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Situating the Elusive Self of Advaita Vedānta¹

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I. Introduction: Advaita and the Question of What is Denied When Self is Denied

In this essay, I will explore some ambiguities concerning what it is to affirm or deny the self, through the view of the Hindu school of Advaita Vedānta on the nature of the 'I' and its relationship to the reflexivity of consciousness. In particular, I will seek to situate this elusive self between my understanding of Dan Zahavi's notion of the minimal self (Zahavi 2005; 2009; and this volume) and one reading of the significance of Thomas Metzinger's brief but provocative comparisons of his denial of self with Advaita and Buddhism (Metzinger 2003: 549–50; 566).

As Zahavi (like others in this volume) observes in Section 4 of his essay, the boundaries between self and no-self theories depend on what the self is taken to be. Exposition of Buddhist denials of self in this volume range from Siderits' uncompromising reductionism all the way to Albahari's defence of a unitary and perspectival witness consciousness, which Zahavi points out appears to preserve many of the defining characteristics of theories of self. So it is clear that in the classical Indian traditions, within Buddhism itself, what it means to deny self is a highly disputed matter. So it is with the Hindu school of Advaita. As both Fasching's paper and mine show, the Advaitic assertion of self is not a straightforward matter, for other senses of self are denied by them that look intuitively necessary for a theory of self.

¹ I would like to thank Miri Albahari, Wolfgang Fasching, Jonardon Ganeri and, especially, Mark Siderits for responses to an earlier draft of this paper.

Let me begin to situate my reading of Advaita by first commenting on Albahari's position (this volume; and 2006). Drawing on the early Buddhist texts of the Pali Canon, Albahari argues that when the Buddhists deny 'self', they deny the ontological independence of a bounded consciousness tied to ownership. She proposes that we understand insight as leading to recognition of the constructedness of this sense of self, leaving only what, she maintains, is nirvana-consciousness—a perspectival, unitary, impersonal witness-consciousness. Such consciousness will be consistent with the intellectual conclusion that the subject of consciousness always eludes us, being its own object.

Some might argue that this sounds remarkably close to the witness-consciousness of Advaita explored in phenomenological terms by Fasching in this volume. Of course, that in itself is not a philosophical criticism of Albahari's position: it merely alerts the reader to the complexity of the debate about the borders of self/no-self. Later on, agreeing with Zahavi even while distinguishing the Advaitic position from his, I will make the point that Albahari's distinction between subjectivity and selfhood is one that Advaita rejects.

Although Fasching and I do not always use the same terminology to frame the Advaitic position, we agree on the elusiveness of the Advaitic self: the Advaitins reject both the generally understood Buddhist denial (*contra* Albahari) of the unity of consciousness, as well as the insistence on individuated or bounded inwardness that other Hindu schools require of self (*ātman*). Fasching provides a phenomenological critique of what he takes to be the Buddhist view that consciousness is momentary, by focusing on arguments for a continuous conscious presence which has changing experiences. I look more closely at a point he touches on, namely, the analysis of the use of the first-person in Advaita, and the role that analysis plays simultaneously in the denial of some senses of self and in the affirmation of a more minimal unitary conscious presence. So, in a sense, my paper follows up on Fasching's, looking at the way in which unitary presence is, in some sense, 'self' for Advaitins.

2. The *ātman* as Self: Hindu Debates

The concept in Advaita that is going to be discussed in this essay is what may be called a formal self—the *ātman*. In the West, much later, Kant is the starting point for the discussion about formal selfhood, that is, selfhood that

is not filled in by the specific content of experience (in short, personhood). His distinction between ‘empirical apperception’ (or ‘inner sense’ or ‘inner experience’) and ‘transcendental apperception’ which precedes all experience, sets in motion the tradition of analysis that distinguishes between the specific features of any person’s sense of themselves as such-and-such a person, and the impersonal consciousness of self that is the ground for the possibility of the former (e.g. Kant: B132). In a very general sense, the Hindu thinkers are somewhat akin to Kant. They too hold that what one takes oneself to be (the ‘sense of self’ or literally, “‘I’-ness’, *ahamkāra*), through experiences of psychological states and bodily conditions, is always shifting; Kant talks of ‘empirical consciousness’ that ‘depends on circumstances or empirical conditions’ (Kant: B140). Their concern is with something akin (in its function, rather than any explanatory feature) to Kant’s ‘pure apperception’, namely, the *ātman*’s priority to empirical consciousness. There are, however, major disagreements among the Hindu or brahmanical schools themselves about what that *ātman* is, such that it is metaphysically distinguishable from shifting personhood.

