

## Too much attention, too little self?

(forthcoming in PPR symposium for Jonardon Ganeri's *Attention, Not Self*)

Carolyn Dicey Jennings  
University of California, Merced

This is a good time for such a substantial book on Buddhaghosa. His ideas may be more difficult to digest than those of contemporary authors, but Ganeri convincingly argues for their relevance. Together with Ganeri's considerable interpretive and philosophical work, Buddhaghosa's view helps to fill out a perspective that is popular in cognitive science, in which the self is replaced by systems. In this case, the self is replaced by systems of attention, a view that Ganeri calls 'Attentionalism.' In this review I will focus on two aspects of the account that I find especially puzzling, with the hope that this leads to further elucidation, whether by Ganeri or others. Specifically, I will focus on the concepts of *ekaggatā*, or "placing," and *anatta*, or "no-self," as interpreted by Ganeri.<sup>1</sup>

Ganeri distinguishes the Pāli term *ekaggatā* from *manasikāra*, both of which are introduced as functions of attention. They are discussed to a much greater extent than two other supposed functions of attention—*sati* ("retaining," 66) and *cetanā* ("executive control," 223)—and are referred to in the index as the "two roles of [attention] in experience." That we can distinguish these two roles is crucial to Ganeri's account, but what are they? Importantly, these are functions of attention *within experience*, so any descriptions will be phenomenological ones. *Ekaggatā* is described as a "a type of concentration...or absorption" (66), a "placing" or a "placing-on" (2), and a "selection through exclusion" (123). *Manasikāra* is described as a "focusing" or a "focusing at" (2), a "directing or driving at" (110), and an "attenuation" of features (123). As someone unfamiliar with the concepts, I found these descriptions confusing, as I suspect they will be for many others. One might wonder at the difference between concentration and focusing, between placing on and driving at, and between exclusion and attenuation. Ganeri provides an example from Buddhaghosa that I found particularly helpful for understanding the distinction. The example has to do with seeing the moon on a cloudy night, which is said to require both *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra*. As Ganeri puts it, *ekaggatā* is like the wind that "may dispel the clouds but does not itself see the moon," whereas *manasikāra* can "produce for thought an intentional object," such as the moon, once the clouds are dispelled (111). One might see *ekaggatā* as the negative side of the function of attention, whereas *manasikāra* is the positive side, a view Ganeri attributes to Anagarika Govinda (110). In other words, one might see *ekaggatā* as removing distractors from the object, whereas *manasikāra* produces the object for thought.

We might contrast the distinction between *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* with that between passive and active attention. The latter distinction is at work in discussions on involuntary and voluntary, exogenous and endogenous, and bottom-up and top-down attention (see, e.g., Carrasco 2011; Preciado et al. 2017). It may sometimes seem as though Ganeri intends this distinction, as when *ekaggatā* is described as a mere "openness to the world" (2), whereas *manasikāra* is described as "driving at an object" (110). Yet, Ganeri is explicit in

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Bronwyn Finnigan, Jonardon Ganeri, Christopher Mole, and Carlos Montemayor for their helpful insights and feedback.

rejecting this more standard way of dividing attention: “these formulations are philosophically loaded, implying commitment to...an authorship model of self-control” (63; see also 112, 118, 175). The authorship model is one in which agents “are compositionally irreducible substances” and “causation by agents is an ontological primitive” (16). In other words, Ganeri rejects the idea of a separable self and sees the more standard distinction between passive and active attention as relying on that idea, since it is the self that is supposed to provide the activity of active attention.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of splitting attention into that which is not directed by the self (passive) and that which is (active), Ganeri splits attention into that which makes negative (*ekaggatā*) and positive (*manasikāra*) contributions to consciousness. Specifically, whereas *ekaggatā* opens “a window for consciousness,” *manasikāra* accesses “the properties of whatever the window opens onto” (2). This is negative in the case of *ekaggatā* because it operates by excluding distractors, like the opaque walls around a window. It is positive in the case of *manasikāra* because it operates by accessing categorical properties and applying them to those objects. This is a positive contribution to consciousness, according to Ganeri, because categorical properties distinguish consciousness from cognition. That is, Ganeri explains the distinction between consciousness and cognition through a distinction between the doxastic and subdoxastic, such that “the concomitants of consciousness are consciously accessible” but “cognitive processes are cognitively insulated” (60).<sup>3</sup> In other words, consciousness has to do with belief and reason, and attention has two different ways of making objects accessible to belief and reason—distractor exclusion and target categorization.

