

This is an excerpt from a report on the workshop on mind and attention in Indian philosophy at Harvard University, on September 21st and 22nd, 2013, written by Kevin Connolly, Jennifer Corns, Nilanjan Das, Zachary Irving, and Lu Teng, and available at:
http://networksensoryresearch.utoronto.ca/Events_%26_Discussion.html

1. How does the understanding of attention in Indian philosophy bear on contemporary western debates?

In contemporary western analytic philosophy, it is assumed that attention involves selection, while the nature and function of that selection remain matters of controversy. How might Indian conceptions of attention bear on these debates?

At the workshop, Alex Watson compared the Brahminical and Buddhist views of attention. On both views, attention is sufficient for consciousness. According to the former, however, awareness outstrips attention, while according to the latter attention just *is* awareness. The Brahminical view posits a distinct organ of attention, the *manas*, directed by the self. According to the Buddhist view, however, there is no self and no *manas*; rather, consciousness is exhausted by momentary, attended experiences. Watson raised three main problems for the *manas* view. First, not all attention is voluntary. Second and relatedly, as in daydreaming, attention is often captured without the subject even seeming to realize it. As emphasized by Jeorg Tuske in his presentation, however, insofar as Buddhism involves the instructed direction of one's mental states, it may seem that *some* voluntary direction of attention is not only allowed, but required. Third and finally, Watson alleges that there is a more fundamental problem in the self-*manas* model: the self requires antecedent awareness to direct the *manas*. Against the Buddhist view, on the other hand, Sebastian Watzl emphasized non-illusory experiences of controlling the focus of one's attention that are irreducible to one experience event causing another. The Brahminical view that awareness outstrips attention, however, remains unsupported if in these cases one is *attending* to oneself as a director of attention.

Whether we can ever have an experience of ourselves “as of a thing or substance that does something” as alleged by Watzl, can be questioned in any case. A related worry was raised by Declan Smithies commenting on Catherine Prueitt’s exposition of Abhinavagupta.

On Abhinavagupta’s view, structured, conscious experience results from the effect of the *apoha* process on attention. The *apoha* process is a recursive process of exclusion, triggered by *vasanas* (previously stored mental imprints), which have in turn been triggered by subjective factors (e.g., goals and desires). The structure of the experience resulting from this process is held to be such that we always consciously attend to subjects and objects together. On this view then, attention is not only necessary for the emergence of the integrated perception of objects, as on contemporary integration theories of attention, but always also results in the experience of *oneself* as an experiencing perceiver.

Here enters Smithies’ raised worry: in some, perhaps all, cases, we don’t seem to be aware of a subject. Our attention can be engrossed in things in the world to the exclusion of ourselves. As Hume pointed out, we seem unable to turn our attention in on ourselves at all, and as Gilbert Harman has emphasized, when I turn my attention to my experiences, I find only the world presented there, and not the presumed subject of the experiences. Even if our subjectivity comes into being by having these structured experiences, as Prueitt offered in reply, it does not follow that we thereby *attend* to ourselves as emergent subjects when having structured experiences.

The preceding discussions assume, like contemporary western views, that attention is a phenomenon of selection, but Kranti Saran argued that cases of meditative attention establish that conscious attention (at least) is only loosely connected to selection. Saran argues that there are cases of meditative attention during insight meditation wherein one is conscious without

selectively attending to anything. Notice that the *sufficiency* of attention for consciousness must here be simply assumed if this is to be a case of not only consciousness without selection, but *attention* without selection. To encourage the subjugation of this claim to scientific scrutiny, Evan Thompson distinguished in his commentary between two distinct attentional phenomena: focused attention and open monitoring. As was repeatedly raised in discussion, however, it is not clear whether the non-selective phenomenon of interest to Saran is one of attention at all.

Saran's depiction of non-selective consciousness through *insight* meditation bears interesting resemblance to the construal of *calm* meditation offered by Laura Guerrero following Dharmakirti. She construed the practice as a fixing of one's attention on increasingly rarified objects until eventually consciousness of *any* object drops out altogether. On this view, however, not only attended, selected objects fall out, but *consciousness* as well. Here we do not seem to have (conscious) attention without selection. As with Prueitt's Abhinavagupta then, in Guerrero's understanding of calm meditation: to cease to selectively attend is to lose not only the objects of conscious experience, but oneself as a conscious subject.

The role of attention in Indian philosophy has many further connections with contemporary western analytic debates. Worth particular mention are those in ethics. As discussed by Keya Maitra, the moral exemplar of the yogi, as depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*, may be best characterized by the manner and content of the yogi's "non-attached" attention. As pressed by Nico Silins in his commentary, however, evaluating this proposal requires getting clearer on the distinction between attached and non-attached attention. Similarly, Jake Davis appealed to the Buddhist notion of *mindful* attention as a means of objective, ethical knowledge that can be defended from moral relativism. As Sharon Street pressed in her commentary,

however, evaluating this proposal requires further specification of a type of attention whose exercise is capable of yielding ethical knowledge.