"What Matters in Psychological Continuity? Using Meditative Traditions to Identify Biases in Intuitions about Personal Persistence" for *Experimental Philosophy of Identity and the Self.* London: Bloomsbury, ed. Kevin Tobia.

Preston Greene and Meghan Sullivan

I.   Egoistic Concern and the Method of Thought Experiments

Thought experiments have played a central role in philosophy since at least the time of the Greeks, and they have long served as evidence for and against theories, as means of exploring the entailments of commitments, and as probes for exposing concepts and values latent in our thinking. In recent decades, academic philosophy has become more interested in studying not only the intuitions elicited by thought experiments but also potential biases that act on these intuitions. The question is no longer simply, "what is the intuitive answer," but also, "what could explain why this answer feels intuitive?" In some cases, the explanation for why a particular response to a thought experiment feels intuitive appeals to processes that we have discovered to be unreliable, noisy, or systematically influenced by arbitrary considerations. This, in turn, has made academic philosophers more sophisticated in their use of thought experiments. These improvements are thanks in large part to the contributions of experimental philosophers and greater interdisciplinarity between philosophy, psychology, and other social sciences.

Our focus in this paper is on how this methodological expansion can be further developed within the study of one subfield of philosophy: psychological continuity theories of personal identity and egoistic concern.

This is a topic where, from Descartes and Locke onward, the method of thought experiments has been central to philosophical argument. Take as a case study Jeff McMahan's agenda-setting 2002 book *The Ethics of Killing*. McMahan opens with an extended defense of a psychological connectedness theory of egoistic concern. He conducts a close conceptual analysis of what we take to "matter" when it comes to being the same person over time and change. His goal is to distill principles which we can then use to make arguments about what we ought to care about in margins of life and radical change cases — abortion and miscarriage, mental and physical change, and death. McMahan's opening chapter on egoistic concern and personal identity has fifteen extended thought experiments, with titles like *Whole Body Transplantation* and *Teletransportation*. In each thought experiment, you are asked to imagine a situation where some aspect of your mind or physical organism is changed and then register the extent to which the change would cause you to be less concerned for the resulting person's interests. With this method, he follows Derek Parfit (1984), who deploys similar thought experiments in defending his view that psychological connectedness is the rational and ethical basis for self concern. Similar examples can be found throughout the recent literature on personal identity. They often serve the claim that concern for the self over time ought to diminish as the self undergoes psychological changes.

McMahan assumes (in line with many philosophers) that there is a reliable route from imaginatively engaging with a thought experiment to realizing a conceptual truth about how change affects normative judgments about the self. Consider McMahan's (2002, 77) reasoning about a case he calls *The Cure*:

> Imagine that you are twenty years old and are diagnosed with a disease that, if untreated, invariably causes death (though not pain or disability) within five years. There is a treatment that reliably cures the disease but also, as a side effect, causes total retrograde amnesia and radical personality change. Long-term studies of others who have had the treatment show that they almost always go on to have long and happy lives, though these lives are informed by desires and values that differ profoundly from those that the person had prior to treatment. You can therefore reasonably expect that, if you take the treatment, you will live for roughly sixty more years, though the life you will have will be utterly discontinuous with your life as it has been. You will remember nothing of your past and your character and values will be radically altered. Suppose, however, that this can be reliably predicted: that the future you would have between the ages of twenty and eighty if you were to take the treatment would, by itself, be better, as a whole, than your entire life would be if you do not take the treatment.

> Would it be egoistically rational for you to take the treatment? Most of us would at least be skeptical of taking the treatment and many would be deeply opposed to it.

The thought experiment is meant to reveal that we care about the connectedness of memory and personality more than we care about (disconnected) improvements to well-being.

This method of thought experiments aims to be both psychologically descriptive and rationally probative. And for both of these projects, the method partially answers to standards of evidence from psychology. Do people have the patterns of egoistic concern that philosophers hypothesize? And upon reflection, do we think the patterns of egoistic concern revealed by these thought experiments are justified? Recent work in social psychology has raised challenges for thought experiments on both counts, indicating that our intuitions on these examples are vulnerable to a bias — we tend to dissociate from negatively valenced moral or social changes and to associate with positively valenced moral or social changes. This is one of the primary upshots of recent work on "good true self" attributions in social psychology (Tobia, 2015; Shoemaker and Tobia, 2020; Strohminger et al, 2017). Though there may be many desires, intentions, and personality features that we discover through introspection, we tend to distinguish an enduring "true self" around a cluster of psychological traits that house and develop our morally and socially valued characteristics.

