

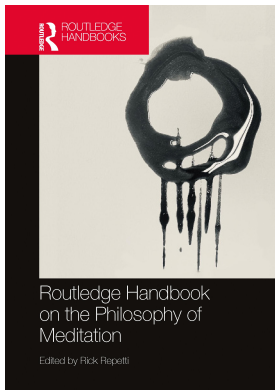
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CONSCIOUSNESS, CONTENT, AND COGNITIVE ATTENUATION

A neurophenomenological perspective

Christian Coseru

1 Introduction

Buddhist scholastic traditions contain extensive discussions about a class of liminal mental states of ‘neither conception nor non-conception’ (*naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana*) that are best categorized as instances of ‘cognitive attenuation’ (CA) – a state in which ordinary cognitive activity, involving both goal-directed and spontaneous thought, has been brought to a halt. Often the point of departure in these debates is a set of considerations about the function of consciousness – on the principle that, while lacking conceptual content, these states are nonetheless minimally conscious or at least minimally sentient (Griffiths 1986, Sharf 2014). Because Buddhist philosophers in general take perception to be a type of nonconceptual cognition, a key question in these debates is whether, and to what extent, their occurrence serves as plausible evidence for nonconceptual content.¹

The thesis that experiences have nonconceptual content became a central feature of Buddhist epistemology as certain strands of Buddhist thought came to be associated with the notion that the only content perceptual experiences can have is nonconceptual.² The historical underpinnings of this development fall outside the scope of this chapter. Rather, I examine the thesis that perceptual experience is nonconceptually contentful, by drawing on a range of arguments that so far have received little attention, and providing additional motivations for the view and its relevance to the problem of the unity of consciousness. Following the textual record (e.g., meditation manuals) alone cannot establish whether practices designed to induce altered states of consciousness provide an empirical foundation for Buddhist theories of mind. Nor can we assume that modern adaptations, e.g., mindfulness meditation for clinical/therapeutic research, supply the missing evidence.³

Nonetheless, the normative valorization of altered states of consciousness in Buddhism, and the rich conceptual vocabulary devised for their categorization, indicate that they are more central to Buddhist theories of mind than one might ordinarily assume.⁴ In what follows, I pursue two lines of inquiry. First, drawing on evidence from clinical literature on borderline states of consciousness, I propose a new categorical framework for liminal states of consciousness associated with certain forms of meditative attainment; second, I argue for dissociating phenomenal character from phenomenal content in accounting for the etiology of nonconceptual states

of awareness. My central argument is that while the idea of nonconceptual awareness remains problematic for Buddhist philosophy of mind, our linguistic and categorizing practices cannot be adequately explained without considering the ways in which the phenomenology grounds a more basic level of cognitive and affective sensing.

2 *Rigor mortis*: Meditative absorption and the question of reportability

A paradigmatic case of this normative valorization is found in canonical debates, e.g., about the distinguishing marks by which one may tell apart an individual in an advanced state of meditative absorption from someone who has just passed away. Although both exhibit similar behavioral markers (e.g., immobility and reduced psychophysiological functions), unlike the dissipated faculties of the just deceased, the yogi's cognitive apprehension is allegedly exceptionally clear:

in the case of one who is dead ... his bodily ... verbal ... and mental formations have ceased and subsided, his vitality is exhausted ... and his faculties are fully broken up. In the case of a monk who has entered upon the attenuation of perception and feeling, his bodily ... verbal ... and mental formations have ceased and subsided, but his vitality is not exhausted ... and his faculties become exceptionally clear.

(*Bodhi 1995, p. 392*)⁵

The only (external) distinguishing mark is vitality, or such signs of vitality as bodily warmth.⁶

Behaviorally akin to a cataleptic condition of diminished responsiveness to environmental stimuli, cognitive attenuation retains only a minimal degree of wakefulness. Functionally, however, they differ: While the latter is characterized by a seeming loss of all self-locating content, the former simply marks the streamlining of such content. An individual in a state of cognitive attenuation is said to have purified – not dissipated – their faculties. The presence of wakefulness would rule out the possibility that this is a characterless state. So, the question remains whether the mode of apprehension characteristic of such liminal states is epistemically salient: Is there something it is like to be in such a state?

One way to answer this question concerns reportability. That one can recall and report such experiences is taken to indicate an awareness of having undergone them, even though that awareness episode alone cannot establish whether the experience in question is nonconceptually contentful. Those who endorse the view that perception – a paradigmatic case of wakefulness – can be disentangled from its objects champion an ecological, rather than inferential, theory of perception.⁷ Because perception plays an active role in apprehending its objects, the same processes that modulate perceptual engagement with situations and things can also, on this view, modulate disengagement. That is, just as perception can be *scattered* by the objects that solicit it, it can be *gathered* by the operations that monitor it. And what performs this monitoring function is a specific kind of introspective awareness or 'alertness' akin to attention.⁸ These perceptual and attentional modulations show how self-reflexive character can be sustained even in the absence of a self-concept model, given that, once achieved, the state of cognitive attenuation keeps solicitation and monitoring in balance.

