

# Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness

*Tradition and Dialogue*

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# Whose Consciousness? Reflexivity and the Problem of Self-Knowledge

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## Abstract

If I am aware that *p*, say, that it is raining, is it the case that I must be aware that I am aware that *p*? Does introspective or object-awareness entail the apprehension of mental states as being of some kind or another: self-monitoring or intentional? That is, are cognitive events implicitly self-aware or is “self-awareness” just another term for the cognition that takes an immediately preceding instance of cognition for its object? Not surprisingly, intuitions on the matter vary widely, and classical Indian philosophy presents us with three distinct views on the problem of self-knowledge: (1) cognitive events are implicitly or “reflexively self-cognizant”: I am simultaneously aware of the rain and of my awareness of it; (2) awareness of a particular cognitive event occurs through an additional, but immediately following, cognition, most often identified as an “inward” perception (*anuvyavasāya*); (3) cognitive events become instances of self-knowledge only when taken up inferentially in “reflection”: I know that I was bitten by a spider upon apprehending the spider’s bite mark on my skin. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti defend versions of the first position, Nyāya and some Buddhist philosophers like Candrakīrti versions of the second and third positions. This paper proposes a novel solution to this classical debate by reframing the problem of self-knowledge in terms of the relation between phenomenal concepts and phenomenal knowledge. Concepts of consciousness such as “introspective awareness” (*manovijñāna*) and “reflexive self-awareness” (*svasaṃvedana*, *svasaṃvitti*) are grounded in phenomenal experiences rather than physical events and processes. As such they yield a different kind of self-knowledge than what can be gained by applying externalist conceptual schemas to understanding the mind. I argue that Dharmakīrti’s theory of content, which takes a bottom-up approach to *apoha*, can thus be seen as endorsing the efficacy of phenomenal experience as a vehicle for self-knowledge.

## Keywords

consciousness – self-consciousness – self-knowledge – subjectivity – higher order thought – phenomenal concepts – cognitive phenomenology

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## 1 Introduction

How do we come to know our sensations, beliefs, desires, and actions? On its face, this question can seem odd, even contrived. What more than, say, feeling the warm glow of the sun does it take to know that I am having a perception of some kind? How could my consciously entertaining the belief that Devadatta is a man not be epistemically salient with regard to the semantic content of the belief? Is there anything more obvious to my being in motion than the regular gait of walking as I lift and set down each foot? And yet it only takes one instance of mistaken self-apprehension to realize that we are no more immediately discerning about our own mental states than we are about external reality or the minds of others. This sort of philosophical awakening is typically short lived, for it is immediately followed by the recognition that what makes self-knowledge problematic is the assumption that knowledge of our own mental states has epistemic privilege over other kinds of knowledge (of non-mental reality and the minds of others).

The contemporary debate on self-knowledge in Anglophone analytic philosophy has focused almost exclusively on those specific aspects that grant self-knowledge epistemic privilege, in the sense that some form of immediate acquaintance with one's own mental states must be constitutive of human subjectivity. But the history of philosophy east and west presents us with a different conception of self-knowledge, one that looks to its role in the achievement of wisdom and, in the case of Buddhism, enlightenment. The Socratic ideal of self-knowledge articulates not simply a conception of who we are, but, and more importantly, of what we can become. As an ideal of self-knowledge's ennobling and enlightening effects it is not unlike that championed by the historical Buddha, who famously urged his followers to seek the guidance of their own reasoned deliberations and disciplined practice.

These two conceptions of self-knowledge may differ in terms of their scope – whether self-knowledge should be about its content or about the act of knowing itself – but they do share a common feature: their concern is primarily not with what it is to know a certain object (a self, subject, or aspect of experience); rather, their concern is with the kind of relation that human subjects have to their own mental states, one which takes self-reference to be a necessary

condition for the ability to entertain propositions of any sort. What these two conceptions of the scope of self-knowledge have in common is the notion that *self-knowledge* is essentially knowledge *about oneself* or *of oneself*: in short, it is *de se* rather than *de re* knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for instance, your awareness of reading these words right now: to count as an instance of self-knowledge, it is not enough that you be aware of their place in the syntax or the meaning they seek to convey. Rather, you must know that the property of “reading these words right now” *belongs to you*, that it occurs *in your own* mental stream.

On the problem of self-knowledge, Indian Buddhist philosophy presents us with three distinct views: (1) conscious cognition of an object or mental state is reflexively self-aware or self-intimating; (2) self-cognition is the result of a co-occurrent or immediately succeeding cognition of cognition, most often identified as a kind of “inward” perception akin to introspective awareness; (3) cognitive events become instances of self-knowledge when *reflection* bears upon a specific inferential sign: I know it must have been a nightmare when I wake up feeling anxious about the dream I had last night. Some philosophers (e.g., Dignāga (c. 480–c. 540), Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660), and their followers) defend versions of the first position, others (e.g., Saṃghabhadra (fl. c. 400) and Candrakīrti (fl. c. 600)) put forward versions of the second and third positions.<sup>2</sup> Given the universal scope to the no-self doctrine, specifying what exactly this self-referential relation entails and how self-knowledge is achieved becomes paramount.

It should be obvious that Buddhist accounts of substantive self-knowledge cannot rest on egological conceptions of self-consciousness, that is, on conceptions of consciousness as the property, function, or dimension of an enduring subject or self.<sup>3</sup> Just what it means for there to be self-knowledge without subjectivity, thus, remains an open question. Indeed, if experience

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1 I follow Renz's (2017: 4–5; 8) discussion of classical and contemporary approaches to the problem of self-knowledge. As Renz makes clear, unlike the contemporary focus on the role and function of self-referential thought to self-knowledge (see Shoemaker 1968, Anscombe 1981, and Evans 1982), classical Western debates were circumscribed by a set of epistemic accomplishments that go all the way back to Socrates' response to the pronouncements of the oracle at Delphi: (i) a firm grasp of the conceptual distinction between *belief* and *knowledge*; (ii) the realization that most people, when challenged to examine their own convictions, fail to grasp this important distinction; (iii) an acknowledgment of the limits of his own knowledge; and (iv) a recognition of the possibility of falling short of the demands of wisdom.

2 These positions, and their variants, are not confined to Buddhism. The Prābhākara Mīmāṃsaka shares with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti the view that knowledge episodes are intrinsically (*svataḥ*) ascertained, while the Naiyāyikas and the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsaka followers of Kumārila come down on the side of the Mādhyamikas in holding a relational view of self-knowledge (see Matilal 1989, Ch. 5).

3 The Pudgalavādins (“Personalists”) are an exception, but their concerns are metaphysical (Do persons exist as conceived?) rather than epistemological (How are persons known?). Despite the dominance of the ultramini-malist Abhidharma accounts of agency there are

lacks any self-specifying features, and if cognitions are merely transient events arising within a continuum of causally interconnected states, what explains the distinctively phenomenal character of first-person agency? How can the efficacy of our epistemic practices be explained without presupposing that conscious cognitive states are diachronically unified? On the upside, the rejection of a persistent owner and/or locus of experience does offer novel opportunities for exploring the structure of awareness and the problem of personal identity beyond the metaphysics of subjects.

Investigations of the problem of self-knowledge in Buddhism so far suggest a profound concern with the possibility of achieving a greater degree of self-understanding than is ordinarily available through reflection, introspection, or intersubjective reports. As the story goes,<sup>4</sup> the idea of cognition being self-intimating or self-reflexive arose among the Mahāsāṃghikas (“Great Assembly” thinkers), who sought to attribute the capacity for becoming an entrant on the path of cultivation (a *śrota-āpanna*) to momentary flickers or flashes of self-luminosity. The Mahāsāṃghikas maintained that these instances of self-luminous awareness explain how it is possible for a mental state to become reflexively self-conscious in a single moment (given metaphysical commitments to the principle of momentariness). Against this view, the Vaibhāṣikas (viz., thinkers who relied on the *Vibhāṣa* or “Compendium”) – chiefly Vasumitra (fl. c. 100), Dharmatrāta (fl. c. 150), and Saṃghabhadra – put forth rival two-moment or two-state views, according to which cognitive awareness is the outcome of a successive or simultaneous co-occurrent cognition. The position of the Vaibhāṣikas was in turn critiqued by Harivarman (fl. c. 350), an early Sautrāntika thinker (so-called because of his association with the Sūtras or “Discourses” School), who took important steps to broaden the scope of inquiry into the problem of self-knowledge beyond merely soteriological concerns.