This effect becomes a bias when we realize that thought experiments like McMahon's Cure are meant to reveal metaphysical data but are likely to be influenced by features of the case which

are irrelevant to the facts of personal persistence (Strohminger et al., 2017).[1] Why think our self histories are ones of uninterrupted moral and social improvement? As Strohminger et al. (2017, 7) put it: "The true self is posited rather than observed. It is a hopeful phantasm." Consider a thought experiment that is structurally similar to *The Cure* but does not involve illness or disability. We might call this thought experiment *The School*:

> *Imagine you are eighteen years old, from a working class background, and offered a full scholarship to attend an elite university far from your family. This experience is known to significantly, rapidly, and permanently shape your personality, desires, and values over the next five years.*

Would you be indifferent between dying and attending the school? More importantly, what intuitions differ between *The Cure* and *The School*? Perhaps the psychological disconnection in the positive valence school case feels far less threatening to self-interest than the negative valence disease case. And if we reflect on these intuitions, we realize that the brute metaphysical facts about being a persisting self shouldn't depend on arbitrary factors like whether the relevant change is caused by education or disability. This bias becomes still more urgent once we realize how many of the philosophical thought experiments (like *The Cure*) involve imagined disability or otherwise negatively valenced changes.[2]

If this reasoning is on the right track, then our ability to think clearly about personal identity and egoistic concern has improved thanks to our newfound awareness of a bias in our intuitive judgments, and this bias has been revealed with the help of social-scientific methods. Research into cognitive biases is useful to philosophy not because it establishes philosophical conclusions directly, but instead because it sometimes calls into question the intuitions that are behind such conclusions. In some cases, the relevant biases are general and far-reaching; e.g., ethical theory has benefitted from awareness of the fact that our intuitions tend to be affected by whether an event is framed as a loss or a gain, and epistemology has benefitted from awareness of how our intuitions are distorted as events change from "near certain" to merely "probable."[3] In other cases, research on biases is more targeted to specific philosophical intuitions, like the "good true self" effect discussed above.

One potential methodological principle to draw from this is that philosophers should pay more attention to empirical psychological research. This is true. Nevertheless, we submit that the more general, and better, lesson to be drawn is that *philosophical theorizing can be improved by*

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[1] Indeed, while the origin of the effect is still being studied, the leading hypotheses are that the effect shows a form of motivated cognition on the part of subjects and reflects evolved heuristics that aid in social coordination. See Strohminger, Knobe, Newman (in press).

[2] See Chapters 4 and 8 of Sullivan, 2018. A similar tendency to focus only on negative cases is seen in philosophical arguments in favor of the rationality of future bias. Greene et al. (2021) found that people are more future biased about negative hedonic events than they are positive hedonic events, and they suggest that it is therefore no surprise that philosophers who defend the rationality of future bias focus almost exclusively on thought experiments involving negative hedonic events.

[3] These are well-established features of prospect theory, developed in the work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.

greater awareness of potential biases in intuitive judgments. Notice that if we are committed to the latter principle, we should be interested in identifying biases *however it occurs*. In other words, we should cultivate as many resources as we can for identifying biases in intuitions that are relevant to philosophical theorizing.[4]

What resources for identifying biases are currently available but underutilized? Plausibly, the answer to this question depends on the domain of philosophical inquiry. For theories of personal identity, especially those that focus on psychological continuity, we contend that a rich and underutilized potential source of data are traditions of *sustained inquiry into the direct observation of the mind* — a practice which is often called "meditation."

"Meditation research" in academia tends to refer to empirical research on the biological and psychological effects of meditation. In contrast, there is currently little precedent for treating meditation as a tool for *conducting* research, though some philosophers have in recent times advocated for the use of meditation in this role.[5] A primary contention of this paper is that a third option is available, and it reveals a role that meditative traditions can and should play in philosophical discourse. In this role, meditation is not used to establish metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical claims directly, but instead to reveal potential illusions or biases in the intuitions of philosophers engaged in the standard analytic methodology.