David Velleman has made a distinction that, terminologically, and to a large extent conceptually, parallels mine. He comments that if two thinking substances share thoughts they are one *person*, whereas if there is access to (presumably to the content and perspective of) one another’s first-personal thoughts, they are one and the same *self* (Velleman 1996: 75, n. 40; emphasis Velleman’s). This is part of his larger distinction between what he calls identity and reflexivity, the first holding between persons at different times, the latter between subjects sharing first-personal terms (Velleman 1996: 65).² In any case, it is the perspectival presence, a consciousness of subjective unity, that is the point of disagreement in Indian philosophy. The question for the Indians is whether what is phenomenologically given—the experience, and the sense of a subject that is the ground condition for experience—is best explained by a genuine unity of consciousness, or whether that unity is itself a

² However, I approach the distinction with different concerns. Velleman calls the selfhood that holds between persons across times a metaphysical relation, and that which holds between first-person-sharing subjects a psychological one. To me, it seems as if it is the other way around: What makes for a person, through identification, are psychological ties, together with other factors such as narrative and social relationality, and what makes for subjective selfhood is the metaphysics by which a unity of consciousness holds across time. I am unsure whether this means we are talking of different things, whether this is purely terminological, or whether there is some important difference in approach here.

construct of experience, and if it is agreed that there is unity of consciousness, whether that points to a unified self. Buddhists, of course, generally deny that there is a unified self which generates unity of consciousness; through a wide range of positions, they maintain that that felt unity is constructed. Broadly, Hindu realists, like the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā schools, hold that there is a unified self to which phenomenology points, which is the condition for the construction of the empirical person (although there are different theories about how the nature and existence of that self is affirmed). The Advaita school holds that there is a unity of consciousness, but not that there is a unified self that happens to possess the quality of consciousness.

Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā (as also the schools of Jainism) clearly assert the existence of a plurality of *ātman*s, understood as non-physical simple entities with the quality of consciousness, with each being (human or otherwise, whether a person or not) animated by an *ātman*. In short, while the *ātman* does individuate each person, its identity is purely formal, in that each *ātman* is ontologically distinct but has no further contentful distinctions, which latter are all tied to the specific features of the person. For Nyāya, the *ātman*, while the owner of the consciousness that thinks of *ātman* in the first place, is at the same time an object in the world, one of the categories (*padārtha*) that constitute reality.³ In the rest of the essay, we will focus on Advaita, which also asserts the existence of *ātman*, and therefore falls under those who believe in ‘self’ against the Buddhists, but turns out to have a very different explanation for what that *ātman* is.

Advaita holds that consciousness can be understood in three ways. (One could say metaphorically, that the latter two are ‘allotropes’ of the first—of the same stuff ontologically, but with different structures and functions.) There is *brahman*, which is simply the name for consciousness as the universal and singular basis for all reality, and from which, in some sense, all reality is no different. Then there is *ātman*, which is the general name for

³ In many ways, Nyāya’s robust metaphysical realism about the *ātman* is closer to Thomas Nagel’s idea of an objective self, in which, while it is contingently true that the self has a perspective on the world, it is itself only an element in that very world, so that the perspective it seeks is completely objective (the famous ‘view from nowhere’) (Nagel 1986). Even more pertinently, its position in some ways resembles Richard Swinburne’s ‘simple self’ (1984), although we have to be careful about mapping the details of Swinburne’s dualism onto the Hindu schools.

consciousness understood as the ground of every individuated being. Finally, there is the *jīva*, which, through its egoity (*ahamkāra*) is the empirical consciousness in the locus of every individuated being. The gnoseological project is the cultivation and disciplining of *jīva*-consciousness through analyzing away the inauthentic features of self found in egoity, so that the phenomenology of consciousness is purified to the point when only *ātman* as formal consciousness is left to, and for, itself; at the point of formal presence alone, the non-difference between the hitherto limited consciousness and that of the universal consciousness is realized.

We are not concerned here with either the gnoseological discipline or the cosmic ontology of Advaita. Rather, the focus will be on how consciousness as we know it, that phenomenal undergoing whose presence is the starting-point of investigation into selfhood, is understood in Advaita. In what follows, we will concentrate on the interplay between (i) the concept of *ahamkāra*—the construction of an ‘I’—in the individuated consciousness of the *jīva* and (ii) the concept of *ātman* that is peculiar to Advaita. I want to locate this exploration within the context of the denial and affirmation of self found in Zahavi and Metzinger.