The notion of 'cognitive attenuation', however, is ambiguous between a dimming of awareness in its multisensory aspects (perhaps accompanied by flattened affect) and the absence of representational content. One interpretation, which tries to spell out this difference by appealing to the simile of a mirror and its reflections, appears to endorse a conception of consciousness as reflexive or implicitly self-conscious:

Just as ... a mirror put into a bag and placed in a box or something similar retains its brilliance, so also the five senses of the one who has attained cognitive attenuation shine with great brilliance. Therefore, it is said: “the sense organs are purified”.

(Griffiths 1986, p. 7)⁹

The brilliance and clarity of perception here are a function of its trained or perfected attentional and self-monitoring operations, not of optimal external conditions or perceptibility. Take vision: Its clarity is not exclusively a function of the object’s positioning, ambient light, and contrasting background relations. Rather, it also depends on whether what is in view and the operation of seeing itself stand in a relation of what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘maximal grip’: the tight connection between body and world in which the skilled body is finely attuned to respond to situations that solicit it (1945, p. 308). On this view, the possession of such cognitive capacities as seeing and hearing is not phenomenally transparent. The activity of registering objects within a field of perception – tactile, visual, or auditory – is phenomenally salient: It foregrounds a particular kind of self-locating phenomenal character, making manifest that the experience happens for someone, that it occurs within a particular mental stream.

Contrary to what the transparency thesis entails, that conscious experience has a diaphanous character, this account suggests that phenomena are registered *discerningly*, as visual, auditory, or introspective contents, and perhaps also *dispositionally*, as something to linger on or to relinquish. The conception of perceptual phenomenology at work here, analogous to adverbial theories of consciousness (that reject the act/object model of conscious awareness (Thomasson 2000)), calls into question certain assumptions about phenomenal transparency. As G.E. Moore, who first introduces the concept, notes, “when we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous” (1903, p. 450). The general idea is that nonintentional features of our experience are generally inaccessible (Shoemaker 1996), although some claim that phenomenal transparency explains why the phenomenal character of experience is provided entirely by its intentional contents (Tye 1995).

Of course, the phenomenal transparency thesis challenges the account of epistemic salience I have sketched here. For now, let me clarify that transparency is taken to be a property of all phenomenal states, in that only their ‘content properties’ are introspectively available. I see the tree outside the window, not the window itself. The seeing itself, which is the vehicle of a conscious act, is transparent to the subject, although some defenders of the transparency thesis have argued that “vehicle properties frequently *are* accessible for introspection” (Metzinger 2003, p. 163).¹⁰ One example of vehicle properties is the subjective experience of immediacy. For example, Metzinger, who articulates a Wittgenstein position, claims that the sort of naïve realism that phenomenal transparency entails “is not a philosophical attitude or a kind of belief”, but “a global kind of phenomenal character, which could also be enjoyed by a nonlinguistic animal entirely incapable of forming beliefs” (2003, p. 170).

While it is reasonable to claim that an equivocation between epistemic and phenomenal immediacy is to blame for naïve realist arguments about the infallibility of first-person knowledge or direct access to the content of experience, the assumption that “phenomenal content as such is not epistemic content” (Metzinger 2003, p. 170) might be a bridge too far. If phenomenal content is never epistemically salient, one could not theoretically differentiate between, say, the operations of perception and imagery without additional verification. A cognitive system requiring that its operations (e.g., seeing, hearing) are discerned solely in terms of (external) validations of their contents (actual vs. imagined shapes and sounds) seems unnecessarily burdensome and ineffective when contrasted with a self-regulating, self-monitoring, and self-reflexive cognitive system. Insofar as we are able to bring an object in

view, adopt a perspective, or bear witness to a particular event, it must be that the phenomenal contents of experience are registered *knowingly*, as visual, auditory, or introspective contents. The epistemic salience of phenomenal content suggests that the transitivity of reflexive self-consciousness is not hidden or transparent. Rather, it is a kind of primitive and pre-reflective consciousness that is nonconceptual and self-presenting (Coseru 2021, Frank 2016, Thompson 2011, Zahavi 2005).

