be.

The collection contains eleven essays together with a substantial introduction. In the space available for this review it is unfortunately not possible to summarize, let alone evaluate the contribution of each author. Instead, I shall give a description of some of the topical landmarks of the conceptual territory the book deals with and then offer an incomplete but hopefully still informative overview how the different essays relate to these landmarks.

The main question explored is of course that of the existence of the self. We can divide possible answers into four main categories.

1. Substantialists regard the self as a substrate and bearer of various psychological properties; most importantly consciousness. The self is the metaphysical pin-cushion to which various psychological states and dispositions are attached.
2. Non-substantialists deny that the self is an agent or substrate that *has* consciousness, rather it *is* consciousness. The self is a pure witness free from any variation of properties. The ancient Indian school of Advaita Vedānta holds that there is only one such self and that this encompasses the whole of reality (see in particular the contributions by Fasching and Ram-Prasad).
3. No-self theorists (sometimes called reductionists) argue that our intuitive conviction in the existence of a self is an illusion due to our cognitive limitations, in much the same way in which the limited temporal resolution of visual perception lets us perceive a single, moving light where there is just a pattern of lightbulbs being switched on and off. The no-self theory has been famously held by the Buddhists but has also found prominent supporters in Western philosophy (such as Hume and Parfit).
4. The narrative view of the self connects the question of how we individuate our selves with that of why we want to do so in the first place. On this conception the self is author and central character of the story of our life rolled into one, thereby capturing much of what appears to be important to the intuitive sense of self people claim to possess, namely the view that our life is not a random

sequence of events but follows a coherent, meaningful trajectory.

Apart from these four major conceptual landmarks there are a couple of smaller ones that keep recurring throughout the book. The first is the idea of the reflexivity of consciousness (see especially the essays by Krueger, Zahavi, Albahari, Dreyfus, and Siderits). This does not just reduce to the claim that we are sometimes aware of our own mental states but constitutes an assumption that every conscious state involves as part of its very structure a knowledge of its own occurrence as cognizing an object.

A second topic is the temporal extension of the self (Zahavi, Thompson, Strawson). Given that we usually want to conceptualize the self as a diachronic unifier of our past, present, and future we would want it to be more than a momentary object that on its cessation is immediately replaced by a different but very similar one.

A third point relates to the immunity from error when it comes to self-ascriptions (Ganeri). While I can be wrong about pretty much all of what my perceptual states seem to indicate I don't seem to be able to be mistaken that I am in such a state. I can be wrong about seeing water in the desert, but not about water appearing to me. Yet there seems to be a difficulty with saying that we are right about things we could not even conceive being wrong about.

A final point concerns the question whether we pursue an ontological or an epistemological investigation. Do we try to find out about the existence and nature of the self, or are we interested in how we come to know the self and its states?

The substantialist view seems to face an increasing number of challenges the more we learn about the neurophysiological basis of consciousness. We have fairly good evidence that there is no place in the brain where "it all comes together", no Cartesian theatre where the content of consciousness is displayed for the benefit of the self. Few would want to identify the self with some part of or particle in our brain (exceptions, such as Roderick Chisholm, notwithstanding). So the substantialist's best bet seems to be a theory of a minimal self, something considerably less involved than what some substantialists would wish for, yet something that accounts for the feeling of "phenomenal interiority", "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." (28) This seems to offer a relatively subtle variety of realism regarding the self, the idea that what makes me "me" is that all my experiences are given to me in a particular way. It is this continuity of presentation which provides us with a coherent thread of selfhood running through our life.

To challenge the no-self account the notion of the minimal self has to entail something that is permanent throughout the stream of ever-changing "goings-on in my head". Joel W. Krueger's essay examines this with reference to the Buddhist idea of the reflexive nature of awareness (*svasamvedana*) which, he argues, is enough to account for the phenomenology of interiority but not enough to account for a continuous self. Indeed the Buddhist authors argued that our sense of self of a mere superimposition of an erroneous I-maker awareness (*ahamkara*) that makes us believe that the continuity of the structural feature of cognitive reflexivity is due to an underlying continuing object, the minimal self. The most we can argue for seems to be the existence of a sequence of "numerically distinct minimal selves: dependently conditioned, temporary subjects that arise, exist, and pass away within the span of an occurrent episode of consciousness". (51) (A view very similar to that put forward by Galen Strawson who also contributed an essay to this collection.) It seems that the minimal view of the self would find it hard to provide a convincing alternative to the non-self view.

A different challenge for the non-self view comes from non-substantialist accounts such as the one

defended by Albahari. This account agrees with the no-self view that our ordinary (substantialist) sense of self is fundamentally mistaken but disagrees with the bundle theorist that the self could be shown to be wholly non-existent. Apart from worries about how the bundle theorist is to account for the binding problem (How come that my headache and my toothache form one bundle, but not my headache and your backache?) and for the felt diachronic unity of our experience the main argument for this is the claim that the bundle theorist would not be able to perceive for himself the non-existence of the self (for example by considering the impermanence of the various physio-psychological factors that make up the self). All our perceptions, it is argued, will share the same perspective, the same sense of ownership, making them *my* perceptions. And it is precisely this omnipresent mere witnessing that our self really amounts to.

While this position might strike us as a plausible compromise between the metaphysical commitments of the substantialist and desert landscape proposed by the no-self theorist it faces certain challenges on its own. The main issue is how to reply to the charge that even though my perception of the yellow banana today and my perception of the green banana last week both involved the kind of perspectival witnessing argued for we are dealing with distinct witnessing-tokens in the same way we deal with distinct banana-perception-tokens, all of which would form part of the bundle we mistakenly identify as the self. The main move the ancient Indian defenders of non-substantialism make at this point is to claim that all difference (between my different banana-perceptions, but also between my and your banana perceptions) is ultimately illusory. Ultimately there are not many distinct selves but only one, all-comprehending Self. It seems that if avoidance of metaphysical extravagance is our driving force the non-substantialist account can only be recommended with reservation.

The narrative view of the self appears to be particularly appealing in connecting with an important idea of what the sense of self is for, namely to connect the present with where we are coming from and where we are going. It can come in two versions, a weak one that assumes the existence of a pre-narrative self that is subsequently enhanced by the narrative process, or a strong version (defended *inter alia* by Dan Dennett) that holds the self to be "nothing but a dense constellation of interwoven narratives" (37). Unfortunately, choosing between them appears to amount to a choice between incompleteness and inconsistency. Since the weak version already presupposes some sense of self it could at best constitute a supplementary theory, without being able to account for the whole self. The strong version, on the other hand, takes bootstrapping too far since being a narrator of stories already presupposes being a conscious subject, while this very subjectivity is something that is supposed to be brought about by the stories narrated.

The book succeeds admirably in opening up the rich conceptual resources available in Ancient Indian philosophical texts that discuss the nature and existence of the self. It shows vividly that Indian philosophy is not a monolithic block of "Eastern thought" but a complex tradition containing many competing views that are of considerable systematic interest for contemporary philosophers. In doing so it brings together sound knowledge of both the Western and the Indian tradition, sophisticated philosophical analysis and clarity of exposition in a way that secures its place amongst the very best work on Indian philosophy done today.