3. Metzinger’s No One and Zahavi’s Core Self

The contemporary research around which I want to build this analysis is a juxtaposition of Thomas Metzinger’s denial of self and Dan Zahavi’s assertion of a core self available in phenomenological consciousness. Let me begin with Zahavi, starting with his interpretation of the phenomenologists (Zahavi 2009). Zahavi reads Husserl and Heidegger as working with a distinction between (i) a self which is not a person as such and (ii) the personal self. Husserl says that the phenomenology of every possible subject of experience has only a peculiar mineness (*Meinheit*), different from the proper individuality of the person whose origin is in social life (Husserl 1989). Again, although this is a notoriously difficult topic, there are elements in Heidegger’s concept of selfhood (*Dasein*) that appear to be getting at a core conception of the self in the phenomenological mineness of consciousness, when he distinguishes this from the everyday *Dasein*, which is an objectual form. For him, selfhood has these different modes, the first addressed by the

question of ‘who’, which speaks of existence itself, and the other by ‘what’, which is that person who is present, or to hand, as the object of any investigation (Heidegger 1962: 62–77).⁴ It would seem here that in both cases, the phenomenological core of being is a self that does not contain the constituents of personal identity, the first-personal nature of awareness being the minimal structure of phenomenal consciousness. In this, all the brahmanical systems, barring Advaita, have a somewhat similar attitude toward the *ātman*, which is picked out by the ‘I’ (*aham*).

Drawing on phenomenology, Zahavi has eloquently made the distinction between a phenomenologically constitutive minimal self which is the perspectival subject, and a more extended sense of self, constituting personhood, given by a richer and more robust psycho-social being (Zahavi. 2005). Zahavi argues for a minimal conception of self, based on the phenomenology of mineness: he derives this conception from his interpretation of the German phenomenologists’ notion of in-each-case-mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*), which he reads as ‘formal individuation’. Again, although this leads to specific aspects of phenomenological interpretation, it has striking parallels with my reading of the nature of *ātman*, especially in the non-Advaitic brahmanical schools, as having only formal identity. For the Advaitins, this applies to the *jīva*, the *ātman* being the impersonal reflexivity of persistent consciousness, as we will see below.

The idea that consciousness is primarily about phenomenality—the what-it-is-likeness that conscious beings undergo—and the idea that that phenomenality contains within it the sense that a self undergoes it, were barely recognized in Anglophone philosophy twenty years ago. But now, even those who take their philosophy to derive from close study of cognitive science, like Thomas Metzinger, agree on these two points. But Metzinger has an interesting claim regarding the phenomenality of self, or the sense within consciousness that such consciousness is that of a self. His scepticism about the self starts with an examination of whether a study of the stable physical world can reveal anything that might count as a self. His claim, which has quickly become well known in the field, is that, ‘nobody ever was or had a self’ (Metzinger 2003: 1).

⁴ There is also the further, very tricky issue of Heidegger’s distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of being the self, which has some resonance with the brahmanical search for a similar-sounding difference.

It seems to me that there are two approaches to take to Metzinger. One concerns his theory of the basis of consciousness (from which the illusion of self is said to derive), and it is broadly physicalist. Another concerns his account of how consciousness (howsoever constituted) generates a sense of self that is somehow illusory. It is the latter in which I am interested. Of course, this means that one can look at his entire book as a physicalist reduction of self. But that these issues can also be read separately can be seen in the fact that Metzinger himself explicitly compares his claims about self with Plato, Śaṅkara, and the Buddhists—none of whom, he will know very well, could possibly be physicalists about consciousness. Surely it is with some deliberation that he makes these comparisons, and that seems sufficient for my purpose of bracketing possible issues about the basis of consciousness (i.e. whether it be physicalist or not), and looking at the way a self is presented in phenomenality. (Despite his own effort at comparison, nothing I say here implies that I read Metzinger as agreeing with the ontological claims of Advaita, or most traditional Buddhist positions for that matter.) My focus, then, is on Metzinger's view that a model of self is generated in and by consciousness, such that there appears to be an owner for phenomenality.

Now, Metzinger cites both the Buddhists and, importantly for my purposes, Śaṅkara (the founder of Advaita Vedānta), as holding a position comparable to his own (Metzinger 2003: 550; 566), so far as the illusion of self is concerned. With regard to the former, he compares his conception of selflessness with the Buddhist conception of 'enlightenment'; with the latter, he finds a common concern to argue that what is identified as self is in some metaphorical sense a 'shadow' of self-consciousness. I take it, then, that he himself is not too concerned with the differences between his scientific concerns and the gnoseological ones of the Indians.