The first proofs of self-knowledge as a one state (mental) event, which also appeal for the first time to the concept of simultaneity, the role of memory, and to arguments against infinite regress, are owed largely to Harivarman.<sup>5</sup> Dignāga’s framing of the problem of self-knowledge in the context of debates about the nature and function of perception reflects this new epistemological orientation. In examining this new orientation, I will argue that Dignāga can be plausibly interpreted as making the case for why we can (and should) pursue the question of the subjectivity or subjective character of experience

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good and compelling reasons to give Buddhist Personalists credit for insisting that important features of personhood are ineliminable (see Carpenter 2015).

4 Yao (2009: 10) traces this preoccupation with identifying the nature of self-cognition to the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. See also La Vallée Poussin (1928–29: 129).

5 See, for example, *Satyasiddhiśāstra*, 278bc in Aiyaswami Sastri (1975).

independently of metaphysical concerns about what this subjective aspect is (and is like), and of what its fundamental attributes might be.<sup>6</sup> In order to motivate this view of Dignāga as a proto-phenomenologist, I will propose several ways in which an analysis of the structure of consciousness can be pursued without assuming that such structure (with its subjective and intentional aspects) reflects an external relation of ownership between consciousness and some underlying substratum.

The central concern here is whether reflexive awareness involves a direct self-referential relation. In § II, I review Dignāga's two-aspectual theory of mental states, and its implications for an account of self-knowledge that must negotiate the subjective and intentional dimensions of experience. In § III I draw a parallel to contemporary debates in philosophy of mind between "one-state" and "two-state" theories of consciousness and consider what is at stake for accounts of consciousness that ignore its properly phenomenal features. In § IV, I outline Dharmakīrti's so-called "egocentric predicament"<sup>7</sup> (*sahopalambha-niyama*) argument, and provide an example of problematic issues that relational theories of self-cognition confront. In § V, I consider the conundrum of metaphysical interpretations, and appeal to the epistemic features of phenomenal concepts in order to articulate a conception of minimal self-reflexivity that – despite associations with the so-called "afflicted mind" (*kliṣṭa-manas*) – affords an understanding of consciousness in non-relational terms. I conclude in § VI with some suggestions for how we may move forward on the problem of self-knowledge without discarding the role of phenomenal consciousness in articulating its content. In defending an account of consciousness that takes self-reflexivity and intentionality to be its co-constitutive and self-specifying features, I also suggest a way in which no-ownership conceptions of reflexive self-consciousness can help us to get the structure of phenomenal consciousness right.

## 2 Subjectivity, Intentionality, and the Dual-Aspect Theory of Mind

Dignāga shares with Vasubandhu and his Abhidharma predecessors the view that a defining characteristic of conscious cognition is its co-arising together with an object or intentional content. But Abhidharma traditions also operate

6 The *Ālambanaparīkṣā* is sometimes taken to represent Dignāga's idealist stance on the object of cognition. But it could also be read simply as a sophisticated phenomenological study of intentionality.

7 The American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry (1910) coined this term to capture the notion, first articulated by Berkeley, that a conception of how things are in themselves is *ipso facto* still a conception, and, as such, an event within consciousness.

with an axiomatic distinction between mind (*citta*) and mental concomitants (*caitta*): the first stands for discerning awareness (*viññānati*) in its many guises (perceptual, auditory, volitional, etc.), while the latter captures the distinctive character of conscious apprehension or its affective and dispositional saliences.<sup>8</sup> Most important, the mind and its concomitants do not attend to different objects. Rather, the same object is consciously apprehended by a particular mode of apprehension such as, say, visual awareness, and, at the same time, disclosed as an event in the mental stream – for instance, as a sensed patch of color or a thought of some kind. At least in the context of Indian Buddhist Abhidharma, the general assumption is that all cognitions are inherently intentional: that is, they are necessarily about an object of their own. But this understanding of intentionality requires that there be particular types or modes of cognitive awareness that are uniquely constituted as such: that is, as always being directed to, or being about, something.

Is intentionality<sup>9</sup> – the apprehension of an object in its first-personal mode of givenness – a distinct mental act, to be added to a long list of mental concomitants? Or is it a structural feature of consciousness itself? In keeping with the Buddhist metaphysical commitment to the momentary nature of all phenomena, even these distinctly intentional modes of cognitive awareness are nothing but temporal instances in a stream of psychophysical events that correspond to phenomenally and physically real structural properties. But now we have a problem: how can presumably non-cognitive or subpersonal factors contribute to the arising of cognitive awareness, let alone sustain the self-referential relation necessary for self-knowledge? If intentionality is a relation between a conscious mental state and its content, how does its object-directedness come about? If all there is to the mental domain is a stream of momentary, object-directed mental events, what does it mean for an object to

8 The *Abhidhammattha-Sangaha* II, 1 (in Nārada 1979) defines the “mental constituents” as follows: *ekuppāda-nirodhā ca – ekālambanavatthukā, cetoyuttā dvipaññāsa – dhammā cetasikā matā* (“The fifty-two states that are associated with consciousness, that arise and cease together with consciousness, that have the same object and basis as consciousness, are known as ‘mental states’”). Vasubandhu’s definition, as found in his *Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa* (TD 31, 848c3–9, in Dantine 1980: 46), is effectively a long enumeration of all elements “associated” (*sariprayukta*) with the mind, among them universal (e.g., contact, attention, volition), particular (e.g., action, resolve, concentration), auspicious, and defiled mental states, and the so-called “others” (*śeṣa*), which include an eclectic list of affective and afflictive dispositions (e.g., hostility, anger, malice).

9 Various terms in the Buddhist philosophical lexicon, e.g., “apprehension of an object” (*arthagrahaṇam, viśayagrahaṇam*), “obtaining cognition” (*prāpakaṇjñānam*), may be taken to capture roughly the notion of intentionality – that is, a mental state’s aboutness or directness toward an object – as understood in Western philosophy since Brentano (1874: 88f). See Coseru (2012: Chapter 8) and Arnold (2005: 44f).

be known, and by whom? *Whose* consciousness is it that does the knowing, and *what* is it that gets known? The causal principle of dependent arising – an axiomatic principle of Buddhist metaphysics – demands that phenomena arise interdependently such that entities or events possess their properties only by virtue of their placement in the causal web. As the canonical formula for dependent arising goes, visual-consciousness arises in dependence upon a visual system and visual objects. This way of framing the causal relation confronts an explanatory problem: How can sensitivity to light and a surface give rise to a metacognitive awareness of blue: not the mere “seeing of blue,” but *the awareness that blue is seen* (*nīlam iti ca vijānāti*)? In short, how does such coming together of sense and object, of thought and its content, become an instance of self-knowledge that tells an individual that the cognition is hers, that it happens in her mental stream?

If mental states are taken to be constitutively, rather than relationally, intentional, then self-consciousness is not a relation that consciousness has to itself when it attends to its own operations. Rather, it is a structural feature that certain (though not all) mental states have by virtue of being conscious. Furthermore, a conception of consciousness as constitutively self-intimating solves the problem of having to bridge the epistemic gap between the underlying factors of cognition (e.g., a living body) and its phenomenal character. One does not relate to pain as to an objective property of some sort (like being six feet tall or the husband of one’s spouse); rather one *is* in pain and the pain is phenomenally foregrounded as a sensation of some kind (of burning, stinging or throbbing). That there should be conscious mental events, such as bare thoughts and sensations that are unknown until they are attended to in a subsequent or co-occurrent moment of awareness is highly improbable.<sup>10</sup> Indeed,

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10 Armstrong (1984: 119f) – who rejects the Lockean self-intimation thesis that it is “impossible for anyone to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive” (Locke 1975: 11 27, 11) – uses the example of sleep-walking to build a case for the existence of unconscious visual and tactile sensations. While the evidence for preconscious human information processing is indisputable (Marcel 1983; Kouider and Dehaene 2007), whether the notion of “unconscious sensation” is coherent is highly controversial. Drawing on the literature on blindsight, Overgaard et al. (2008) give compelling evidence for why blindsight should be regarded not as a case of unconscious vision but rather of severely degraded conscious vision. Similarly, against Block’s (2012) appeal to two recent cases of neglect as evidence for unconscious seeing, Phillips (2016) argues that, while the various information extraction processes in these cases do provide support for sensory registration, they do not add up to perception, which requires phenomenal consciousness. Furthermore, neglect patients show various attentional and perception deficits, which biases their subjective reports in various ways. As Phillips notes apropos the paradigmatic case for unconscious perception, “the claim that blindsight involves unconscious perception is largely based on a dissociation between responding in a biased task and performance in an unbiased forced-choice task” (2016: 435).



the notion of a pain that is unknown until it is reflected upon or attended to raises the question: how is such unknown pain ascertained? As a phenomenal concept (that is, as a concept that expresses knowledge of phenomenal qualities) “pain” is acquired experientially. On an account of phenomenal knowledge as mediated by phenomenal concepts, the idea of unknown or unconscious pain is, simply put, a category mistake.<sup>11</sup> The problem of self-knowledge, then, is the problem of specifying how *phenomenal salience* – this distinctive quality that conscious mental states have – becomes a defining self-referential feature of conscious cognition. Is phenomenality, like intentionality, a structural or merely an add-on feature of consciousness? Do mental states acquire their character and perspectival stance as a result of self-grasping or is the *mineness* or *for-me-ness*<sup>12</sup> of experience built in?