Of course, claiming that data from meditative traditions *can* play this role is not yet to show how that is best accomplished. In the context of philosophical theories of personal identity, we believe the main barrier to the incorporation of meditative insights is the misperception that if taken seriously this data would only push toward grand conclusions about the erroneous nature of Western philosophical reasoning — conclusions such as "there is no self."[6] Instead, in this paper we try to show how meditation traditions can play the more reasonable role of revealing potential biases (which, in the context of Buddhist meditative traditions are usually called "illusions" or "delusions") that are relevant to philosophical thinking about personal identity.

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[4] It is important to note that in some instances philosophers have used thought experiments as a method for calling intuitions into question. The best example of this, in the study of personal identity, may be Dennett's (1978) essay "Where Am I?" Indeed, the thought experiments Dennett presents can help show us that there is *something* off about our common conception of ourselves as spatially located behind our eyes, and thus pave the way for taking seriously meditative practices that aim to reveal this intuition as an illusion. See Section II and Footnote 12. (Another prominent example of thought experiments used in the latter way, this time in epistemology, is Gendler and Hawthorne, 2005.) So, when we refer to the "method of thought experiments" in this paper, we have in mind the method of using thought experiments to elicit intuitions as data for theories, and not the method of using thought experiments to call intuitions into question.

[5] See the work of Miri Albahari; e.g., her 2019a and 2019b. See also Sparby, 2015, 216, who notes the ambiguity in the term "meditation research." There has been a recent resurgence in Western philosophers arguing for greater engagement between Buddhist and analytic philosophical traditions. See, for example, Garfield, 2015 and Bommarito, 2020.

[6] Intriguingly, recent work in experimental philosophy shows that among Monastic Tibetan Buddhists who deny the existence of any continuity of self (an extreme view with which we do not engage in this paper), there are still significant indicators of forms of future-directed egoistic concern, like fear of death (Nichols et al, 2018; Garfield et al, 2016). This data cries out for further explanation.

The claim that we will focus on in this paper is that there is a ubiquitous tendency to misidentify ourselves with our thoughts, emotions, memories, aspects of our personality, or combinations of these. This is a consistent report from many meditative traditions, and we will have much more to say about it in the next section.The claim is intriguing because if true, it seems to cut at the heart of much philosophical theorizing about personal identity over time, and especially that which focuses on the method of thought experiments. It is taken for granted in philosophical discussions of psychological connectedness views that we identify a persisting self with our thoughts, memories, intentions, and the like, and the changing personality is viewed as inextricably linked with the changing self. (Recall, for instance, the role that changes to memory and personality are assumed to play in McMahan's *The Cure*.) We might call this the *dualistic assumption* in personal identity. According to several traditions of inquiry into our nature — most immediately Buddhist meditation practice — this dualistic perspective is a *delusion*. You are *not* your memories, desires, emotions, thoughts, or any combination of these. And if this really is a delusion, then it is one that could affect the layperson in the same way that it affects philosophers as venerable as Descartes.

Our primary task in this paper will be to interpret reports on the identification delusion in a way compatible with developing the psychological connectedness theory of rational egoistic concern within analytic philosophy. So, our study is one *within* the study of psychological connectedness theory, which nevertheless draws on resources that are uncommon or underexplored in the existing literature. As our task is such, we will not be presenting in-depth analysis of Buddhist theory but instead introducing applied material as appropriate to reveal a potential bias in intuitions about thought experiments concerning psychological connectedness. Our hope is that the view we formulate is plausible as a model for study by psychologists and philosophers, without any necessary appeal to scripture or mystical writing offered to defend this as a religious tradition.

Our thesis is that people who have undergone the sustained inquiry into the observation of their psychologies, in many cases over a lifetime, have insights that are worth paying attention to when interpreting the results of the method of thought experiments as applied to psychological connectedness theories of personal identity over time. Thus, we claim that psychological connectedness views can be improved by incorporating data from meditative traditions, and that the improvement can be felt most clearly in thinking about potential biases in intuitions about cases of psychological change. According to the positive proposal we will sketch, the basis for psychological connectedness and egoistic concern is less susceptible to change than intuitions gleaned from the method of thought experiments would suggest — there is a latent form of experience, or what we call "ur-experience," that may be the subject of what matters and the basis for self-persistence. We present evidence for this proposal from new and underappreciated sources in Western analytic philosophy, namely a tradition of Tibetan Buddhist meditative practices.