States of consciousness associated with various kinds of meditative attainment pose a challenge to the problem of phenomenal transparency, given that they are supposed to serve as vehicles for the deep phenomenology of consciousness. Specifically, given the normative valorization of nonconceptual awareness, an individual in an advanced state of meditative absorption is said to be conscious in a way that exhibits greater epistemic salience than that of the ordinary folk: A skilled meditator may more effectively sustain a particular kind of attentive awareness and better understand its subjective properties and representational contents.¹¹ Regarding liminal states such as the attainment of cognitive attenuation, the question of epistemic salience concerns not only consciousness itself, as the categorical ground for perception, reason, memory, etc., but also sentience, the bare sense of being alive.

3 Content, concepts, and the unity of consciousness

Consider, e.g., the account of Buddhaghosa, 5th-century CE Theravāda Buddhist philosopher. Seeking to explain how the presence of heat distinguishes one who has attained the attenuation of verbal and mental formations from the dead person, Buddhaghosa uses the analogy of extinguishing and rekindling a fire. In putting out a fire, one may pour some water and cover the embers with ash. In rekindling the fire, one removes the ash, exposes the embers, and adds more fuel. It is reasonable to assume that vitality – the property that characterizes the state of cognitive attenuation – here captures the most basic autonomic functions required for staying alive. There are grounds to think that while such states differ etiologically from borderline states of mere wakefulness or from those of patients undergoing drug-induced ego dissolution (DIED), they exhibit similar structural features.¹²

One common thread in unpacking the deep phenomenology of cognitive attenuation is the indispensability of analytic insight to the success of the contemplative enterprise. Great emphasis is placed on the twin tasks of mastering tranquility and insight, without which one cannot reach beyond a state of neither conception nor nonconception:

The contemplative attains the state of neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization. Then, after the occurrence of one or two more moments of consciousness, he reaches a noncognitive state and attains cognitive attenuation. Why is it that cognition no longer occurs after these two last moments? Because of this effort toward attenuation.

(Rhys Davids 1920, pp. 1679.2–7)

What it might mean to enter a noncognitive state that is neither conceptual nor nonconceptual is unclear, although Buddhaghosa warns against interpretations that endorse annihilationism, the view that with the attenuation of all cognitive activity all traces of conscious awareness have also been eliminated. The only positive thing Buddhaghosa has to say about such states is that they capture the sense of happy relief at having attained *nirvāṇa*: “Let us live in happiness having become mindless here and now and having attained that cessation which is *nirvāṇa*” (Rhys Davids 1920, pp. 1673.5–7). States of happy, blissful countenance are phenomenally conscious, so

terms used to designate them (e.g., *acittakā*; lit. ‘nonconscious’) must point to a different category of experiential states.

Further problems arise when considering what the attainment of cognitive attenuation reveals about such structural features as intentionality. Since neither conceptual nor nonconceptual contents are present in such states, can they be said to possess any structure? Is there a sense that the attainment in question is *for someone* and *about something* in particular? Do such attainments happen to *this* contemplative – occur in *his* or *her* mental stream?

Buddhist causal theory stipulates that no event can arise or cease independently of causes and conditions. If the attainment of cognitive attenuation depends on the sustained effort of meditative cultivation, emergence from such states must be causally conditioned. But it is hard to find a satisfactory account of how conscious states, which are understood primarily in terms of subjective character and intentional content, might be reconciled with physical events and processes that admit of causal explanation only.¹³ So, the continuity of awareness following emergence from the attainment of cognitive attenuation remains problematic for Buddhism (and is further complicated by the doctrine of momentariness, with its ontologically minimalistic conception of point-instant mind-moments).

This deliberate effort to link non-ordinary states of consciousness and nonconceptual mental content raises interesting questions about the problem of phenomenal transparency. If a conscious mental state is transparent to its subject,¹⁴ how are its intentional contents disclosed? What does it mean to say that red is visually registered if the registering itself lacks self-location in a perceptual horizon? How does a mental state present itself as conscious, as a minimal state of wakefulness, if there is nothing it is like to be in it? For the Buddhist no-self theorist, addressing this problem requires a complex set of concepts that could explain how such altered states are conscious but anonymous, lacking subjective character. It’s an open question what category of concepts would fit the task at hand. Griffiths, e.g., signals the need of “a highly ramified set of interpretive concepts” such as “to capture the way it appears to the experiencing subject”, since “the central point about this altered state is that it permits no experience while it endures” (1986, p. 5). Sharf goes a step further and takes cognitive attenuation to stand for “insentience pure and simple”, a meditative state no different from a “vegetative coma in which all consciousness has ceased” (2014, pp. 136, 143).¹⁵

While I agree with Sharf that the scientific literature on borderline states of consciousness supplies a more effective category of concepts, it is important that their adoption is in keeping with clinical advances in diagnosing and describing these states. Research suggests many diagnosed as vegetative are minimally conscious, but confused and disoriented.¹⁶ Whether what persists once cognitive attenuation has been attained is something akin to such minimally conscious states or to an ‘unmanifest thinking consciousness’, it is clear that this is a contentful experiential state (Cox 1995, pp. 114–22, Griffiths 1986, Chapter 2, Schmithausen 2007, pp. 18–27). But, to make sense of nonconceptually contentful states we must carefully consider the relation between consciousness and content.