Dignāga’s dual-aspect theory of mind can in large measure be understood as an attempt to bring the debate about the primacy of either “intentionality over phenomenality” or of “phenomenality over intentionality” to a resolution. As it stands, the theory rests on three distinct claims:<sup>13</sup> (1) that we are directly aware of conscious events such as perceptions and thoughts; (2) that each mental event has a dual aspect: it has both a subjective (*grāhakākāra*) and objective (*grāhyākāra*) aspect; and (3) that each mental event is also reflexively self-conscious (*svasaṃvedana*). The first claim goes against the view that conscious mental states are ultimately impersonal or anonymous (on the assumption that even nonconceptual content is first-personally given). To hold such a view would be akin to claiming that experiential states do not have a self-referential structure or acquire such structure only by virtue of the operations of what Asaṅga calls the “afflicted mind” (*kliṣṭa-manas*): an inauspicious

11 Of course, one can talk about tissue damage as the object (or cause) of a sensation of pain, but the physical state of the body prior to the occurrence of this sensation does not admit of phenomenal description.

12 I take “mineness” or “for-me-ness” to be an irreducible structural feature of experience with a distinct phenomenology, not simply an occurrent feature of conscious mental states. See Kriegel and Zahavi (2015) for an articulation of this view.

13 Funayama (Chapter 7) contrasts this threefold schema with the fourfold division of cognition popularized in East Asia by Dharmapāla, which he regards as a Chinese apocryphal theory, and as not particularly helpful in unpacking or making explicit the intent of Dignāga’s threefold division between the objective, subjective, and self-reflexive aspects of cognition. Indeed, Dharmapāla’s postulation of a fourth aspect – the “cognition of self-cognition” or “awareness of self-awareness” (*svasaṃvitti-saṃvitti*) – to account for how self-cognition itself is known – is explanatorily redundant. On Dignāga’s understanding of the concept, *svasaṃvitti*, that third dimension of cognition, which guarantees that subjective and objective aspects are self-intimating, is itself epistemically salient. It is a metaphysical requirement of conscious cognitions, as opposed to subconscious or subpersonal mental factors (e.g., *vāsanās*), that they be self-intimating, that they exhibit a particular phenomenal character.

repository of “I-making” and “self-grasping” tendencies.<sup>14</sup> The second claim identifies subjectivity or the “subjective aspect” (*svābhāsa*) and intentionality or the “objective-aspect” (*viṣayābhāsa*) as distinctive *features* rather than *operations* of the mental domain. The subjective aspect is constitutive of an implicit openness to what is given, while the objective aspect captures what the mental state is about: a content of some kind. Finally, the third claim is intended to capture the mode of presentation of all conscious cognitive states. Incidentally, the first and third claims can also be read as making the case that effortful self-knowledge – of the sort gained through introspection or intersubjective reports – depends on tacit or non-propositional modes of acquaintance.

This understanding of the structure of conscious experience is not unlike that put forward by some contemporary defenders of the view that our subjectivity is immersive rather than egological: as Zahavi observes, taking Heidegger’s lead on this issue, “I am acquainted with myself when I am captured and captivated by the world. Self-acquaintance is indeed only to be found in our immersion in the world, that is, self-acquaintance is always the self-acquaintance of a world-immersed self.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, as P.F. Strawson notes with regard to the mode of presentation of our mental states, “our desires and preferences are not, in general, something we just note in ourselves as alien presences. To a large extent they *are* we” (Strawson 1992:134). Even Wittgenstein comes close to articulating a tacit conception of self-knowledge when he declares: “It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking,’ and wrong to say ‘I

14 *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* 1, 6–7 (in Lamotte 1938: 36): “How does one know that *manas* in the sense of ‘afflicted mind’ (*kliṣṭa-manas*) exists? Without it, there would be no uncompounded ignorance, that is, a basic ignorance not yet associated with all the faults (*doṣa*), but serving as their base (*āśraya*). Indeed, introspective awareness (*mano-vijñāna*) must also have a simultaneous basis, as do the five types of empirical consciousness whose support are their material organs. Such a simultaneous support can only be found in the ‘afflicted mind.’ The etymology of the word ‘*manas*,’ which means ‘mine,’ and has to do with the afflicted mind, could not be otherwise explained. Also, without it there would be no difference between the trance of non-identification (*asaṃjñisamāpatti*) and the cessation trance (*nirodhasamāpatti*), which would constitute a fault. Indeed, whereas the trance of non-identification is free of afflictions, the trance of cessation is not. For those who lack conceptuality, then, there would be neither self-grasping (*ātma-grāha*), nor the conceit of ‘I’ (*asmimāna*); for as long as they dwell in a non-conceptual state, they would not be afflicted.” See also Kramer (2008) and Waldron (2003: 147) for further discussion of the concept of *kliṣṭa-manas* and its implication for a Buddhist account of subjectivity.

15 See Heidegger GA 61: 95, and discussion in Zahavi (2005: 82). As Zahavi notes, echoing an argument that is central to Dharmakīrti’s defense of the self-presentational character of cognition, “self-acquaintance is not something that takes place or occurs in separation from our living in a world” (*ibid.*).

know what I am thinking.’ (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar.)”<sup>16</sup> To claim that access to our mental lives is always mediated in some fashion or another, perhaps by participation in a shared domain of language and reflection – is to ignore these essential features of consciousness.

Against this view, Dignāga’s dual-aspect theory entails a fundamental difference in the two basic modes of existence of consciousness: as pre-reflective and as reflective. While the former is a kind of immersive non-objectifying acquaintance, the latter stands for a detached and objectifying self-acquaintance. It is to this latter type of conscious apprehension that we owe the distinction between *observer* and *observed*. Does Dignāga’s dual-aspect theory of cognition, then, reflect commitment to a subjective ontology, as his critics claim? Or do we have here the makings of a distinctly proto-phenomenological epistemology that brackets assumptions about a world beyond experience so as to lay bare the phenomenal character embodied in that experiential structure?

I do not mean to suggest that the dual-aspect theory cannot be read as a statement about the metaphysics of mind and thus as open to the sort of criticism leveled against it by both Buddhist and non-Buddhist rivals.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I want to claim that such a reading is less helpful if we take Dignāga’s project to be descriptive in scope, and concerned with making sense of experience itself rather than negotiating various theoretical assumptions about it. Specifically, the question is whether the first-personal givenness of experience entailed by the “subjective aspect” (*svābhāsa*) is itself an intentional or objectifying stance, and thus some kind of internal or inner perception. If it is, then we have to side with Yao (2005) against Hattori (1968), Nagatomi (1979), Franco (1993), and all those who take the self-intimating dimension of reflexive self-consciousness (*svasaṃvedana*) to be a distinct type of *inner* or *mental* perception rather

16 Wittgenstein (2001: 189). It is true that elsewhere in the *Philosophical Investigations* (e.g., Section 357), Wittgenstein insists that a meaningful articulation of our inner mental states requires the sort of accessibility that only public ways of knowing can provide. And yet, here he seems to concede that our phenomenal or subjective use of the first-person pronoun does have immunity to error through misidentification. See also Overgaard (2007: 135ff).

17 Arnold (2012) makes the case that while Candrakīrti’s and Kumāriḷa’s critiques of the phenomenology of first-order experience in Dignāga’s memory argument for *svasaṃvitti* do raise legitimate concerns (for instance, about the absurd consequences of admitting that all cognitions, by virtue of being self-presenting, are epistemically salient), they fail to capture the intent of Dignāga’s phenomenological stance. What Dignāga is most likely after with his argument for *svasaṃvitti* is a criterion by means of which the *occurrence* of mental states, rather than their *intentional content*, can be indexed as such, that is, as states of a distinctly *perceptual* or *conceptual* kind.

than a structural feature of consciousness itself.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, if the “subjective aspect” is self-intimating without being constituted as the intentional content of a previous cognition, then the structure of self-knowledge is non-relational.