II.   Meditation and Methodology

We should at the outset say more about our conception of Buddhist meditation and what forms of it we take to be most relevant to this project. This is important because we will be focusing on a different type of practice from those often associated with the current "mindfulness" movement in the West — with which we expect our readers to be most familiar. We will argue that these types of meditation are not the most useful practices for the purposes of analytic philosophy. So, it will be helpful for us to say more about the kind of practice from which we aim to draw insights.

"Meditation" can mean many different things depending on the context. Empirical research on meditation practices categorizes them into three types: 1) focused attention, 2) open monitoring, and 3) nondual awareness.[7] As Albahari (2019a, 19) explains:

> Meditation is … the systematic training of attention to go against that current of mind which keeps it unwittingly lost in the content of various objects to enable, eventually, a keen percipience of the objects' status as unfolding, present-moment events. The attention can for instance be trained to (1) focus on one object (such as the breath, mantra, or an idea of God), perhaps eliciting states of absorption [focused attention], or (2) become aware of different objects as they arise and pass away [open monitoring], or (3) go beyond objects to the field of conscious awareness in which they arise and pass away [nondual awareness meditation].

In the West, books on "mindfulness," as well as meditation centers and teachers, almost exclusively engage with Theravada or Zen traditions of Buddhism (for example, *vipassana*) that emphasize (1) and (2) — focused attention and open monitoring. These styles of meditation are sometimes described as "dualistic" because they "contain an essentially dualistic orientation of 'subject-observing-object'" (Josipovic, 2010, 1120). For example, meditators might be instructed to sit and to pay attention to their breath, and encouraged to gently return to the breath when they become lost in thought or their attention wanders to something external (focused attention). Meditators with some experience may be invited to simply sit and notice thoughts and emotions come and go, without attempting to direct the flow of their experience (open monitoring). These are the kinds of practice that most Westerners associate with the mindfulness movement.

All Buddhist meditation practices aim for the practitioner to achieve some degree of enlightenment or awakening to insights about the nature of reality. However, a common feature of focused attention and open monitoring practices is that they are *indirect* and *gradual*. They are indirect because they aim to shift the mental makeup of the practitioner to a place where they arrive at nondual insights independently. And they are gradual in that they view the process of achieving the insights as proceeding slowly over a very long period of time with great effort. Aspiring meditators are often encouraged to meditate for an hour or more a day in their normal circumstances, and to go on sustained meditation retreats that can last for months or even years.

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[7] See for example the survey article of Millière et al. (2018).

Nondual awareness meditation, in contrast, reverses this process (at least in some traditions —
more on this below). Nondual awareness meditation often begins by *directly pointing out* an
aspect of conscious experience that goes unnoticed in the everyday mind. By receiving this
pointing out instruction, the person glimpses a nondual way of perceiving the world. They are
then encouraged to remind themselves of what has been pointed out during "short moments" as
they go about their lives (Mingyur Rinpoche and Tworkov, 2021, 52). This practice helps to shift
the mind into a place where recognition of the insights is sustained and natural. Thus, the
process of awakening is reversed in the sense that recognition of insights drives a shift in one's
mental makeup, as opposed to a shift in mental makeup driving the recognition of insights. In
the Tibetan Buddhist nondual awareness tradition *Dzogchen*, this is described as "taking the
goal of meditation as the path" (Josipovic, 2010, 1120).

There are psychological benefits touted from all three forms of meditation.[8] And all have
practices that are taken as legitimate routes to awakening within the traditions. Nevertheless,
traditions that emphasize nondual awareness meditation are particularly suited to the task of
gleaning insights from practitioners for the purposes of philosophical inquiry. After all, the
methodology of the practice proceeds by *the direct pointing out of the insights*, as a method to
foster further practice. It is not the case, of course, that one can fully appreciate the nature of an
insight without sustained engagement with the practice. Even so, if one has an open mind, there
is at least a chance to glean something of value, even at the very beginning. In contrast, very
few people have the inclination to spend many years training their mind with dualistic practice,
and that includes philosophers.