4 Self-awareness without representational content

We are now in a better position to address the question raised at the outset: Are there conscious mental states that can make present certain features of experience even though the bearer of those states lacks the concepts necessary for specifying their content? It is clear that brain modulation associated with self-referential activity can be present in patients diagnosed as in vegetative states, which means that lack of consistent behavioral responsiveness is not a good marker for loss of consciousness. If so, behavioral paradigms used in establishing the neural correlates

of self-consciousness in healthy individuals are not a good benchmark for the presence of self-referential mental content in comatose patients.

One justification for this view comes from considerations about unconscious causation and automaticity, which explain why conscious thought and intention often has little impact on behavior. Nonetheless, there is extensive evidence that consciousness does cause behavior, albeit indirectly through a constant interplay with unconscious processes (Baumeister, Masicampo, and Vohs 2011, Pockett, Banks, and Gallagher 2006). Thus, it seems plausible that conceptual processing and representation are not adequate markers of contentful and self-intimating awareness and should not be taken as the standard for establishing the availability of experiential content. But first, we must clarify what it means for a liminal mental state to represent features of experience, and for the content of those states to be non-conceptually specified. Furthermore, what can Buddhist accounts of the structure of consciousness contribute to discussions about the varieties of content?

Consider the notion of ‘nondual awareness’ (NDA) presents a challenge: What does it mean to talk about a consciousness that lacks differentiation?¹⁷ Even Buddhist thinkers who grant perception a unique epistemic status doubt that certain features of experience, e.g., the selection, recognition, and discrimination of something as ‘blue’, can be achieved nonconceptually.¹⁸ If we need concepts to specify the content of experiential states, does that mean nonconceptual states are experientially indiscernible? If not, how are they to be ascertained? Or should we assume, with their critics, that they are dogmatic postulates? More pointedly, what is it that Buddhist philosophers talk about when they refer to conscious mental states that are both subjectless and nonconceptually contentful? And, in general, what role do concepts and conceptual analysis play as we move from sensation and perception to the complexity of human thought?

On a generous reading of the various attempts to settle the debate about what is given in perception, Buddhist philosophers – minimally – distinguish between sensory discrimination of unique particulars, the perception of property particulars or kinds, and inferential reasoning about a variety of conceptual contents. Beyond this distinction, the role concepts and conceptual thought play vis-à-vis this basic mode of perceptual apprehension remains disputed (Dhammajoti 2007, Kellner 2014, Sharf 2018). This notion, that conception stands for a thought process (viz., reference) the primary function of which is the categorization of what is perceptually available, underscores the centrality of perception. Hence, to accurately describe the contents of experience, some *lower level of nonconceptual cognitive and affective sensing* must ground our linguistic and categorizing practices.

One way to argue that perception lacks the determinacy of conceptual cognition is to draw on neurophenomenological considerations about the structure of cognitive awareness. E.g., the neuroanatomy of the visual system suggests that some degree of discrimination and binding happens at the lower level of visual information processing: The mammalian eye has three types of photoreceptor cells responsible for color vision (Palmer 1999, pp. 112ff.). If the appearance of objects in visual awareness is to be isomorphic with the color and shape properties of the object perceived, visual awareness must be able to discriminate shapes and colors prior to the application of the relevant concepts. Perceptual processing thus displays a fineness of grain that outstrips the conceptual capacities of the perceiver.

The idea that some aspects of perceptual processing escape conceptual grasp is relevant to the question whether experience is structured around a subject- and object-pole. Testimonial evidence that subject/object duality is disrupted in meditative practice informs the view that consciousness in its natural state is ultimately undifferentiated, and therefore that the subject/object duality manifest in ordinary experience is illusory (Dunne 2011). The notion of nondual experience requires clarification. First, despite contrary claims (e.g., Dennett 1991), the general

agreement is that a level of consciousness characterized as ‘nondual’ or ‘pure’ is metaphysically problematic because it is impossible for a state of consciousness to be entirely lacking in self-consciousness (Zahavi 2005, Chapter 5, Strawson 2009, Part 3, Chalmers 2010, Part 3). Second, although the notion of nondual consciousness cannot be easily operationalized in cognitive neuroscience, some have claimed that consciousness at this level must, *as a matter of principle*, lack phenomenal content (Josipovic 2010, Travis and Shear 2010). Lastly, the notion of ‘phenomenal content’ needs unpacking, since it is often ambiguous between ‘phenomenal character’ and ‘intentional content’.