What is at stake in this debate about the character of self-knowledge, then, is whether self-knowledge is best understood on a *perceptual* or *acquaintance* model. According to the perceptual model, mental states are logically (and perhaps ontologically) independent of the awareness that can attend to them. That a certain mental state can become the object of another mental state depends on contingent features of our cognitive architecture: I see color because I am sensitive to light (where sensitivity reflects an external relation of some sort between an organism and its surroundings). But on this model the relation between mental states and our acquaintance with them is causally indeterminate. A whole series of concurrent factors must be in place for an instance of self-awareness to occur: an object or mental state of sufficient salience, the lack of distracting factors, and a well-developed habit of attending to the present at hand. The perceptual model does not tell us how self-knowledge can be achieved, only that, given the right chain of events, it is so achieved. By contrast, on the *acquaintance* model, the link between a mental state and its conscious apprehension is constitutive rather than causal. If Dignāga’s account of reflexive self-consciousness (*svasaṃvedana*) follows the constitutive model, then having an experience of some kind, say of seeing blue, is akin to standing in an intimate epistemic relation to that experience.<sup>19</sup>

18 Franco’s position on “introspective awareness” (*mānasa-pratyakṣa*) is also a critique of Wayman’s (1991) view that Dignāga did indeed treat such awareness as a different type of perception. Yao rests his claim that Dignāga does take self-awareness as a type of perception on a close reading of the Chinese materials, specifically on translations of *Nyāyamukha* by Xuanzang (600–664) and Yijing (635–713), as well as on Kuiji’s (632–682) commentaries on Dignāga’s principal works. These texts seem to indicate, in no ambiguous terms, that Dignāga treats self-awareness as a distinct form of perception. For Yao mental perception (*mānasa-pratyakṣa*), then, and the mental faculty of cognitive awareness (*mano-vijñāna*) are to be clearly differentiated, the first being just an aspect of the latter.

19 This perceptual model self-knowledge follows closely Shoemaker (1996: 224). See also Chalmers (1996: 195), for a discussion of *constitutive* versus *causal* accounts of epistemic access to our mental states, and Zahavi (2005: 22) for parallels to Sartre’s views on consciousness. The “acquaintance view” also resonates with Zahavi’s account of subjectivity as minimal mineness or for-me-ness, for which see Gallagher and Zahavi (2012) and Zahavi and Kriegel (2015). Ganeri (2012: 154) finds parallels to Vasubandhu’s account of an emergent subjectivity from the activity of *kliṣṭa-manas* in these contemporary accounts of minimal subjectivity or for-me-ness.

It is important to remember that Dignāga develops his account of self-knowledge both in response to a received tradition of speculation about the so-called “luminosity” of the mind, and as a critique of alternative theories of perception, specifically those advanced by Nyāya, Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā, and Buddhist realists (e.g., Sarvāstivādins).<sup>20</sup> Thus, when Dignāga takes self-intimation to be the mode of presentation of all perceptual experience, he does not merely systematize into a system of epistemic warrants what had traditionally been known as empirical awareness and self-consciousness. Rather, he seeks to empirically ground his stance on cognition: perception does the job of apprehending particulars as uniquely characterized phenomena, but only if operating in a non-conceptual mode. If the goal is to account for the sense of *mineness* or *for-me-ness* that conscious cognitive events exhibit, naïve realist assumptions about how the mind interacts with the world are to no avail.

Let us take a closer look at Dignāga’s claim, as articulated in his major work, the *A Collection on the Sources of Knowledge* (the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and *Vṛtti*) that perception appears in its dual aspect as awareness of something coupled with self-awareness:

Every cognition comes about with a double appearance, namely that of itself and that of the object. The awareness of itself as [possessing] this double appearance is the result [of the intentional act] – because the determination of the object [*as cognized*] conforms to it. When a cognition intending its object itself becomes an object of apprehension, then one apprehends it as either desirable or undesirable in conformity with self-awareness. When, on the other hand, the object to be apprehended is an external entity, then the source of knowledge is simply the cognition taking on the [intentional] aspect of the object. In this second instance, the source of knowledge refers simply to cognition as intending the object, thus ignoring the character of cognition as self-awareness, even though it is self-awareness that brings it forth. Why? Because the object as perceived [*viz.* the external object] is apprehended only by means of this [intentional aspect]. Thus, in whatever way the object may be apprehended, for instance as something white or non-white, it is an object in that form [*viz., as intended*] that is thus perceived.<sup>21</sup>

20 For a summary of the various arguments in this debate for and against using light as an analogy for cognitive awareness, see Watson (2014).

21 PS I 9 and PSV *ad cit.*: *dvyābhāsaṃ hi jñānam utpadyate svābhāsaṃ viśayābhāsaṃ ca. tasyobhayābhāsaṃ yat svasaṃvedanaṃ tat phalam. kiṃ kāraṇam. tadrūpo hy arthaniścayaḥ yadā hi saviśayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ, tadā svasaṃvedanānurūpaṃ arthaṃ pratipadyataiṣṭamaniṣṭamvā.yadātubāhyaevārthaḥprameyaḥ,tadāviśayābhāsataivāsya*

As I have argued elsewhere (Coseru 2015a: 223; Coseru 2015b), Dignāga's central claim here concerns the character of cognition, specifically its self-intimating aspect. Regardless of *what* they are about (e.g., real or imagined objects), conscious cognitions are such as to disclose their occurrent for-me-ness: they happen to me, they occur in my mental stream. This notion that cognition is self-presenting is simply meant to address the problem of anonymity. But it also captures the *modality*-specific nature of conscious apprehension: *perceiving* differs from *remembering*, which, in turn, differs from *conceiving*. It is only insofar as cognitive awareness is self-intimating that it is possible to discern whether an object, say an earthen pot, is thematized as such or is merely ready to hand. The second claim is that a determination of the object, that is, how the object appears in cognition, for instance, as something desirable or undesirable, also depends upon various dispositional factors. This second claim addresses the *phenomenal character* of experience, the fact that conscious mental states have a distinct (perhaps even proprietary) phenomenology.

Can I be mistaken about the content and character of a given mental state? For Dignāga, we can only be mistaken about the object or content of cognition, specifically about the nature of the object of cognition. We cannot be mistaken about cognition itself: "Even conceptual cognition is self-reflexive in its mode of presentation, though it differs [from perception] with regard to its object, because that [viz., the object, is what] it conceptualizes."<sup>22</sup> Given that what we are most intimately acquainted with are mental states, being mistaken about an occurrent mental state would be akin to being mistaken that one is conscious. That we are not so mistaken is because certain mental states exhibit *immunity to error through misidentification*:<sup>23</sup> I can be mistaken about what I am experiencing, but not that I am having an experience. In shoring up his defense of the self-intimating character of cognition, Dignāga is also affirming the close link between consciousness and self-consciousness. However, his distinctly proto-phenomenological stance does not entail that conscious mental

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*pramāṇam tadā hi jñānasvasaṃvedyam api svarūpam anapeksyārthābhāsataivāsya pramāṇam. yasmāt so 'rthaḥ tena mīyate yathā yathā hy arthākāro jñāne pratibhāti śubhāśubhāditvena, tattadrūpaḥ sa viśayaḥ pramīyate* (Sanskrit in Steinkellner 2005). Translation, slightly adjusted for consistency, per Hattori (1968: 28). Cf. Kellner (2010: 207–210).

22 PS 1:7ab: *kalpanāpi svasaṃvittāv iṣṭā nārthe vikalpanāt*. See also Yao (2004: 64) for a discussion of the same idea in the *Nyāyamukha*.

23 In introducing the concept, Shoemaker (1968) also distinguishes between *circumstantial* immunity to error, as in instances where knowledge that one, say, faces a certain object is ordinarily assessed (by means of perception), and *absolute* immunity, as is the case with the identification of mental states as being "had" by a subject.

states are completely knowable for the subject whose states they are. While the possibility of dwelling in a conscious mental state without any intentional content is presupposed by the thesis of omniscience, Dignāga's immediate concern is pragmatic rather than soteriological: what relevant criteria must be in place for our mundane cognitions to succeed? As such, he addresses an issue that is at the very heart of phenomenological approaches to the problem of self-knowledge. As Zahavi observes:

In my daily life, I am absorbed by and preoccupied with projects and objects in the world. Thus, pervasive pre-reflective self-consciousness is definitely not identical with total self-comprehension, but can rather be likened to a pre-comprehension that allows for a subsequent reflection and thematization. One should consequently distinguish between the claim that our consciousness is characterized by an immediate self-givenness and the claim that consciousness is characterized by total self-knowledge. One can easily accept the first and reject the latter, that is, one can argue in favor of the existence of a pervasive self-consciousness and still take self-comprehension to be an infinite task. (Zahavi 2005: 22f.)