Consider another prominent nondual awareness tradition, *Sutra Mahamudra* (sometimes called
"Mahamudra"),[9] a tradition in Tibetan Buddhism that is claimed by its practitioners to offer a
"direct path" to awakening that is "especially swift" (Dorje, 2003, xiii). This practice, according to
the Dalai Lama, goes "straight to the point" (Dalai Lama, 2003, xi). Mahamudra was initially
developed not by people living in monasteries, but instead by lay practitioners in India looking

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[8] There now exists a large empirical literature suggesting benefits from meditation to physical and
emotional well-being, as well as to attributes like attention, memory, and mental quickness. Most of this
research is on the benefits of focused-attention and open-monitoring meditation, and it is only recently
that studies have started to regularly include nondual-awareness meditation. An early study by Josipovic
et al. (2011) found that focused-attention meditation suppresses the internally focused default-mode
network while open-monitoring meditation suppresses the externally focused task-positive network. In
contrast, nondual-awareness meditation tended to balance the activity of each network. A subsequent
study by Schoenberg et al. (2018) found that nondual-awareness meditation created high gamma
frequencies in subjects, which occur when separate areas of the brain fire in harmony. There is recent
work about potential harmful effects of sustained meditation practice (e.g., Lindahl et al., 2019), including
conjecture about whether there is a "U" shaped trajectory to meditation training where initially positive
effects turn negative (Britton, 2019). (Though see the recent review of Farias et al. (2020), which
concludes that the rate of observed adverse effects due to meditation are similar to that of psychotherapy
in general). Josipovic (2014, 12) suggests that the network-suppression effects of focused attention and
open monitoring are the most likely cause of long-developing adverse effects, because it is questionable
whether the ongoing suppression of networks, leading to an attenuation of their activity, is a viable
long-term strategy.
[9] Mahamudra and Dzogchen share many methodological similarities and are often thought to be
complementary practices.

for a way to awaken within the context of everyday life. As Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche explains: "[Mahamudra] is seen as a very profound method because it does not require any of the sophisticated and complex tantric rituals, deity yoga visualization practices or [vows] … Sutra Mahamudra has a tradition of skillful means that contains profound methods of directly pointing out the selfless and luminous nature of mind."

So, what are the insights about the nature of the self that a nondual awareness practice like Mahamudra tries to reveal, and how do these bear on what matters in psychological continuity? We can distinguish between two projects. One is the negative project of pointing out what we are *not* — the common illusions that occur when people try to understand themselves, which are claimed to afflict the vast majority prior to training in meditation. The other is the more positive project of attempting to describe what we are — the features of our nature of mind (*rigpa* in Tibetan Buddhism). In what follows, we focus on the negative project for two reasons. First, because the negative project alone is (nearly) sufficient for the aims of the paper. Second, because understanding the proposed illusions and mistakes is easier for the uninitiated than understanding the positive proposals. (The positive proposals are often interpreted as gibberish or as false metaphysical theses by those unenthusiastic about contemplating spiritual-sounding claims.) Nevertheless, we do include some discussion of the positive project below.

While throughout this paper we cite the reports of both Buddhist monks and Western practitioners, in discussing the negative project we draw heavily from the work of Loch Kelly. Kelly initially studied in Nepal under the prominent Mahamudra teachers Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche,[10] and then continued with the two sons of Urgyen Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. In 2004, he was asked by Mingyur Rinpoche to work on synthesizing Mahamudra with contemporary science and to teach it to Westerners. Kelly's phrasings make Mahamudra teachings more accessible to contemporary Western ears than reading directly from the esoteric language of ancient manuals, and his comparisons to contemporary science and the history of Western philosophy create easy-to-spot points of contact between nondual awareness insights and analytic philosophy.

Another feature of Kelly's work that makes it unique and interesting for our purposes is his focus on perfecting the pointing out instructions. In the Mahamudra tradition, pointing out instructions are called "an introduction to awareness," which are "hints on how and where to look" to see through our "mistaken identity" (Kelly, 2017, 37). These instructions are intended to describe a kind of insight that occurs at the end of a process of awakening or enlightenment, which can nevertheless be partially glimpsed at the beginning if delivered with skill. It is these kinds of instructions, we believe, that offer the most immediate and fruitful data for the philosophical study of identity and personal persistence.