Turning then to some details of Metzinger's position, one line of his argument against belief in a self is that the self-identification with body and the rest by phenomenal awareness—that is to say, the identity that consciousness takes by associating itself with its content—generates an illusion. Insofar as both Śaṅkara and the Buddhists maintain that what consciousness constructs or generates as an individual self, from out of its phenomenal inputs, is an illusion at some level, then Metzinger is right in citing them both. He argues that the phenomenology of consciousness is itself wrong when it appears to yield a self to whom that consciousness belongs. His

complex and ground-breaking book is impossible to summarize but the relevant argument (Metzinger 2003: 547–99) is that consciousness is a system whose function of transparently representing the world includes building into itself a perspectival grasp of that world, and that perspectival quality consists in a model of a phenomenal self whose construction is transparent (i.e. not apparent) to the conscious system. In other words, just so the conscious organism can function for survival, it requires representing the world from a (its) perspective; and the way to do that is to generate a sense that there is someone, a subject from whose perspective the world is experienced, and to whom that experience happens. In that way, all the distinctions and lack of confusion between ‘you’ and ‘me’ that ordinary consciousness possesses are delivered. But there is no real self which is the subject of experience, if by subject is meant a metaphysical entity whose capacity to be conscious explains the perspectival nature of consciousness’ presence to itself. There is only a model of a phenomenal self built into the representational functions of consciousness. It is impossible to both preserve that sense of self and become convinced that intuitively there is no such self. Either ‘I’ continue to function with that illusion necessary for perspectival functioning or—radically—the consciousness ‘here’ reconfigures its entire global model of what it is to be phenomenal and enters a cognitively lucid way of functioning in which there is no self-ascription of experience at all (Metzinger 2003: 626–7).

It is this latter possibility that prompts Metzinger to suggest that there are similarities in his view with Asian notions of enlightenment. In short, Metzinger is not only reducing away the social dimensions of personhood, he is also saying that the I-ness of phenomenal consciousness is just a model and not ‘real’—by which he means not a metaphysical object.

Zahavi, in contrast, reads phenomenal consciousness as that of a self: he affirms ‘the subject(ivity) of experience’ (Zahavi 2005: 146), in effect arguing that subjectivity simply is the presence of a subject in, and of, awareness. The self that Zahavi is interested in asserting as minimal but real is precisely what is provided in phenomenal consciousness (or ‘experience’): a persistent presence in its own occurrence (Zahavi 2005: 128). But this indicates that he may not necessarily be involved in a metaphysical disagreement with Metzinger so much as a conceptual one. If Metzinger starts by granting that the phenomenality of the self is given—that consciousness contains consciousness that it is/appears to be a self’s consciousness—then Metzinger

has granted enough for his, Zahavi's, purposes.⁵ Zahavi is not interested in defending conventional Western theories of a substantial self that Metzinger rejects.

Two main points relevant to my interpretation of Advaita emerge: First, there is a self-model in phenomenal consciousness, which is not a self (Metzinger 2003: 550); under this model, where presence is transparent to consciousness, phenomenality is represented as a relationship between a perspectival subject (the 'self') and its objects. In that sense, Metzinger does bear similarity to Advaitins and Buddhists, in charging that the self built out of the interaction of consciousness and world (howsoever their ontological status is conceived) is illusory, and not a legitimate type of selfhood.⁶ Secondly, however, in stating that, if phenomenal consciousness does not depend on an independent self whose consciousness it is, then there is no self at all, Metzinger is only denying particular conceptions of selfhood, which require 'an "individual" in the sense of philosophical metaphysics' (Metzinger 2003: 563). That would include such theories as those of the Hindu schools of Nyāya or Mīmāṃsā, for whom consciousness is a quality of the *ātman*, and therefore secondary to its existence. For Naiyāyikas or Mīmāṃsakas, if phenomenal consciousness has perspective (i.e. is structured as being from some specific perspective, that of the self) that is only because there is actually a self which possesses that consciousness. For them, the transparency of consciousness to its objects is explicable through there being a subject-self which directly grasps those objects at all only because it possesses the determinative quality of consciousness (Ram-Prasad 2001: chs. 1 and 2).

In arguing that consciousness is not intrinsically that of an individual self, even a minimally phenomenological one, Metzinger does offer a view that has something in common with Advaita and with (most conventional interpretations of) Buddhism. Zahavi might simply decide that that is sufficient to call that consciousness a minimal self, just because that is how

⁵ Zahavi in correspondence.