The reflexivity of awareness that *svasaṃvedana* is meant to capture is simply a condition for the possibility of self-knowledge. The mistake that critics of reflexivism make is to assume that this self-intimating or self-reflexive dimension of consciousness is the *achievement of self-knowledge* when in fact it is merely the *condition for its possibility*. In one of the most influential such critiques, Garfield writes:

It may well be that the phenomenological project as prosecuted by Dignāga and Husserl, and as resurrected by Coseru and Zahavi, may be misguided for a simple reason: There may be nothing that it is like for me to see red, because I don't. Instead of a single locus of consciousness contemplating a distinct world of objects – like a Wittgensteinian eye in the visual field or a Kantian transcendental ego – to be a person, from a Buddhist perspective, is to be a continuum of multiple, interacting sensory, motor and cognitive states and processes ... My own access to them is mediated by my ideology, my narrative and a set of fallible introspectible mechanisms. (Garfield 2015: 209)

As Garfield – echoing here Candrakīrti and fellow critics of *svasaṃvedana*, as well as contemporary champions of Higher Order Thought theories – would

have it, mental states lack any distinct phenomenal character of their own, so access to them is always mediated in some fashion or another. Once again, let me be clear that what is at stake in this debate is not the achievement of self-knowledge, which – and here I agree with Zahavi – may indeed turn out to be an “infinite task.” The issue rather is that self-knowledge comes bound up with a distinctively phenomenal character that tells the knower that the pain, the *seeing* of blue, the childhood memory are hers, that they occur in her mental stream.<sup>24</sup> Even reflective and inferential modes of knowledge presuppose this tacit self-acquaintance. Otherwise, we confront the circularity implicit in the presupposition that specifying the content of reflective modes of self-consciousness demands mastery of the concepts the reflective experience entails. Mastering such concepts, however, requires that there be some way of telling the specific mental state I happen to be in at the time: I can only ponder, judge or entertain that which is already present to me in thought.<sup>25</sup>

Dignāga’s attempt to frame the problem of self-knowledge in terms of the distinctive character of cognition leaves open the question whether *svasaṃvedana* should be understood in intentional or representational term. The dual-aspect language is strongly suggestive of representationalism, which explains why debates arose in later Sautrāntika-Yogācāra circles about whether cognition (i) is aspectual or imagistic (*sākāravāda*), or (ii) lacks such representational features (*nirākāravāda*), or (iii) possesses such imagistic features only falsely (*alīkāravāda*).<sup>26</sup> Dharmakīrti’s elaboration of the argument for *svasaṃvedana* in terms of a constraint (*niyama*) that objects are known “only as apprehended” (*sahopalambha*), and Śāntarakṣita’s account of self-awareness in terms of sentience come largely in response to the challenges that dual-aspect theories of consciousness face.

24 Sharf (Chapter 1), drawing on Saṃghabhadra’s discussion of perceptual objects in the *Nyāyānusāra*, frames the discussion in terms of the difference between conceptual and non-conceptual content: the “seeing of blue” is just a “raw feel” or a “quale” but one that lacks any discerning features, given that it has not yet come under the concept of “blue.”

25 The upshot is that we need nonconceptual content to make sense of conceptual accounts of self-knowledge, particularly as they find articulation in discussions about the relation between consciousness and content. I address this issue in detail elsewhere (Coseru 2020). See also Bermúdez (1998) for a compelling defense of the importance of nonconceptual content to solving the so-called paradox of self-consciousness.

26 See Dhammajoti (2007), Moriyama (2014), Kellner (2014), and McClintock (2014).



### 3 Self-Awareness without Higher Order Thought

A central problem in contemporary discussions of consciousness is the problem of determining in precisely what a mental state's being conscious consists. This problem raises a range of conceptual issues about the nature and structure of consciousness. Of particular importance here is the relation between consciousness and self-consciousness. The key question is: does consciousness imply self-consciousness or is self-consciousness the result of a higher-order cognition (a metacognition) co-occurrent with, and taking a previous instance of cognition as, its object? Solutions to this problem typically divide between those that take conscious cognition to be a "one-state" and those that regard it as a "two-state" process. One-state proponents argue that a mental state can be deemed conscious if and only if it possesses a specific character: it is reflexive or self-reflexive. This view, whose antecedents can be found in Descartes, Locke, and Kant, finds its clearest modern articulation in Brentano: "Every consciousness upon whatever object it is primarily directed is constantly directed upon itself" (Brentano 1982: 25). Following Brentano, the thesis of the unity of consciousness as reflexive awareness finds strong support in Husserl, Sartre, and many contemporary philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition.

Critics of the reflexivity thesis in both India and the West have traditionally pointed to the conceptual problem of other minds and, more recently, to the findings of cognitive science to make the case about the fallibility of first-personal access to our own mental states. Proposing an alternative, two-state (or higher-order perception (HOP)) conception of consciousness, they argue that a mental state is conscious in virtue of a distinct second-order state that is directed toward it. This latter group includes, among others, David Armstrong (1968, 1981/1997), David Rosenthal (1986, 2004), William Lycan (1996), and Rocco Gennaro (1996; 2006).

Like the one-state model, the higher-order thought view too has antecedents in the Indian philosophical tradition. For instance, Mīmāṃsaka philosophers such as Kumāṛila, and notable Buddhist thinkers such as Candrakīrti and Śāntideva defend versions of the higher-order view. What Candrakīrti in particular takes issue with is the specifically imagistic position that the object of cognition is not extrinsic to cognition but is an aspect of cognition itself. Candrakīrti's critique of reflexive awareness,<sup>27</sup> then, targets this notion that there is a class of cognitive events that are essentially self-characterizing: they

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<sup>27</sup> See *Prasannapadā* and *Madhyamakāvatāra*, and discussions in Williams (1998), Garfield (2006) Arnold (2012), and Ganeri (2012).

reveal their own content without recourse to an additional instance of cognitive awareness, an object, or the positing of a subject of experience. More to the point, Candrakīrti rejects the notion that reflexive awareness has this unique property of giving access to the pure datum of experience.<sup>28</sup>

It is precisely with the intention of answering critics like Candrakīrti<sup>29</sup> that Śāntarakṣita identifies the character of cognition as being contrary to insentient objects: “Cognitive awareness arises as something that is excluded from all insentient objects. This reflexive awareness of that cognition is none other than its non-insentience.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, Śāntarakṣita simply follows Dharmakīrti’s critique of the physicalist (Cārvāka) claim that consciousness arises from the four material elements (Coseru 2017). Indeed, as Dharmakīrti maintains, if the four elements, or a special transformation thereof, are the ultimate basis of consciousness, then consciousness ought to arise whenever and wherever the elements occur, which is to say at any time and everywhere.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, even if consciousness were said to arise at a particular point in time and only in regions of space occupied by (or configured as) bodies, it cannot arise from something that is itself not sentient.

The contemporary version of Candrakīrti’s view is that for a given mental state to be conscious a subject must have an appropriate higher-order belief, thought, or judgment that he or she is in that mental state. Take, for instance, Rosenthal’s influential defense of the higher-order view: “Conscious states are simply mental states we are conscious of being in. And, in general, our being conscious of something is just a matter of our having a thought of some sort about it” (Rosenthal 1986: 465). According to Rosenthal, for consciousness to be intelligible and analyzable, one must assume it to be an external, relational property of mental states, and to have something like an articulable structure. Here’s what I see as the main difficulty with this theory. Rosenthal argues that it is possible, in principle, that I be persuaded of my being angry through someone else’s testimony. Thus, I may realize that I am angry in the absence of

28 Arnold (2012) makes a compelling case that Candrakīrti’s uncompromising critique of the *svasaṃvedana/svasaṃvitti* thesis might be unwarranted if it is taken to show that self-awareness cannot be even conventionally, let alone ultimately, real. If *svasaṃvitti* is simply, with Śāntarakṣita, the mark of consciousness, rejecting it would in effect amount to denying “that we are conscious.”