One of the primary aims of Buddhist meditation is to help you "awaken" from the illusion of being what is sometimes called a *small self* or "mini-me" located inside your head behind your eyes.

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[10] "Rinpoche" is not a surname but an honorific term used in Tibetan Buddhism. It can be translated as "precious one."

This illusory small self is created through the process of *identification with thought*: the feeling that you are choosing the thoughts that arise and that they are you talking.

To understand this proposal, it may help at the outset to consider the common phenomenon of having a piece of a song stuck in one's head. For example, consider an unfortunate case where you've gotten stuck with the chorus of "Who Let the Dogs Out?" by the Baha Men. This is one of those rare instances when you are *not* identifying with mental chatter; it doesn't feel like it is "you" (i.e., the small self) who is singing the song. Nevertheless, if you try, you might find that you can identify, on command, with the repeating chatter, by choosing to mentally "sing" the next line as it replays (not singing it out loud, but rather silently "singing" it in your mind). For example, you might try to create the following pattern of identification, where **bold** text represents the inner hearing you identify with, and normal text represents the inner hearing that you do not identify with.

> "Who let the dogs out? Who, who, who, who? **Who let the dogs out? Who, who, who, who?** Who let the dogs out? Who, who, who, who?"

You can identify, and thus create the feeling of "this is me, I am doing this" selectively as the lyric replays. But in this case, it is clear that the replaying of the lyric is not under your control — after all, it's been replaying for the last several minutes, and will continue to replay whether you like it or not.

The Buddhist proposal is that *all* inner talk arises like the song lyric. "You" (i.e., the small self) do not select a thought to occur next; there are just thoughts popping up. What makes this hard to see is that in normal cases — cases in which the Baja Men have not invaded your mind — identification with mental hearing happens automatically and immediately. In other words, what you just did with the song lyric deliberately is what you do with your other mental hearing automatically. We thus find ourselves with the feeling that we are what we hear. As Kelly (2017, 130) explains:

> You are not the voices in your head…. The ... thoughts that you hear are not you talking. You are not even the second voice that comments on the first thoughts. You start by listening to the thoughts, then you believe the thoughts, and then you believe the thoughts are you. It is important that you directly experience that you are primarily the awareness that hears all voices and thoughts.

How does one glimpse that one is the awareness that hears thoughts? A lot of discursive mental talk concerns *problem solving*, in a general sense. Problem solving can range from deciding what one is going to do next, to crafting what one will say to persuade another person, to hypothesizing about why one is feeling unhappy, and so on. As such, a pointer that has helped many people glimpse what is beyond identification with thought is the inquiry:

> What is here now if there is no problem to solve? (Kelly, 2017, 29; 2019, 25)

This is an inquiry you might try sitting with for a minute or two. What is here if "there is nowhere to go and nothing to do? Nothing to know or create or become? What is here, just now, when you are not the problem solver?" (Kelly, 2017, 29) Remember that instances of thinking like "how long am I going to sit here" or "what is the point of this?" are themselves directed at solving problems. What aspects of your conscious experience are here, right now, if there are no problems?

A related pointer begins with a focused-attention instruction and then expands into a nondual insight:

1. Sit and focus your attention on the breath in your chest or stomach as it rises and relaxes.
2. Take a minute to notice the sensations of breath in this one specific area.
3. Next, become aware of the area you are focusing *from*. This is usually in the head, behind your eyes.
4. Ask: What is the awareness that is aware of both what you are focusing on and where you are focusing from? Does it have a location?
5. Open to the awareness that is aware of both what you are focusing on and where you are focusing from.[11]

The aim of these pointers is to glimpse an alternative to understanding one's identity within the constructed illusion of the small self and its thought-based identity. The small self is posited to be a "self-referencing loop" (Kelly, 2019, 81) which is created when a thought orients to a previous thought, and then that thought refers to the next thought, which itself then orients back again to the initial thought (Kelly, 2017, 129). This loop "creates a limited thought-based sense of self" (Kelly, 2019, 81) that Tibetan Buddhism calls "afflictive consciousness." Our minds then project this looping, or "selfing," onto our spatial representation of the location behind and around our eyes.