In making negative and positive contributions to consciousness, the two functions of attention support two types of conscious content, according to Ganeri—phenomenal and access content, respectively. A significant amount of philosophical research has been devoted to the idea that, in Ned Block’s language, we should separate phenomenal consciousness from access consciousness, since consciousness ‘overflows’ access (Block 2011). The intuition behind this idea can be understood through a simple example: when we taste something for the first time, we may be able to access only limited information about the flavor, while it may seem to us that our flavor experience transcends that limited information. A related question is whether consciousness ‘overflows’ attention.<sup>4</sup> In Ganeri’s account, consciousness overflows access but not attention, since the two functions of attention support two types of conscious content, only one of which has to do with access:

In our Buddhist theory, then, the intentional content of an experience is an object, feature, place, or goal (*ārammaṇa*), which has been identified in a certain way (*saññā*), while phenomenal content is a ‘flavour’ (*rasa*), which has been evaluated in a certain way (*vedanā*). It is the function of focal attention (*manasikāra*) to bring an intentional object into experience and to access its identifier. The function of placed attention (*ekaggatā*) is so to structure the phenomenal content as to enable a felt evaluation to take place. (154)

---

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps worth mentioning is that my own, opposing view is that the distinction between active and passive attention both tracks reality and indicates the existence of a self (Jennings 2012, Jennings 2017, Jennings *forthcoming*).

<sup>3</sup> The “concomitants” of consciousness are the parts of consciousness that are: “co-emergent,” “co-dependent,” and “conjoined” (37).

<sup>4</sup> I argue as much in Jennings 2015.

So *ekaggatā* enables the structuring of experience, helping to bring about phenomenal content, whereas *manasikāra* enables access to a sample of this phenomenal content (105). Thus, both conscious content and attention overflow access, in Ganeri's account. Further, by making attention necessary for both types of conscious content, Ganeri thinks Buddhaghosa is able to avoid the Myth of the Given, a solution Ganeri compares to that of John McDowell (72, 87; McDowell 1996). From the above it should be clear that the distinction between *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* has a crucial role in Ganeri's account, since it allows for a unique position in this debate.

One might usefully contrast Ganeri's account with that of Daniel Dennett, who argues that consciousness overflows attention but not access, and John Campbell, who argues that conscious content overflows both, which are tied together. Dennett emphasizes the importance of the language faculty for consciousness in arguing that it does not overflow access: "One's access to one's experience is accomplished via the access relations between M and PR [the language faculty]. As Anscombe would put it, we simply can say what it is we are experiencing, what it is we are up to" (Dennett 1978, 222). Yet, he sees attention as only covering a fraction of consciousness: "One experiences more than one attends to" (Dennett 1978, 222). In contrast, Ganeri explicitly separates the issue of consciousness from that of language (90), and yet sees attention as necessary for conscious experience (241). Campbell emphasizes the importance of a target being separated from its distractors ("singled out") in arguing that attention is necessary for demonstrative reference (Campbell 2002, 2). Yet, Campbell also argues that conscious content overflows attention (Campbell 2002, 1). Ganeri, in contrast, thinks that the form of attention that allows for distractor exclusion (*ekaggatā*) does not get us all the way to access, connecting attention to access at a later stage (*manasikāra*). For this reason, he finds room to argue that attention is necessary for both conscious content and access, even while conscious content overflows access.

While *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* are described as functions of attention at the level of consciousness, Buddhaghosa has different language for attention at the level of cognition—modules M1 through M4. Ganeri argues that we should not see one set of language as reducible to the other: "Neither form of explanation consists in a reduction of intentional experience to something else" (61). Yet, it seems clear that the two types of explanation are related to one another in some way. My main puzzle about *ekaggatā* stems from the fact that the divide between *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* appears to be supported by the divide between M1 and M3 in Ganeri's model, as I will reason below. As I see it, this causes tension with the idea that *ekaggatā* should be understood as a function of *attention*.

The tasks of the four cognitive modules are "attentional orienting" (M1), "receiving into early vision" (M2), "determining categorical identity and late attentional gate-keeping" (M3), and "investigating (mapping spatial boundaries, etc.); conscious 'having-that-as-an-object' as the final stage of running" (199). Ganeri sees these as lining up with the stages of visual processing in the brain, such that M2 is early visual processing "located in the area of the brain V1" (184) and M4 is intermediate visual processing "located in a range of brain areas" (185). Attention is required to make this processing conscious, and it is in the description of this requirement that Ganeri seems to tie *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* to M1 and M3, respectively:

The third phase referred to above is responsible for the difference between unconscious perception and conscious experience, and what bridges the two is attention: attention selects an object from the visual scene for consciousness, and attention targets cognitive resources onto the selected object. So attention has two roles in the theory of vision, an orienting role and a late gate-keeping role. (183)

Recall above that *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* are indexed under the “two roles of [attention] in experience.” That entry includes page 183. Further, in other places *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* are described in similar terms as the above, with *ekaggatā* having to do with the selection of objects (66, 121, 131) and *manasikāra* having to do with focusing categorical properties onto or “at” the object (2, 87, 109, 123, 131). It thus seems that Ganeri is here connecting *ekaggatā* and *manasikāra* to M1 and M3; the two roles of attention in conscious experience, already known to us, are the very roles that have been provided for M1 and M3 (“attentional orienting” and “determining categorical identity”).