29 Śāntarakṣita does not engage Candrakīrti directly, given that he does not become an influential thinker in Madhyamaka circles until the 11th century. His main Madhyamaka interlocutor is Bhāviveka.

30 TS 2000: *vijñānaṃ jaḍarūpebhyo vyāvṛttaṃ upajāyate / iyaṃ evā’tmasaṃvittir asya yājadarūpatā.*

31 See PV II, 35 and PVĀ *loc. cit.* Cf. Franco (1997: 171–172).

any conscious feeling of anger, that is, without feeling angry much like a depressive might learn about her condition from a therapist without having any awareness of it. This example underscores the inferential conception of self-knowledge. On the higher-order theory, an individual must have a suitably unmediated higher-order thought about being in that state. But this higher-order state will not itself be conscious unless subject to another higher-order thought about it (thus leading to infinite regress). That means, a fairly large number of these higher-order thoughts are in fact unconscious. How exactly a series of unconscious cognitive events could generate conscious apprehension is not at all clear. As Dharmakīrti famously puts it in the *Ascertainment of Knowledge* (*Pramāṇaviniścaya*) (targeting the regress argument):

Awaiting the end of a series of successive cognitions, a person does not comprehend any object, because cognition cannot be established as cognition when that cognition which is first-personally known (i.e. self-awareness) has not been first established. And since the arising of cognitions is without end, the whole world would be blind and deaf. For the series to come to an end, cognition's own ascertainment and its apprehension of the aspect of the object must be concomitant.<sup>32</sup>

How, we might ask, can an unconscious mental state operate to confer consciousness on another unconscious mental state? In other words, if the HOT theory claims that the thoughts required for consciousness can themselves be unconscious, we are owed an explanation of how the unconscious mental states can be a source for consciousness.

Given these problematic issues, defenders of the higher-order view should not be allowed to gloss over the question of the phenomenal character of consciousness by assuming that consciousness owes its phenomenal character, indeed its very subjectivity, to an external or causal relation of some sort. Instead, the relational scenario ought to be unpacked in considerable detail so as to explain how it is possible for there to be such a thing as, for instance, pain that is unconscious or unknown until it becomes the object of a suitably co-occurrent cognition. On the view that I put forward here, “pain” is a phenomenal concept that can only be acquired experientially. Hence, talk of “unconscious pain,” as I noted above, amounts to committing a category mistake: specifically, using the language of subpersonal phenomena to refer to conscious

<sup>32</sup> Pvīn 1: *tan na tāvad ayaṃ puruṣaḥ kañcid arthaṃ pratyety upalambhaniṣṭhāṃ pratiḥsamāṇaḥ, ekāsiddhau sarvāsiddheḥ. na cōpalambhānām utpattiniṣṭhety andhamūkaṃ jagat syāt. kvacin niṣṭhāyāṃ sa svayam ātmānaṃ viṣayākāraṃ ca yugapad upalabhata iti ...* (in Steinkellner 2007, pp. 41–42). Cf. Arnold (2012: 270).

mental states. Someone who has suffered no injury, discomfort, or distress or displays the rare condition of congenital analgesia cannot in principle grasp the concept of pain. Furthermore, even assuming that one can learn the concept of pain by definition does not entail that one grasps the property expressed by the concept (Nida-Rümelin 2007: 312). One need only point to conditions typically associated with various kinds of psychopathy and sociopathy to provide critical evidence for the relevance of phenomenal experience to phenomenal knowledge.

These considerations should give pause and raise concerns that the higher-order theories – just like the relational stance at the heart of Madhyamaka dialectics, in view of their commitment to grounding consciousness in non-conscious mental (and even physical) states – are both more problematic and less equipped to handle analyses of phenomenal consciousness than one state theories. The representationalism that informs higher-order theories may be able to answer how consciousness comes to be about something in the absence of that something. But representationalism cannot tell us in a non-question begging way how consciousness comes to make its representational contents *present* and, in so doing, to be *located* in its occurrent for-me-ness. Specifically, these considerations invite us to go beyond traditional positions in metaphysics concerning the relation between mind and world, and corresponding debates in epistemology concerning externalist accounts of self-knowledge.

#### 4 A Cognition Worthy of Its Name: Dharmakīrti's *Sahopalambhaniyama* Argument

The tradition of epistemic inquiry that Dignāga helped to initiate rests on an important and somewhat radical claim regarding the relation between cognition and its result, between the cognitive event in question and its outcome: a reliable belief of some kind. As Dignāga notes, “a source of knowledge is something that performs an operation, but it is really effective only as a result.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, the cognition that arises taking on the aspect of its object, while seemingly bound up with the intentional act itself, is nothing but the resulting apprehension: the act of knowing itself. In apprehending a given object, say an earthen pot, all that we can be certain about is that we are having a cognition of some kind: a visual or tactile experience. The aboutness of experience is a function of its intentional act: the earthen pot is only *as seen*, *as handled*, or *as weighed*. Similarly, the high-pitched sound is only *as heard*, and the judgment

33 PS I, 8: *savyāpārapratītatvāt pramāṇaṃ phalam eva sat*. Cf. Hattori (1968: 97).

that numbers are real only *as grasped under a Platonist metaphysics*. Dignāga's understanding of what counts as a reliable cognition is not unlike Husserl's account of noematic content (e.g., the "perceived as such"). Access to the content *as such*, without recourse to ontological considerations about whether it is internal to cognition or external to it, is precisely what the phenomenological *epoché* is supposed to provide. Dharmakīrti's argument for reflexive self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*), then, is the closest we come to something like a proto-phenomenological account of noematic content.

What is it about cognition that makes it worthy of its name? "Cognition" (*jñāna*), "discerning awareness" (*vijñāna*), and the warranted results (*pramāṇaphala*) of such epistemic practices (*pramāṇa*) depend on a complex vocabulary of *phenomenal concepts* (i.e., "concepts of experience") to make them intelligible. How is it, then, that a reliable perception can be phenomenally distinguished from an instance of mistaken apprehension? That is, what are the criteria by means of which something can be veridically ascertained as "white" and "a lotus"? Whereas Dignāga thinks the only reliable basis for, say, perceptual knowledge is the presence of a nonconceptually contentful awareness (*viśayābhāsātā*), Dharmakīrti instead argues that it is the *seeming* character of cognition itself that serves as a criterion for discerning what *kind* of cognition it is and *of* what. Bracketing considerations about the object at hand – considerations inherited from his Sautrāntika and Yogācāra predecessors – Dharmakīrti's *sahopalambanīyama* argument addresses the (otherwise quite trivial) concern that in seeking a basis for certainty, considerations about the *epistemic character* of cognition trump considerations about the *ontological status* of the object of cognition. There is no way to make sense of *what* we come to know without reference to *how* we know it: the lotus flower is only *as seen*, *as drawn* or *as imagined*; the childhood experience is only *as remembered*; the threat of losing a loved one is only *as feared*.

Dharmakīrti's *egocentric predicament* argument for reflexive self-awareness, then, does double duty: on the one hand, it makes explicit what the cognition's relation to its object entails, and, on the other, it addresses concerns that, say, a Sautrāntika interlocutor might have about the consequences of removing external objects from considerations about the efficacy of our epistemic practices:

Thus, "on account of there being no apprehension of [an object]," such as blue that lacks qualification (*upādhi*) – [specifically the] individuation (*viśeṣana*), which is "perception" or cognition – and "because there is apprehension of blue only when there is apprehension of that" – that is, because there is no awareness of blue and of its cognition [*as blue*] except

as co-occurrent (*sahaiva*) – it is established that “perception takes the form of blue” [stands for the view that it] just has the aspect (*ākāra*) of blue. On account of the requirement that the object be apprehended together with (*sahopalambaniyama*) the cognition, the so-called external (*bāhya*) object – for instance [a patch of] blue – does not differ from [its cognition], as in the case of apprehending the double moon [illusion, which no one takes to correspond to an external object].<sup>34</sup>

The central thesis at work in this extended version of the argument is that object apprehension is primarily the result of an individuation that occurs in the horizon of awareness itself. Phenomena such as “blue” appear as such only because of the operations of cognition in the relevant domain: in this case, that of color vision. In short, there is no such thing as “blue” apart from a blue quale. Rather, there are only experiential or self-presenting blue-continua. This way of framing the issue of the efficacy of our epistemic practices has consequences for the problem of self-knowledge. Specifically, it warns that postulating a basis for self-knowledge outside the structure of experience has the unfortunate outcome of assuming (mistakenly) that experience is an emergent property of something that is not itself experiential, but that nevertheless has the functional organization to support such experiential self-ascriptions.