We've learned from an early age that our brains are responsible for our thinking, and so it is perhaps no surprise that many of us project our thoughts onto the area we know our brains to be located. Often the projection is on a spatial representation of our brain area, but since we typically do not feel much sensation in this area, some people project their thoughts onto the closest place to their brain in which dynamic sensation *does* occur — the little muscles around the eyes. But nondual awareness meditators have found this habit of projection can be broken. We don't *need* to imagine that our "inner" mental contents are all somehow crammed into a small area of our spatial representation. Thought experiments popular in the study of personal identity already strongly suggest that there is no necessary connection between where one's brain is located and where one takes oneself to be.[12] The feeling that your mental life is happening where you represent your brain to be located is not a result of your biology — it is a result of your beliefs about your biology.

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[11] Adapted from Kelly, 2019, 58–9.
[12] For example, Dennett's 1978. See Footnote 4, above.

The proposal, then, is that experienced meditators in the nondual awareness tradition have managed to break the illusion of being a small thought-based "mini-me" located behind or around the eyes, and they have done this by repeatedly glimpsing pointers like those suggested here. The pointers are designed to draw one out of identification with mental talk and the looping thought patterns that create the feeling of being a small self. Thus, the project of "awakening," in Buddhism, is largely the process of transitioning out of the delusion of the small self. As Kelly (2017, 27) explains, "When you awaken, you awaken from a looping thought pattern that has been called 'me' and feels located behind your eyes, in the middle of your head." To do this, as Mingyur Rinpoche (2018, 45) puts it, one must "become bigger than the thought."

The afflictive consciousness insists on the delusion:

> *Thoughts are occurring in a place located behind or around your eyes, they are chosen, and they are you talking.*

When one awakens, one realizes:

> *True nature of mind is not (represented as[13]) spatially located, it is aware of thoughts occurring unchosen, and it is not thought-based.*

In this discussion, we have been focusing on thoughts, and especially their occurrence as inner chatter or mental hearing. Thoughts have been our initial target because of the exalted status that philosophers have placed on discursive thought in establishing identity. This can, of course, be seen clearly in the work of Descartes. In interpretations of Descartes' meditations, thought is often interpreted not just as a tool for reasoning but also for establishing one's identity as a "thinking thing." Compare this perspective with that presented by Kelly (2017, 125):

> The most crucial mistake we make is turning to thought to know who we are. Unfortunately, philosopher René Descartes's famous statement 'I think, therefore I am' is often misunderstood to mean 'I am my thinking,' or 'I am a thinker.' When we identify ourselves as our thoughts, we become anxious, isolated, and obsessively caught in our own self-images and stories. To grow beyond afflictive consciousness, we need to experience [nature of mind], the feeling of "am" that is not thought based.

Identification with inner chatter thus seems to play an important role in our conception of ourselves, but such identification occurs with other forms of experience as well. One can identify with imagined images, emotions, and, of course, with *memories*. Just as one can have the feeling that "this is me, I am doing this" as thoughts come and go, as one remembers something one can feel "I am choosing to remember this, this is me."

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[13] It is important to note that these claims concern what is true *as a matter of experience*. They are not claims about metaphysics; e.g., claims about whether consciousness is spatially located.

The proposal is that as thoughts, emotions, memories, and the like come and go, the process of illusory identification occurs automatically and immediately. Our true identity — our nature of mind, or *rigpa*[14] — is not to be found in these kinds of contents of consciousness but instead in the broader context in which they occur.

III. Ur-Experience as Replacement for the Small Self in Theories of Diachronic Connectedness

Buddhist theory of mind does not view thinking as having a special status in relation to the five senses. Thinking, appearing as "inner hearing" or "inner seeing," has no more claim to being one's identity than the hearing and seeing of external objects. (This is why Buddhism views thinking as the "sixth sense.") We normally don't think of thoughts and memories as experiences like visual and auditory sensing because of the illusion of a small self that is *choosing* thoughts and memories; a small self that is, in some sense, *composed* of thoughts and memories. But this is an illusion that is consistently seen for what it is with the help of meditation.