Consider visual perception. Ordinarily, when I look at the sky my experience manifests two aspects: (a) the experience of blueness, of something (i.e., the sky) being represented as blue, and (b) the character of the experience, which seems ‘bluey’ in the sense of what it is like to be in that state. That there is such a distinction between representational (or intentional) content and phenomenal character is what the transparency thesis calls into question. Most defenders of this thesis argue that “we are not aware of those intrinsic features of ... experience by virtue of which it has that content” (Harman 1990, p. 667). But it has also been invoked to argue that phenomenal character is just a species of representational content – in short, that when we shift the focus from how the sky looks to the experience of looking at the sky, we’re still only attending to the property of blueness. This property of blueness – blue qualia – is what the phenomenality of the experience amounts to: It just *is* its phenomenal content. Following Kriegel, who favors a representational theory of subjectivity, I take ‘phenomenal content’ to stand for “the sort of representational content that features only properties of eliciting certain qualia – that is, content featuring only phenomenal properties” (Kriegel 2002, p. 180).

To say nondual experiences lack phenomenal content, on this view, is to say that there are experiences without phenomenal properties. On a *conservative* conception of phenomenal content, which takes the content in question to be exhausted by the phenomenal properties of the objects represented in experience, theoretically there would be nothing it is like to undergo a nondual experience. If no objects – and by extension, no subjective qualities – are represented, then no phenomenal properties attach to the experience (which raises the question whether the state in question can still be deemed ‘experiential’). However, on a more *liberal* view of phenomenal content, one could argue that while phenomenal properties and representational contents are closely related, they are not identical: The absence of representational content does not entail the absence of phenomenal properties, which means that even so-called nondual awareness would minimally exhibit distinctive phenomenal character (Bayne 2010, Kriegel 2002). And, to continue the line of reasoning about metaphysical grounding, one could argue further that it is a metaphysical requirement of conscious experiences that they have phenomenal character, that they feel or are a certain way for a subject. This subject need be nothing more than a thin locus of experience (Peacocke 2014, Strawson 2017).

Consider, first, the view that cognitive awareness is ultimately undifferentiated – a view central to certain Buddhist and Indian positions on the metaphysics of mind.¹⁹ This has been interpreted to suggest that such experiential states are not only subjectless but also contentless, because content entails the ‘dualistic distortion’ of a lower-level, error-prone, conceptualizing mind (Dunne 2011, MacKenzie 2007, Chadha 2018). While such interpretations are tenable on exegetical grounds, they do not address the problem of epistemic salience, of how subjectless and contentless consciousness makes itself known or manifest. It is precisely the problem of epistemic salience that reflexivist theories of consciousness aim to address. Reflexive self-consciousness may be taken to stand for the *metaphysical fact* that all conscious cognitions manifest a subjective aspect, in the sense that to be conscious is implicitly to be self-conscious. But it is mainly intended to ground, first, an *epistemic fact*, namely that cognizers are immediately

aware of their cognitions as they occur, and second, and more importantly, a *phenomenological fact*, specifically that their awareness is experiential in a sense that captures its distinctively phenomenal character.

One worry is that by introducing such a notion, something is lost or undermined: the distinction between perception and conception. If all conscious states exhibit this direct mode of acquaintance, then reasoning and deliberation would be redundant in grounding self-apprehension: One could not reason without being immediately and nonconceptually aware of doing so. This position is defended by the Buddhist philosopher Dignāga, who explains that, in a sense, “even conceptual thought is admitted [as being perceptual in character]”, although, he adds, only “in terms of self-awareness”, i.e., “not with respect to its content, since that is”, in effect, “conceptually constructed”.²⁰ On Dignāga’s view, insofar as conscious cognitions presuppose a direct – *nonconceptual* – acquaintance with their mode of presentation, we are directly aware of the varieties of mental content, though we can only articulate it conceptually. The *epistemic fact* of self-reflexivity,²¹ that is, is meant to establish an intentionalist stance: namely, that one could not claim a conscious cognitive state indirectly via externalist or inferential accounts of mental content. While the complexity of human thought is only conceptually articulable, it is a further epistemic fact that such articulation becomes known only in conscious thought.