On the proposal outlined here, a solution to the question “What does self-knowledge contribute to our understanding of objects?” will demand that there be a class of primitive concepts, call them “phenomenal concepts,” that anchor our cognitive practices. Phenomenal concepts, then, are a special category of concepts uniquely suited to provide epistemic access to experience such that by virtue of possessing them a person can be said to have direct and infallible access to her mental states. Unlike the concepts of natural science, which mediate our knowledge of the external world, phenomenal concepts are the vehicle for phenomenal knowledge, that is, for knowledge of conscious experience. There is a long debate in contemporary analytic philosophy about whether the presence of phenomenal concepts shows that there is an *epistemic gap* between truths about the physical world and truths about phenomenal consciousness, and whether, given this epistemic gap, we can infer an *ontological gap* between mind and matter (or consciousness and the brain).<sup>35</sup>

34 PV 3. 335; *tatra darśanena jñānenopādhinā viśeṣaṇena rahitasya nilāder agrahāt tasya grahe ca nilasya grahāt sahaiva nilādhiyor vedanād darśanaṃ nilādinirbhāsaṃ nilākaraṃ vyavasthitam. yad tāvan nilādiḥ bāhyam ity ucyate tad jñānena sahopalambhaniyamād tadabhinnasvabhāvaṃ dvicandrādivat.* Cf. Ratié (2011: 347 n87).

35 Proponents of the so-called “phenomenal concepts strategy” have argued that phenomenal concepts are in effect either *recognitionial* (Loar 1990; Carruthers 2000; Tye 2000,

Much of the debate, which reaches back to Frank Jackson's (1982) now classic knowledge argument against physicalism, concerns whether or not phenomenal concepts can be deduced a priori from physical concepts. If they can, then their possession does not provide any additional knowledge beyond how the world seems to us (because, unlike physical, functional, and intentional concepts, they do not explain how the world must be in order for us to have the experiences that we do). If they cannot, then comprehensive knowledge of the physical domain cannot give us phenomenal knowledge: knowing all there is to know scientifically about color vision does not give us the knowledge of what it is like to see red.

For the purpose of explaining Dharmakīrti's *sahopalambanīyama* argument, I take phenomenal concepts to be concepts that apply to experience when we seek to explain why and how acquaintance with our own mental states differs from our grasp of external objects. Without the immediacy, fineness of grain, and epistemic stability of phenomenal concepts we cannot in principle report on the qualitative aspects of our experience. We may apply phenomenal concepts to experience directly, merely in virtue of having had some experience, say of seeing a white lotus, or indirectly, when recalling a past experience or making sense of someone else's experience. But what sets phenomenal concepts apart is not how they relate to the experience in question (directly or indirectly), but rather that they convey the properties of the experience.<sup>36</sup> Phenomenal concepts are what we need in order to provide description-level

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2003; Carruthers and Vaille 2007) or *indexical* (Perry 2001 and O'Dea 2002) or *information-theoretic* (Aydede and Güzeldere 2005) concepts of experience. As such they are said to provide *causal*, *demonstrative*, or *informational* access to experience in a manner that both bridges the explanatory gap and is compatible with physicalism. The problem with this strategy is the assumption that we need not invoke the nature of phenomenal consciousness itself in order to account for the special knowledge that phenomenal concepts provide (cf. Balog 2009: 301–302). But by not invoking the nature of phenomenal consciousness, proponents of this strategy – as Chalmers (2007) has convincingly argued – are confronted, inter alia, with a dilemma: either a scenario physically indistinguishable from ours that misses the physicalist's account of phenomenal concepts is conceivable, in which case we cannot provide a physicalist explanation of how phenomenal concepts relate to phenomenal consciousness, or such a scenario is not conceivable, in which case the physicalist's account of phenomenal concepts cannot explain our epistemic situation (cf. Balog 2009: 309). See also Alter and Walter (2007), and contributions therein.

36 In this case, the property of having had an experience *as if of a white lotus*. In a defense of the reflexivity of awareness thesis, Jenzen (2008: 80f) offers an interesting argument “from spontaneous reportability,” which makes the case that in order for us to report on the objects of some experience, say the white lotus, we must be able to report on having had an experience since objects are known only as experienced.

analyses of experiential content,<sup>37</sup> to tell what it is like to see red, smell roses, or entertain I-thoughts. As a phenomenal concept, “reflexive self-consciousness” (*svasaṃvedana*, *svasaṃvitti*) designates that dimension of awareness that provides first-personal grounding for the apprehension of objects.

Consider the function of phenomenal concepts when applied to perception. An object *as perceived*, thus, is such that it makes its causal efficacy present by occasioning different types of experience. For example, water causes the experience of wetness and fluidity, rocks the experience of resistance or hardness, and irregular surfaces the experience of roughness. Hence, our effective deployment of such concepts as “fluidity,” “resistance,” and “roughness” are instantiated by these phenomenal experiences. To invoke the special relation of phenomenal concepts to phenomenal consciousness, however, is not to deny the natural world. The object *that* is perceived, although unknowable apart from the perceptual occasion, does constrain the phenomenal concept’s referential and intentional properties. A wall limits movement, night restricts vision, and inattention renders us “blind” to salient features of our surroundings. In Dharmakīrti’s example above, the aspect that perception takes, which makes it seem “as if” of a blue object, is not a *function of its representational content* but a *modality of its perceptual apprehension*. We see a blue sky not because some determinate object gets represented as “sky” and as having the property of “blueness,” but rather because our visual system has adapted to seeing certain frequencies of light as blue. As a color quale “blue” can only be apprehended as such by a visual system directed by visual awareness.

For this reason – argues Dharmakīrti in a more succinct rendition of the argument (this time in the *Pramāṇaviniścaya*) – “Blue and the cognition [by means of which something comes to be known] as such are not different because they are necessarily perceived together.”<sup>38</sup> The consequence of this view, and a corollary to this thesis, is that, as Dharmakīrti explicitly states (concluding his verse): “The seeing of the object is not established with respect to someone unacquainted with [its] perception.”<sup>39</sup> There is no apprehension of an object without an implicit awareness of its mode of apprehension. Reflexivity,

37 Chalmers (2011) applies this strategy in mitigating the distinction between questions of fact and questions of language, concluding that our verbal disagreements should not call into question facts about a certain domain, only their description.

38 PvIn I 54ab: *sahopalambhaniyamād abhedo nilataddhiyoḥ* (in Steinkellner 2007: 40). A detailed genealogy of this widely cited verse is found in Watson (2010: 305 n26). For alternative translations and analyses, see Iwata (1991: 66–109), Dreyfus and Lindtner (1989: 47), Taber (2010: 292f), Kellner (2011: 419), and Arnold (2012: 267).

39 PvIn I, 54cd: *apratyakṣopalambhasya nārthadṛṣṭiḥ prasiddhyati* (in Steinkellner 2007: 40).



then, is simply a condition for the possibility of effective conscious cognition, not the self-knowledge that is gained while pursuing the various moral and existential goods that Buddhists ultimately seek. The metaphysical impulse that drives explanatory concerns about self-knowledge is rooted in an unjustified demand: that the problem of self-knowledge can only be addressed if the objects, situations, and events that occasion it are abstracted from lived-experience. But the reductionist framework of Buddhist metaphysics, with its anti-realist stance on “the self,” seems ill-equipped to handle the subjective features of lived-experience, thus creating seemingly insurmountable problems for externalist accounts of self-knowledge.

## 5 Self-Knowledge and the Conundrum of Metaphysical Interpretations

There are substantive disagreements about how the problem of self-knowledge should be framed, the kind of evidence that is deemed reliable, and the lines of justification that are worth pursuing. It can be (and has been) framed in both metaphysical and epistemological terms, drawing on both dialectical and epistemic accounts of what it is that we thus come to know, and taking the form of both conceptual analysis and ostensive demonstration. Nāgārjuna’s dialectical stance, which takes the essencelessness (*niḥsvabhāvatā*) implicit in the relational view of emptiness to be the defining characteristic of all phenomena, targets specifically the metaphysical stance of Abhidharma Reductionism: namely, that for an entity to be real it must have *svabhāva* (regardless of whether *svabhāva* stands for the Sarvāstivāda conception of “own nature” or the Sautrāntika idea of a “defining characteristic”). With Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, this dialectical move is reworked into a critique of the relational view as reflecting an internal dialectic of cognitive distortions. Following Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, commitment to a conception of epistemically warranted subjectivity becomes the norm for Yogācāra conceptions of self-knowledge. This line of thought, in turn, faces a robust challenge from later Mādhyamikas such as Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, whose antirealist stance about phenomenal character blocks any conception of self-cognition as intimating or self-illuminating (*svaparakāśa*).<sup>40</sup> These debates, and their offshoots in Tibet and East Asia during

40 Arnold (Chapter 5) thinks that there is “no good reason for a Mādhyamika to resist the idea of self-awareness,” at least as Śāntarakṣita understands it, that is, as “nothing more than *that we are conscious*.” Simply put, consciousness ought to have a place in our conventionally reliable account of what there is even for the Mādhyamika. The Mādhyamika’s

the second millennium, inform a thriving analytic philosophy of mind that has endured in Buddhist intellectual circles to this day.