⁶ Zahavi, by contrast, wants a different account of this sort of self, an extended and richer self which is equally real, but on an account different from the strict phenomenological one. Incidentally, there is much in the classical Indian material on such a view, in which the socially embedded person, regardless of his or her constructivity, is still an ethically relevant and real entity, whose metaphysical status does not alter the significance of virtue and conduct. This is the so-called 'human-ends' (*puṣārtha*)-oriented view concerned with *dharma* or the ordered, virtuous life.

experience phenomenologically represents it. There is then an ambiguity over how the very idea of a ‘self’ (in the *ātmanic* sense) should be understood. This ambiguity over whether what is left as core consciousness is a self or not is precisely what is evident in the Advaitic use of *ātman*.

For the Advaitins, authentic self (*ātman*)—the core, undeniable presence that is the ground of phenomenological content—is not about individuality. The sense of an individual locus of consciousness—consciousness as *jīva*—is not the final stage of analysis. This is because, according to them, *jīva* consciousness functions through the instruments (*kāraṇa*) and objects (*kārya*) of embodiment (*śarīratva*) (Śaṅkara 1917: 254–5). Perception and other cognitive activities that are structured in the subject-object relation are, of course, possible only in consciousness individuated through its psychophysical apparatus of mental operations, senses, etc. But that sense of individuated selfhood is consciousness functioning (*kṛtam*) through ‘adjuncts’ (*upādhi-s*), that is, the intellectual faculty (*buddhi*) of conceptualization, the perceptual organs, etc.; consciousness is not that of an individual self (Śaṅkara 1913: 487). The Advaitin rejects the idea of an individual self which happens to possess the capacity for consciousness. Rather, what the Advaitin calls *ātman* is not the ‘seeing of the seen’—because that would simply imply a subject in relation to its object—but the ‘seer of the seeing’ itself (Śaṅkara 1914: 161–2)—in short, reflexive subjectivity as such. Advaita therefore has a complex and ambiguous view of the perspectival nature of consciousness: on the one hand admitting that that is constitutive of subjectivity, and on the other denying that that implies an individual subject. It is in its analysis of the ‘I’ of consciousness that we perhaps find a radical way of cutting across the apparently rival accounts of Metzinger and Zahavi.

4. Exploring the ‘I’ and its Peculiarities in Advaita

We now turn to looking at the details of the Advaitic analysis of ‘I’ and the way in which this analysis shows how it may be possible to deny egology, even while affirming a unified consciousness that can be termed ‘self’. Philosophical systems committed to a metaphysically robust self routinely relate it to the reflexive pronoun; whatever the precise details of their theory, they tend to see the ‘I’ as somehow naming a self. In the classical Indian

schools, there is a common gnoseological concern to determine features of selfhood that mislead the seeker into continued entanglement with the world of suffering and metaphysical misunderstanding. Carefully delineating the many features of bodily, psychological, ethical, relational, and social existence that make up a sense of selfhood, the philosophers argue that these are not, in fact, truly constitutive of one's being, and that it is only through profoundly transformative realization of this truth that there is liberation from the conditions of suffering. Of course, the Buddhist schools deny there is anything ultimately constitutive of being at all, although they disagree amongst themselves as to how such a misleading constitution of selfhood occurs and how it should be discarded. The brahmanical schools, including the other main Vedānta schools, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita, generally tend to distinguish between these misleading senses of selfhood—which they term egoity (*ahamkāra*, the made-up-'I')—and the authentic self—which is picked out in some way by the reflexive pronoun 'I' (*aham*).

In order to appreciate the strangeness of the Advaitic position, we can compare it to more intuitive accounts given by other Hindu schools. In the school of Mīmāṃsā (or rather, within it, a sub-school called the Bhāṭṭa), for example, Kumārila argues for two things at the same time: the self makes infallibly veridical reflexive reference to itself through 'I'-thoughts which take it as their object, yet, the features to which these 'I'-thoughts relate the self, like bodily qualities and activities, are themselves not part of the self. On the one hand, the very locution 'my self' (*mamātmeti*) indicates that the primary meaning (*mukhyārtha*) of the first-person cannot apply to anything other than the self. On the other, locutions regarding my body indicate a distinction between the self and the body (Kumārila: 125–134). Pārthasārathi Miśra defends this combination of claims. He says that the cognizing subject is the object of the 'I'-thought (*ahampratyaya*). When one apprehends (*parāṃśati*), one apprehends two things: the self as 'I' and something else as 'this'. At the same time, when the apprehension is of the form, 'I am thin' or 'I go', the being thin and the going are distinct from the self. This is grammatically indicated by the use of the genitive case, for what is actually implied is, 'this, my body, is thin', and what is mine (the being thin or the going) is not me. The 'detrimental effect of intimacy' (*samsargadoṣa*) between self and its embodiment creates the illusion that, in the case of qualities pertaining to the embodied self (the person), those qualities are somehow constitutive of the ātmanic self (Pārthasārathi: 121). The Bhāṭṭa