5 Conclusion: No meditation without meditators

Are meditative absorptions conscious? Is there something it like to be in them? Is a state of “yogic perception” (*yogi-pratyakṣa*), as it is often referred to in Indian philosophy, epistemically salient? Classical and contemporary interpreters diverge, but generally see them as akin either to phenomena such as *clairvoyance* or to penetrating, transformative *insight* into core Buddhist principles (e.g., momentariness, no-self, and dependent arising). Dunne (2006) endorses the latter view, whereas Eltschinger (2009), following Schmithausen (2007), claims that, at least for someone like Dharmakīrti, yogic perception represents a sort of direct, nonconceptual encounter with reality, a form of *gnosis*. It is only at the end of the Buddhist path, when defilements have been eliminated, that one can go beyond the mind’s conceptualizing activity and apprehend reality directly (Eltchinger 2009, pp. 167, 199).

It seems obvious that the attainment of cessation indicates a “state” of mind, whereas *yogi-pratyakṣa* represents the means by which such states are attained. Given Dharmakīrti’s commitment to the principle that *like causes like*, conceptual cognitions cannot be a vehicle for the attainment of nonconceptual states: Hence, for perception – particularly yogic – to be an effective epistemic instrument, it must be a nonconceptual and reflexive process. It does not follow, however, that reflexive or self-reflexive consciousness is contentless.²² This disciplined mode of perceptual awareness, Dignāga insists, is contentful: Yogic perception is “the vision of the object as perceived [in and of itself], unmixed with the doctrines of the teachers” (Hattori 1968, p. 27).²³ And Dharmakīrti, who thinks this mode of perceptual awareness represents an integral aspect of the path of cultivation (*bhāvanā*), likewise describes *yogi-pratyakṣa* as a cognitive modality that “arises at the end of the progressive intensification of the meditation (*bhāvanā*) on a real object” (Shastri 1985, p. 1).²⁴ It is to yogic perception, argues Dharmakīrti, that we must look for proof of the nonconceptual character of perceptual awareness:

The proof that perception is devoid of conceptualization is to be found in perception itself One who abides calmly within oneself, having withdrawn one’s mind from the object [as conceived], sees the object as perceived, [and is aware] that thought arises from sensation. When thoughts gradually return, one knows them as one’s own

conceptual elaborations. [One thus recognizes that] the conceptual state just experienced did not come from the senses.

(*Shastri 1968b, p. 117*)²⁵

This is a defense of the notion that perception provides the paradigm for nonconceptually contentful experiences. By cultivating an attitude not unlike the Husserlian *epoché*, the range of common-sense assumptions that inform our mundane conception of reality, and obscure the contents of perceptual awareness, is bracketed in meditative calm abiding. Because only a trained mind can stand in the right relation to its intentional contents, and only objects that have stood the test of analysis are constitutive of this content, this mode of cognitive awareness is epistemically salient *qua* phenomenal content: There is no confusion about this experience's mode of presentation. The nonconceptual mode of presentation of such direct modes of apprehension is qualitatively different than the so-called 'natural attitude', which attributes independent existence to objects of experience. This suggests that conceptualization, like sightedness, is an ineliminable dimension of the mind. Our minds are such that we cannot eliminate conceptualization, though we can bracket ontological assumptions informing its common, philosophically unenlightened operations. Yogis rely on specific processes of reasoning to gain insight into the nature of mind. The nonduality of the mind thesis, for instance, is predicated on denying subjects and objects exist *as they appear*, not in denying the subjective and intentional dimensions of consciousness. If *objects do not exist as they appear, the subjects* for whom they appear *do not exist as they appear either*. However, that doesn't mean the experiential structure that make these modes of appearance possible vanishes; rather, it is made present or manifest.

Those who call into question the epistemic salience of phenomenal consciousness often invoke the well-known introspective objection: the lack of a subjective element in the mental stream (Hume's claim that we can never catch ourselves without a perception or observe anything but perceptions).²⁶ The introspective objection resembles canonical articulations of the Buddhist no-self doctrine. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Coseru 2021),²⁷ experiential or phenomenal self-reflexive character is not a detachable quale, specific feeling, or isolated content of consciousness. It cannot be grasped as a distinct element within the mental stream. Rather, it is a constitutive dimension of the experiential givenness. It is, as Buddhists such as Kamalaśīla contend, a non-recollective (*asmṛti*) effortless awareness (*amanasikāra*) of phenomena *as experientially given* (*bhūtaṣayākāra*).²⁸

Buddhist philosophers have been just as puzzled about the nature and character of various nonordinary states of consciousness as contemporary philosophers of mind. The importance of reevaluating the significance of these states in light of contemporary advances to the study of borderlines states of consciousness cannot be overstated. The upshot is that there are modes of self-consciousness that are logically and ontologically more primitive than conceptual forms of self-consciousness. Recognizing the presence of such modes can take us a step closer to demystifying (rather than dismissing) the subjective and phenomenal dimension of consciousness.