Thus, if these claims are correct, then there is more to our experience than thinking and the five senses. There is a form of experience that is prior to the arising of these. We do not wish to take a stand on the more specific attributes of this form of experience, but we think it is helpful to have at least a catch-all term for it. We thus propose to call this form of experience, whatever its specific nature, *ur-experience*. Meditation is the project of ceasing the habit of identifying with thoughts, emotions, and memories, and building awareness of ur-experience. Ur-experience remains even if there are no problems to solve, and it explains why one can at the same time experience the location one is focusing on and from. Ur-experience is not dependent on one's experience of oneself as a thinker or as having a personality. Ur-experience is the experience of being immediately aware of these phenomena as experiences.[15]

This view proposes that what matters in psychological continuity is the connectedness of ur-experience. This contrasts with existing theories that focus on the connectedness of memory, thought, personality, and other mental phenomena that are commonly involved in identification delusions.

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[14] Kelly translates rigpa as "awake awareness." Other translations include: "no-self self," "true nature," "unity consciousness," ground of being," "source of mind," "optimal mind," "natural awareness," "heart-mind," "unchanging essence," "open-hearted awareness," and "Self 2."

[15] To avoid a regress, we would predict that awareness *of* ur-experience *as* experience would not be possible in the same way that ur-experience makes possible awareness of the experience of thinking, having a personality, or remembering. This prediction is consistent with the fact that the attributes of ur-experience are consistently presented as either indescribable or only describable in "mystical" language, which itself seems to offer little in the way of concrete description. Given the proposed nature of ur-experience, we would expect to only be capable of describing the functions of ur-experience and not its attributes. If one views mystical language as *not* successfully describing the attributes of ur-experience, then this expectation is satisfied. See Albahari, 2019a for more on "mystical" passages describing the nature of rigpa and an interesting discussion on the evidential status of mystical reports for the study of analytic metaphysics.

The proposal has stark implications for cases of radical psychological change. Many of these implications are acknowledged in the Buddhist tradition. As Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (2003, 14–5) admits, "from a conventional point of view" the view is "a little bit insane." For example, ur-experience remains constant through the transitions from waking to sleeping, and thus those who recognize ur-experience as the foundation of their identity "see little difference between being awake and being asleep."

What this implies, for our purposes, is that ur-experience is a candidate to endorse and explain perceived psychological continuity through radical change — whether that change be between waking and sleeping or changes of an even more radical nature. The crucial claim is that psychological continuity is in no way threatened by any changes, radical or otherwise, to one's personality, memories, emotions, or patterns of thought. It is the connectedness of ur-experience, which notices the arising of these contents, and not these contents themselves, that matters to personal persistence. For many people, the realization that ur-experience is the foundation of their identity is seen to make sense of the deep-set intuition that their identity has remained constant even as their personality and thought patterns have undergone drastic changes as they grow older. A common sentiment is: "This is the feeling of who I've been at all ages in my life, which hasn't changed" (Kelly, 2017, 27).

IV. Conclusion

Research into cognitive biases is useful to philosophy not because it establishes philosophical conclusions directly, but instead because it sometimes calls into question the intuitions that are behind such conclusions. In this paper we have developed an account of how some Tibetan Buddhist meditation traditions can play the same role: revealing potential biases that are relevant to philosophical thinking about personal identity and egoistic concern.

Specifically, we have claimed that there is a tendency to identify ourselves with a "small self" composed of thoughts, emotions, memories, aspects of our personality, or combinations of these. Just as psychologists suggest that the "good true self" is a persistent illusion, one that we must be careful of when we distill philosophical insights about personal identity and egoistic concern from thought experiments, meditative practices suggest that the "small self" is a similar illusion. This has important implications for philosophical theories (most notably psychological connectedness theories) which identify the self with thoughts and memories. Given that this illusion is pervasive and requires sustained observation to overcome, it would not be surprising if this bias went undetected even by philosophers like Descartes, Parfit, and McMahan who engage in sustained but non-meditative reflection on philosophical prompts. Centuries of cultivated meditative practices suggest that the route from intuitions about thought experiments to data about the nature of psychological continuity is suspect.

We can endorse this regulatory role for Buddhism while still remaining open to theories about the nature of a persisting self. And if, of course, these claims about supposed biases, such as the identification delusions of the small self, can themselves be challenged or explained away

by empirical psychological research, then that would also be an intriguing and welcome development.

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