Mīmāṃsakas maintain that awareness requires embodiment: without body, there is no consciousness for the self.⁷

The Naiyāyikas have a somewhat similar view of the matter. The ‘I’ picks out the self. The self (i.e. *ātman*) cannot have experience (*bhoga*) without embodiment (Vātsyāyana: 1.1.22; 35). Vātsyāyana also states that the fundamental erroneous cognition (*mithyājñānam*) consists in taking what is not the self as the self; this is the delusion (*moha*) of egoity. Egoity consists in taking the body (*śarīra*), the senses (the *indriya*-s), the mind (*manas*), feelings (*vedanā*-s) and the intellectual faculty (*buddhi*) to be self (Vātsyāyana: 4.2.1, p. 288). This is not to say that these thinkers reject any association of selfhood with psychological states or the conception of their body as an object in the world. They understand, to repeat the point made at the beginning of the essay, that this extended sense of self is intimately connected with the rich features of the life of a person, that only the direct way of referring to the embodied person is possible in ordinary language. All conduct and experience require understanding oneself to be a person who takes a trajectory through the world. But the gnoseological interest in these features of extended selfhood—emotions, attachments, revulsion, relationships, physical features, bodily activities—lies in analysing their separateness from the irreducible self, the *ātman*, which they believe is picked out by the referential use of the ‘I’, independently of the ascriptions of personhood.

I have given these other views in order to demonstrate that many brahmanical thinkers tend to do three things simultaneously: (i) They assert that what the ‘I’ designates, without ascription of particular states or qualities, is the *ātman*, that is, the authentic self. (ii) They deploy, in contrast, the concept of egoity—‘I’-ness—as a fraudulent (*sopadha*) sense of selfhood (Udayana: 377) which, for all its psychological and social vitality (or, indeed, precisely because of that), needs to be analyzed insightfully in the gnoseological project of attaining liberation. (iii) At the same time, they allow any and every conscious state—those that actually occur in life—invariably to take the form of associating the ‘I’ with qualities (sick, sad, tall). So the condition of life consists in the ascription of a sense of self that is always extended beyond what the self truly is. (That the analytic distinction

⁷ J. L. Mackie makes a similar distinction (although, of course, for very different purposes), saying that there are two different rules for the use of ‘I’: one linking it directly to the human being, and the other, to the subject, whatever it may be (Mackie 1980: 56).

between the transcendental 'I' and all its ascribed qualities is in fact a metaphysical one between true and inauthentic selves is a further argument within that project. But finally, both Bhāṭṭas and Naiyāyikas argue that the 'I', when stripped of all ascriptions, is the self free of all personal qualities.)

The Advaitins, on the other hand, say something much more radical: the 'I' itself is part of egoity, everything about it is made up. The 'I' simply does not pick out *ātman*. They are sensitive to the actual function of the ego in the life of human beings, but given their interpretation of *ātman*, the individuation denoted by the 'I' is precisely what they must reject.

Śaṅkara notes that there can be no account of the epistemic life which does not involve the use of the reflexive pronoun in all its psychological complexity. Without the appropriation (*abhimāna*—a possessive pride) that 'I' and 'mine' deliver, there can be no epistemic subject (*pramāṭṛ*) and the operation of the epistemic instruments (the *pramāṇas*). Vācaspati, in his commentary on Śaṅkara, explains how this extended and gnoseologically misleading sense of self functions through two types of paradigmatic assertions: 'I am this' and 'this is mine'. The first, primary claim of identity between *ātman* and the bodily apparatus individuates the self, and distinguishes it from other loci of such identification. The secondary claim is an appropriation of relationships, in which the individuated being's identity becomes extended socially; 'this is my son' is Vācaspati's example. The self's two-fold (*dvividha*) appropriation sustains the march of the world (*lokayātram*), including the means for the attainment of liberation (Vācaspati:154).