Notes

- 1 Early Buddhist philosophers, most notably Buddhaghosa (fl. 5th century CE) and Dharmapāla (530–61 CE), it seems, took only marginal interest in the significance of these liminal states. Things take a different turn with the development of the Sarvāstivāda canon. Concerned with accommodating every possible entity or existent, actual or potential, Vaibhāṣika thinkers such as Ghoṣaka (fl. 2nd century CE) and Dharmāśrī (fl. 2nd century CE) give the attainment of cognitive attenuation a more prominent role, specifically one that advances a sophisticated account of mental causation. Lastly, given its specific metaphysics of mind, Yogācāra, as developed by Asaṅga (fl. 4th century CE) and

- Vasubandhu (c. 316–96 CE), comes to categorize cognitive attenuation under various analyses of the function and role of subliminal consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*). See Griffiths (1986, Chapters 1–3), Cox (1995, Chapter 17), and Schmithausen (2007).
- 2 Readers wishing to explore this topic further may consult Dhammajoti (2007), and Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti (2011).
 - 3 See McMahan and Braun (2017) for a critical examination of the so-called ‘McMindfulness’ phenomenon (the – often commercial – appropriation/repurposing of Buddhist mindfulness practice outside its broader cultural context, stripped of its ethical implications) and of the problematic assumptions that inform current scientific research on mindfulness. Thompson (2014) makes a compelling case for taking mindfulness to be a type of enactive, skillful, embodied cognition that engages the whole individual (situated in her social/cultural environment), rather than just a subset of her mental states. See also Vago (this *Handbook*, Chapter 11), for a comprehensive review of the scientific research on mindfulness, its hyperbole and its limitations, and its potential relevance to the philosophy of meditation; see MacKenzie (this *Handbook*, Chapter 15), for research on egological versus nonegological features of consciousness. Cf. Spackman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 8), on the issue of nonconceptual content.
 - 4 Franco (2009) disagrees and argues, *contra* Schmithausen (1973), that the relation between meditation and metaphysics is tenuous. Rather than drawing their insights from meditation, Buddhist philosophers, specifically in the epistemological tradition, use meditation to sharpen their understanding of Buddhist metaphysics.
 - 5 Quoting *Middle Length Discourses* (of the Buddha) 1.296.11–23; cf. Ñāṇamoli (1995).
 - 6 There is an equivocation between heat (*uṣman*) and vitality (*āyus*) in the canonical literature, as the explanation of the cognitive attenuation mentions both: “Heat stands in dependence on vitality” and “Vitality stands in dependence on heat”. The text offers the simile of fire and a lamp as an aid for understanding the relation between heat and vitality, which, given the dependence of fire on fuel, would make vitality the basic element in this relation (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 392).
 - 7 A defense of this view is found, *inter alia*, in Coseru (2012), who adapts the active perception theory to the Buddhist context. For a detailed account of active perception theory, see Noë (2004).
 - 8 Buddhist accounts of the role of attention in cognition provide a hitherto untapped resource for philosophical inquiry; the exception is Ganeri (2017), who argues that, given that attention is explanatorily prior to the self in philosophy of mind, it is to attention that we must turn if we are to understand the nature of consciousness, intentionality, perception, memory, etc. Practices that are indispensable to the path of moral and mental cultivation rest on this capacity to harness attentional abilities. Among these, three stand out: (a) *manaskāra*, which Vasubandhu, e.g., glosses as the ‘bending of the mind’ (*cetasa ābhogaḥ*), stands for the sort of attention that places some aspects of experience in the foreground (Li and Steinkellner 2008, Engle 2009, and Sharf 2014); (b) *smṛti*, ‘recollection’, stands for the capacity to prevent distraction from the task one is engaged in (Gethin 2011), and (c) *samprajanya*, sometimes translated as ‘awareness’ or ‘introspective awareness’, functions as a sort of attentional watchdog, guarding against anything that threatens to break the continuity of foregrounded experiential content (Lutz et al. 2008).
 - 9 Citing *Commentary on the Middle Length Discourses* (of the Buddha) 2.351.14–352.4.
 - 10 Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12) discusses certain meditative practices thought to afford consciousness the ability to perform “transparency-to-opacity” frame-shifting, whereby the practitioner shifts *from* seeing the intentional object *through* the cognitive modality (*transparency*) *to* seeing the cognitive modality itself (*opacity*), which Vervaeke argues affords a greater ability to break frame, thereby increasing perspectival knowing.
 - 11 Regarding any representational content of such states, see a challenge by Legum (this *Handbook*, Chapter 1), who develops an analytic epistemological objection from Nozick to the effect that such states may be cognitively meaningless, comparing Chisholm’s and Plantinga’s approaches to a foundational epistemology of ‘basic’ propositions.
 - 12 See Coseru (2021) for further details; see also Letheby (this *Handbook*, Chapter 13) and Huebner and Hayman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 17), for discussions of the empirical research on DIED experiences and their potential relevance to the metaphysics of the self.
 - 13 See Griffiths (1986, p. 109) for an extensive discussion of this issue.
 - 14 Here, my use of ‘transparent’ entails something like ‘visible to itself’, as opposed to Vervaeke’s sense of ‘seeing through, but not seeing, itself’, which latter sense I also employed in my example of seeing through the window but not seeing the window (see note 10 above).