In my view, this interpretation of the account presents a puzzle. Namely, what makes *ekaggatā* count as a function of *attention* (see also Watzl 2019)? For Ganeri, “attention is...the ongoing structuring of experience and action” (12). Can the exclusion of distractors count as the structuring of experience and action? This seems unlikely if *ekaggatā* excludes distractors by preventing them from being registered in V1; arguably, exclusion from V1 means exclusion from (visual) experience.<sup>5</sup> This much is suggested by the connection between *ekaggatā* and M1 together with the oft-used window metaphor, which “implies the exclusion of items not currently in the attended location” (113). In that case, *ekaggatā*’s structuring role occurs at the divide between what is and what is not experienced, rather than having a role within experience. Another possibility is that felt evaluation, rather than the exclusion of distractors, allows *ekaggatā* to structure consciousness (see the quote above). Felt evaluation is what provides the minimal normativity required to make the content outside of access count as *conscious* content. But valuation appears to be a later stage occurrence for attention, such that some have argued that “theories about the effects of reward coding and top–down attention on visual representations should be unified” (Stănişor et al. 2013). In that case, valuation and access seem likely to have substantial overlap. Put simply, the puzzle is that of accounting for something low level enough that it can provide conscious content outside of access, but high level enough that it can count as attention, in Ganeri’s sense of the word.

So far we have covered but one topic in Ganeri’s extensive volume, but in covering that topic I have drawn on 10 of the 16 chapters, demonstrating its importance to Ganeri’s project. The other topic that I take to have central importance is that of self, or “no self” (*anatta*). For the remainder of this discussion I will present what I take to be a puzzle about this part of Ganeri’s project.

The title of the book is explained by Ganeri as based on the idea that “attention, not self, is the fundamental point of departure in explanations of being” (322). I share this stance (Jennings 2017). Yet, Ganeri often goes further than this in support of *anatta*, or “no self”: he describes the self as “this unspeakable nothing” (11), claims that “there is in fact no such thing as the self” (257), and says that “the myth of the self” (313) is “not merely false but

---

<sup>5</sup> I am setting aside here the secondary visual channels that bypass V1, as are supposed to be active in blindsight.

psychologically and morally pernicious” (310). I disagree with this way of thinking about the self (Jennings 2017, Jennings *forthcoming*). Yet, Ganeri’s position is a powerful alternative to, as he puts it, the “philosophia-falsafah tradition” (15). My puzzle with *anatta* is in understanding how its target is distinct from *mano* or “mind,” as interpreted by Ganeri.

Ganeri summarizes the standard Buddhist argument for *anatta* as follows: “being at the centre of an organized arena of experience and action is a property not of a real but at best of a virtual entity, which as such cannot have any causal powers; so the self cannot be an agent” (1). This argument should be familiar to those who have been exposed to Dennett’s work on self as “center of narrative gravity” (Dennett 2014). But why should we think of the self as “the centre of an organized arena of experience” in the first place? This appears to be based on the presumption that the self must occur *within* the “space of experience” or *citta*: “At its centre there is neither an agent, presented as producing the centred array, nor a witness passively observing the display” (9).

Against this presumption, another possibility is that the self just is *citta*, an idea Ganeri ascribes to Rune Johansson (329). Yet, Ganeri thinks this view is consistent with the denial of self, or *anatta*, since *citta* is not an agent (330). My puzzle is how to square the claim that *citta* is not an agent with the idea that *citta* is “one in meaning” with *mano*, or “mind”: “consciousness is referred to as *citta* in the context of perceptual experience and as *mano* (‘mind’) in the context of cognitive control” (73). My puzzle stems from the fact that cognitive control is typically linked to the “central executive,” which is explicitly rejected by Ganeri as a homunculus (207). What are the properties of *citta* that allow it to provide cognitive control but prevent it from being a central executive or agent?