The Advaitins go so far as to say that all uses of the reflexive pronoun only pick out the extended self, the person, and not the authentic, 'innermost *ātman*' (*pratyagātman*). The Mīmāṃsaka might say that the misleading intimacy that leads to erroneous identification is between the 'I' and the qualities attributed through the 'this'. But the Advaitin says this intimacy is in fact between consciousness as such and the 'I' (which are co-present like fire and wood are burner and burnt, in Sureśvara's picturesque analogy). The 'I' too is truly just a 'this' for the seer (Sureśvara: 3.59, 3.61). This suggests that even the barest awareness of individuation—howsoever stripped of specific thoughts or feelings or perceptions—does not designate the *ātman*; it only designates the individuated self represented in consciousness (i.e. *jīva*-consciousness).

In common with the other schools, the Advaitins agree that the 'I' picks out an object idiosyncratically: the user of the 'I' succeeds in referring to that

very user and it alone. They agree with their brahmanical interlocutors that the states the 'I'-usage represents the subject as being are not themselves part of the authentic self. But they part company with the others when it comes to the claim that the bare consciousness of self present in the 'I' is in fact the *ātman*. Here we must be very careful in seeing just what is going on. The Advaitins do not disagree with the others that the 'I'-form picks out something uniquely and idiosyncratically, and that, moreover, there is a plurality of such entities, each with its own locus of awareness. But whereas the others call this the *ātman*, and take it as an element in the ultimate order of metaphysical existence, the Advaitins call it the form of consciousness-as-*jīva*. In other words, they argue that 'I' only designates a constructed self, namely, a representation of consciousness individuated by and through its psychophysical locus. What the Advaitins call *ātman*, however, is not the self of individuated consciousness. For them, *ātman* is simply the consciousness itself that does the taking (we can say, using the Metzingerian term, 'the modeling') of itself as an individual. Consciousness as such is not designated even by the bare 'I'.

If by the use of the word 'self' we mean necessarily an individuated locus of consciousness idiosyncratically designated by the 'I', then the *ātman* of the Advaitins is not a self at all, for they reject mineness as a fundamental feature of reality, arguing that appropriation is a mark of the inauthentic self. At the same time, there is a more nebulous usage of 'self', which adverts to the quintessential nature, the very basis of a being's reality, which is what makes it what it is. Now, our standard view of the fundamental nature of a being is construed in terms of distinguishing it from what it is not. In the other brahmanical systems, the 'I' functions admirably to thus distinguish the *ātman* which uses it idiosyncratically from all others who use it in their own way. So we find it reasonable to think that the *ātman* should be translated as 'self' for them, howsoever different this usage is from the richer notions of personhood found in the larger tradition. But if the whole point of the Advaitic *ātman* is to deny ultimate distinction between individual loci of consciousness and treat it simply as the generic name for reflexive presence, then it does seem strange to use the word 'self' for it.

What then does the 'I' pick out (because, after all, it does function to designate something idiosyncratically)? The 'I' in fact refers to the mind, for the Advaitins. The mind for them is an internal organ or mechanism (*antaḥkāraṇa*), in itself part of the physical functions of the body. The

classical Indians, of course, had no knowledge of the microstructures of the brain, but by taking the mind to be some sort of ‘subtle’ (*sūkṣma*) but physical internal cognitive organ, they treat it very physicalistically, as something that can be described entirely through its content. Consciousness is truly only that aspect of phenomenology which is reflexive, that is, the constant accompaniment of being present, which renders an event something that the subject undergoes. But what consciousness takes to be happening to its (constructed) subject is in fact a process represented in the content of the mental processes with which it is associated. The analytic separation of awareness from, say, my feeling of sadness and its ascription, is phenomenologically occluded: I feel sad and recognize it thus; the consciousness here is not aware that the sadness is only associated with a sense of mineness which is itself constructed. There are three elements for the Advaitin here: the ‘I’; the sadness as a state of the subject, as detected by the internal organ; and the awareness that this is so ascribed to the superimposed ‘I’. The Advaitins urge us to recognize that the occlusion is because of egoity. Egoity is that function of the mind whereby the (non-aware) mind’s contents are associated with the (ātmanic) awareness, in that awareness is not aware that it has constructed a first-person ascription: in other words, the constructed self is transparent to consciousness.