Is there a tension between the no-self view and the notion that cognition of an object is possible only in virtue of cognition's own self-specifying features? In other words, assuming a realist ontology of unique particulars that can be perceptually apprehended, what are the specific criteria for dissociating between self-knowledge and knowledge of external objects? I want to claim that such a tension arises only if self-knowledge is framed primarily as a problem about grounding, specifically about the nature of the objects, properties, and relations that are constitutive of self-knowledge. As a problem in the metaphysics of mind, self-knowledge concerns the subject-object relation or how consciousness in its various guises can relate to itself as an object. The assumption is that self-consciousness presupposes no prior acquaintance with the mental state one happens to be in. Rather, one comes to have self-knowledge by recognizing oneself as the object of a particular mental state of some kind (e.g., of perception, memory, or introspective awareness). If this object (a self or subject) can be dissolved under analysis – given the Abhidharma ontological distinction between primary and secondary existents –, then it is not something that exists ultimately (*dravyasat*) (Cox 1995: 138f). Primary existents, unlike secondary existents, are irreducible and thus serve as the constitutive elements of what there is. On this ontological picture, then, ultimately only partless atoms and partless moments of consciousness exist; enduring selves and chariots derive their existence from these more basic elements and reflect our linguistic and conceptual practices (Williams 1981: 240).

The grounding project thus embroils us in questions about exactly how these partless atoms and partless moments of consciousness ultimately exist, and about the relations that obtain both among and between primary and secondary existents. Combined with the principle of momentariness, which stipulates that these units of matter and experience are in effect very short

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concern, however, is with the kind of awareness *svasaṃvitti* claims to be, specifically a special type that makes itself present or known in the process of revealing its object or content. Since the Mādhyamika is blocked by the rejection of *svabhāva* from admitting that anything could possess its own determination or intrinsic character, he cannot commit to the idea of a self-revealing or “autonomously intelligible” cognition. While I am in general agreement with Arnold that Mādhyamikas have no good reason to reject the notion of *svasaṃvitti* as entailing that consciousness is implicitly self-aware or self-revealing, the question whether this self-awareness also entails a privileged way of knowing, I think, unnecessarily complicates what in effect is a basic phenomenological stance: that experiences are what they are in virtue not merely of their content but also their character.

lived, questions about the object of self-knowledge ultimately lead to considerations about causality and the nature of the dependency relation between partless atoms and partless moments of consciousness. Since the Abhidharma project has no place for the idea of a first cause, the only way to make sense of the arising and dissolution of phenomena is to say that they do so as manifestations of a beginningless and bottomless causal web. The problem of self-knowledge, then, becomes the problem of charting the order of causal events to explain how an awareness comes to have properties of some sort, say visual, because of its dependence upon a visual system and the reflectance properties of a given object.

As a key taxonomical concept at the heart of Abhidharma, *svabhāva* stands for either “intrinsic nature” or for a “distinguishing feature” or “characteristic” of phenomena. Applied to cognition, the notion that mental states have distinguishing features or properties of their own yields a range of positions in epistemology, from naïve realism to representationalism. Take hearing: either there is something intrinsic about the auditory system that furnishes it with phenomenal content over and above the sound’s represented features or what we call “hearing” is just a set of features such as pitch, timber, and degree of acoustic acuity, that are represented as externally (perhaps spatio-temporally) mapped.<sup>41</sup> One example is the difference between hearing a sentence in a language one does not understand, such as “*gataṃ na gamyate*”, and hearing it after one has learned the language in this case, Sanskrit. Clearly, what sets the two instances apart – that is, what marks their phenomenal contrast – is that although they involve the exact same auditory input, the second comes bound up with a rich phenomenal content. How far this phenomenal content reaches into the structure of cognition is precisely what the Yogācāras want to examine when they affirm the ultimate irreducibility of mental properties. That such self-specifying thresholds of experience as *phenomenal contrast* should exist and be discoverable is precisely what the Madhyamaka project calls into question when it argues that our tendency to see things in terms of their defining properties (that is, in terms of *svabhāva*) is the result of a fundamentally mistaken superimposition.

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41 In drawing an analogous distinction, Bayne (2009) argues that the line between low-level and high-level perceptual content is rather blurry, and that it is doubtful that phenomenal content only becomes manifest at a certain threshold, or that we could talk about phenomenal content at all without considering such representational features as edge, corner, shade, acoustic acuity, etc. How far into perception phenomenal content reaches is highly debated, but various proposals for moving this investigation forward invoke, for instance, contrast arguments in order to make the case for something like a distinct cognitive phenomenology that combines these two kinds of content.

Thus, when approached from the standpoint of the two truths dialectic, it is not hard to see why the problem of self-knowledge becomes a problem of adjudicating between realist, idealist, and anti-realist positions in the metaphysics of mind. In this case, the solution is always articulated in terms of a “revisionary metaphysics” (as Claus Oetke (2003: 470) calls it, borrowing Peter Strawson’s distinction between “descriptive” and “revisionary” metaphysics) since a conception of consciousness as self-intimating cannot arise in relation to things that are impermanent or lack shareable features.<sup>42</sup> For something to be defined as the locus of a specific property such as self-intimation—the argument goes—there needs to be some corroborative evidence beyond the conscious mental state itself.

## 6 Conclusion: Consciousness, Naturalism, and the Bounds of the *Lebenswelt*

It should be obvious by now that framing self-knowledge as a problem in the metaphysics of mind creates more problems than it solves. First, questions about the content of consciousness become questions about ontological constitution: are the objects so apprehended real, are they merely representations, or are they entirely internal to the mind? Second, the possibility of treating such content as simply intentional content is blocked by the more pressing need to address the problem of reference, specifically the problem whether uses of the first-person pronoun refer to a subject or owner of experience. Third, the difference between action, object, and agent or cognition, cognized, and cognizer (*pramātr*, *prameya*, and *pramiti*) becomes a difference in modes of existence rather than a way of specifying the constitutive elements of a knowledge event, its modality, and its epistemic status. Just as pursuing questions in the metaphysics of mind by asking – with a view to closing the explanatory gap between mind and world – how consciousness and cognition can emerge from what are presumed to be unconscious and non-cognitive elements and processes, so

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42 This point is amply made by Āryadeva in CŚ 10.3 with his ingenious argument that, if something is real (say, the property that fires have to generate heat), it is so for all tokens of the type. The same cannot be said for selves, given that “what is your self is my non-self” and hence what one apprehends as my own self is not a universally shared property like “heat,” which is experienced by all those exposed to fire. Siderits (Chapter 6) appeals to Āryadeva’s argument to make the case that attribution of mentality must require criteria for attribution: if we employ criteria (of the inferential sort) to attribute states of consciousness to others, why should the establishment of self-consciousness be exempt from such criteria?

also doing epistemology in a metaphysical key obscures in a fundamental way what is at stake in the debate on self-knowledge.

What is at stake in these debates is not just the possibility of overcoming ignorance, but the very capacity to even entertain this possibility, let alone engage in the sorts of self-reflective and self-scrutinizing activities that are presupposed by substantive accounts of self-knowledge. According to one tradition of thought, the self-knowledge project is deeply embedded in the Abhidharma metaphysics: figuring out what phenomena reduce to, and what is ultimately real, serves as a proxy for self-knowledge. Whether Abhidharma Reductionism is eliminativist or not, then, remains an open question whose answers depend on whatever the no-self doctrine is taken to entail: dispelling the illusion of a permanent, substantive self, or dispensing with any talk of subjective experience altogether. But according to the view I defend here, reductionism must give way to phenomenological reduction for the project of self-knowledge to get off the ground. For without an understanding of the distinctively self-intimating character of experience, identifying, analyzing, and cultivating the range of presumably impersonal mental factors that Buddhists deem wholesome (and countering those they deem unwholesome), would have no way to proceed.

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