- 15 Sharf (2014) draws on what he regards as a scientifically informed skepticism about the usefulness of the animate/inanimate categorical distinction, social constructivist conceptions of personal identity, and epiphenomenalism about mental content to argue that cognitive attenuation (*nirodha-samāpatti*) stands not for the attainment of nonconceptuality (*asaṃjñi-samāpatti*), but the attainment of insentience: a state of (literally total) mindlessness. While this interpretation is plausible (*nirodha-samāpatti* is typically translated as ‘attainment of cessation’), it is problematic given metaphysical considerations about the nature of consciousness.
- 16 Machine learning techniques that combine results from neuroimaging based on measurements of brain activation (a) during various functional tasks, and (b) during resting state, have been successfully used to disentangle unresponsive from (minimally) conscious patients (Noirhomme et al. 2017).
- 17 Such a claim is found, *inter alia*, in Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary on Epistemology* 3.212 (Shastri 1968, p. 138).
- 18 Dunne (2006) makes this point when he argues with Dharmakīrti that, although concepts, when taken as particular mental events, can become objects of nonconceptual cognition, their epistemic function is by definition to identify, differentiate, and establish relations, operations that cannot be nonconceptually achieved.
- 19 An articulation of this view is found, *inter alia*, in Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary on Epistemology* (PV 3.212bc), in Shastri 1968, p. 138: “Cognitive awareness is not differentiated, though its appearance is differentiated, therefore [appearing as differentiated constitutes] an obstacle”.
- 20 *Compendium of Epistemology* (PS I.7) in Steinkellner (2005, p. 3); in Hattori (1968, p. 27).
- 21 The key Sanskrit technical term is ‘*svasamvitti*’ or ‘*svasamvedana*’. The secondary literature on this important concept is extensive. Various translations as ‘reflexive awareness’ (Williams 1998, Yao 2005), ‘self-cognition’ (Dreyfus 1997), ‘apperception’ (Arnold 2005), ‘self-awareness’ (MacKenzie 2007, Kellner 2010, 2011), ‘self-reflexive awareness’ (Ganeri 2012), ‘reflexive self-awareness’ (Coseru 2012), and ‘self-illuminating’ consciousness’ (Finnigan 2018), the notion of *svasamvitti* (or *svasamvedana*) is meant to address the problem of how conscious cognitive episodes are made known. Are they implicitly self-revealing or do they become so only as the intentional contents of other cognitions? Is *svasamvitti* a kind of transitive (object-directed) or intransitive (self-presenting) consciousness? Critics such as Candrakīrti and Śāntideva typically interpret it as intransitive consciousness, whereas defenders view it as a type of awareness that both presents its contents and is self-disclosing.
- 22 Torella (2012, p. 482, n. 33) makes a similar point when considering the relation between *bhāvanā* (meditative cultivation) and *yogipratyakṣa*. It seems plausible that yogins owe their special perceptual awareness to meditative cultivation. Does that mean the content of the experience varies? Not necessarily, since what changes is the mode of apprehension, not the content.
- 23 Citing *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I.5cd (in Steinkellner 2005, p. 3).
- 24 Citing *Nyāyabindu* I.11 (in Shastri 1985, p. 1).
- 25 Citing *Pramāṇavarttika* 3.123–125 (in Shastri 1968, p. 127).
- 26 “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.” (Hume 1740/1988, p. 252)
- 27 See also Zahavi and Kriegel (2015).
- 28 *Bhāvanākrama* 3 15.8–9 (in Tucci 1971, p. 15). For an extensive discussion of Kamalaśīla’s rejection of the view (articulated by Mo ho yen) that one can achieve a state of nonconceptual awareness without having first discerned reality nonconceptually, see Adam (2008, pp. 201–8). As Ruegg clarifies, Kamalaśīla takes the notion of *amanasikāra* to mean not the “simple absence of mentation (*manasikarabhāvamatra*)” but, rather, that non-objectifying or non-apprehension which belongs to him who analyses through discriminative knowledge (*prajñaya nirupayato yo ‘nupalambhah’*) (Ruegg 1989, p. 94). I take ‘*amanasikāra*’ to stand for a type of effortless cognitive awareness, rather than ‘absence of mentation’.

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