One of the properties of *citta* that struck me as similar to the central executive is that it is active when it has an attentional task and is otherwise in a passive “default” mode (45). Compare this with the observed trade-off between the central executive and default mode networks: “Cognitively demanding tasks that evoke activation in the brain’s central-executive network (CEN) have been consistently shown to evoke decreased activation (deactivation) in the default-mode network (DMN)” (Sridharan et al. 2007). Further, Ganeri claims that *citta* leaves the default mode when triggered by a salient stimulus (188), just as the switch between the central executive and default modes has been found to be regulated by “the rFIC, a key node of the SN [salience network]” (Sridharan et al. 2007). Finally, just as *citta* is responsible for cognitive control in Ganeri’s model, the central executive is “important for multiple cognitive control functions, including initiation, maintenance, and adjustment of attention” (Sridharan et al. 2007).

Not only does *citta* share many of the characteristics of the central executive, it is said by Ganeri to be “emergent” (“a unified emergent dynamical system”) at least when in the active state (37). This seems to open the door to the possibility that *citta* has new powers and properties in this state, such as those of the global workspace, which Ganeri ties to *citta* (212). The global workspace, for example, is said to allow for “the spontaneous generation of intentional behavior” (Dehaene & Naccache 2001). Yet, Ganeri sees this emergence as occurring only at the level of description: “A conscious mental life is, at another level of description, the activity of a set of cognitive modules. Only having reached this point, and not before, can the question of strong first-personal phenomena be raised and addressed”

(322). He describes the maintenance of the boundary as “apophatic rather than forensic” (4). The puzzle I find myself left with is how we can be sure that the emergence of *citta* is limited in this way. It seems natural to me to see an emergent system that allows for cognitive control as having distinct metaphysical status; in my own view, the self is an unified emergent dynamical system that directs attention, and we should see it as having independent metaphysical status due to powers of attention we only get through the emergence of this system (Jennings *forthcoming*). Those powers are best summed up, I think, through the standard division of active from passive attention. Our views are thus at odds on this point, and I am not sure why Ganeri has removed this sort of view from the table.

Finally, according to Ganeri, the claim that the concept of self is not just wrongheaded but morally pernicious is based on the idea that the self is rooted in the past, and so “insensitive to evidence”: “The false belief that I am my will prevents any question of disidentifying by disattending even from arising, which is why craving is what being in the grip of the myth of self as detached from experience entails” (313). Yet, *citta* is also rooted in the past: “the ethical profile of a mind, the influence of past ethical conduct, bears on attentional selection” (198). Why is it that being rooted in the past is positive or neutral in the case of *citta* but negative in the case of self?

To sum up, *ekaggatā* and *anatta*, both crucial elements of Ganeri’s overall view, seem to me to face some further challenges. It may be that Ganeri already has the resources to face them, either in this book or in other work, and I welcome the opportunity to learn more about his important project.

## References

- Block, N. (2011). Perceptual consciousness overflows cognitive access. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 15(12), 567-575.
- Campbell, J. (2002). Reference and consciousness. *Oxford University Press*.
- Carrasco, M. (2011). Visual attention: The past 25 years. *Vision research*, 51(13), 1484-1525.
- Dehaene, S., & Naccache, L. (2001). Towards a cognitive neuroscience of consciousness: basic evidence and a workspace framework. *Cognition*, 79(1-2), 1-37.
- Dennett, Daniel C. (1978). Toward a cognitive theory of consciousness. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 9.
- Dennett, D. C. (2014). The self as the center of narrative gravity. In *Self and consciousness* (pp. 111-123). Psychology Press.
- Ganeri, J. (2017). *Attention, not self*. Oxford University Press.
- Jennings (*forthcoming*). *The Attending Mind*. Cambridge University Press.

Jennings, C. D. (2017). I attend, therefore I am: You are only as strong as your powers of attention, and other uncomfortable truths about the self.

Jennings, C. D. (2015). Consciousness without attention. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 1(2), 276-295.

Jennings, C. D. (2012). The subject of attention. *Synthese*, 189(3), 535-554.

McDowell, J. (1996). *Mind and world*. Harvard University Press.

Preciado, D., Munneke, J., & Theeuwes, J. (2017). Mixed signals: The effect of conflicting reward-and goal-driven biases on selective attention. *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*, 79(5), 1297-1310.

Sridharan, D., Levitin, D. J., & Menon, V. (2008). A critical role for the right fronto-insular cortex in switching between central-executive and default-mode networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105(34), 12569-12574.

Stănişor, L., van der Togt, C., Pennartz, C. M., & Roelfsema, P. R. (2013). A unified selection signal for attention and reward in primary visual cortex. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(22), 9136-9141.

Watzl, S. (2019). Review of Jonardon Ganeri's *Attention, Not Self*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.