The ‘I’, then, lies in the domain of objective usage, albeit in the specially restricted indexical sense that it can be used truthfully only by each user him/herself, where this user-specificity is determined by the location of consciousness within a body. In fact, in Sureśvara’s formulation (Sureśvara: 3.60), first-personal ascriptivity is a specific mental function: it is the operation of the internal organ (*antaḥkaraṇa*) as delimited (*avacchinna*) by the ‘I’-state (*ahaṃvṛtti*). As he puts it, ‘putting on the cloak of the “I” (*ahaṃkañcukaṃ paridhāya*), the self associates itself with things external to it, whether they be helpful or harmful’ (Sureśvara: 3.60). Mental functions occur in two ways: first, they operate in the ‘revealer-revealed’ (*avabhāsaka-avabhāsyā*) relationship with the self, in which consciousness reveals (or takes itself to relate to) the ‘I’-function of the mind; this is why consciousness has the illusion that it is familiar with an object called ‘itself’. The mind becomes the idiosyncratically possessed object of consciousness, through the unique use of the ‘I’ in ascribing its contents to that consciousness. Second, mental functions operate in a helped-helper (*upakārya-upakāraka*) relationship with objects, in that the objects help to structure ‘I’-thoughts (‘I want this pen’; ‘I

do not want that poison’). It thereby allows consciousness to take itself to relate meaningfully with the world, even if erroneously.⁸

The Advaitins themselves obey the normal grammatical uses of the first-person pronoun, although they do mark out their special usage of the ‘I’ as mind-wrought object too. For the former, they use the conventional cases (*vibhaktyaḥ*) for the first person, for example the genitive is ‘mine’ (*mama*). But when signifying the use of the ‘I’ as a metaphysically important object—that which is associated with, but is not the self (*ātman*) as such—they are capable of treating it as a special sort of proper name, so that, with the genitive case, they use the locution ‘I’s’ (*ahamasya*) like one would use ‘Rāma’s’ (*rāmasya*).⁹ Sureśvara also says that the self (*ātman*) is the secondary meaning (*lakṣyārtha*) of ‘I’ by virtue of its association with the mind. The ‘I’ is extremely helpful for self-realization (*ātmadṛṣṭya*), and the self should therefore be seen to be implied by the use of the ‘I’ (Sureśvara: 2.55).

5. The Elusive Advaitic Self

What this account shows is a position that interestingly combines features of Metzinger and Zahavi. Regarding the former, for the Advaitin too there is no *one* indeed. For Metzinger, there is consciousness here that generates a sense of ‘I’, as that which picks out an individual self; phenomenal self-consciousness represents mineness, a sense of ownership whose construction is not spotted by the consciousness which constructs it, because its modeling is transparent (Metzinger 2003: 562). For the Advaitin, consciousness of individuality is an illusion: *ātman* is not one particular entity but the consciousness which mistakenly generates individuality.¹⁰

Regarding Zahavi, the Advaitin shares the notion of core consciousness with him. Zahavi’s argument is that phenomenological investigation simply presents the ‘subjectivity of experience’, the denial of which (by Metzinger)

⁸ *Ibid.*; Balasubramanian’s editorial commentary here is extremely helpful.

⁹ I must thank Nirmalya Guha for his insightful understanding of this usage in Advaita.

¹⁰ Of course, this consciousness is also transcendental for the Advaitin, for in the manner of Kant, it is the prerequisite, the ground, for the phenomena of individual consciousness. Incidentally, Metzinger is dismissive of Kant, and resolutely avoids the terminology of transcendental metaphysics, but one could ask whether his ‘system’, which models the phenomenal self, is not in some sense a transcendental requirement. The possible response that reductive physicalisms do not require transcendental arguments requires a discussion that will take us beyond the remit of this essay.

seems ‘unnecessarily restrictive’ (Zahavi 2005: 128). He is aware that his minimal self is ‘overly inclusive’ and the comparison with Advaita’s insistence on its notion of consciousness being also one of self certainly seems very lax too. In general, his careful distinction between core and extended self also fits my interpretation of Advaita comfortably. In his essay in this volume, he reiterates his view that the ‘givenness’ of the unity of consciousness is also a ‘mineness’. But, unlike Zahavi, the Advaitins will resist seeing this reflexivity as a perfectly natural appropriative and ascriptive ‘mine’. For them, any mineness is empty unless it is about some specific quality or representation—but then, that is not the core consciousness that provides the very possibility of phenomenology but is itself not found in phenomenological content. Earlier Advaitins did not recognize immediately that the combination of denying the ‘I’ and affirming the presence of unified consciousness requires more understanding of how consciousness relates to perspectival phenomenology. Later Advaitins concentrated on this via the theory of ‘auto-luminosity’ (*svataḥ-prakāśa vāda*). We will now turn briefly to this theory, in order to see how they seek to approach perspectival presence without first-personal usage.

6. The Reflexivity of Consciousness

Analytic philosophers have sometimes thought that the phenomenal presence of consciousness to itself (what the phenomenologists had talked about as the essential mark of the self) is actually about the self-consciousness of any particular conscious state. The Indian debate that can address the mix-up of the phenomenology of mineness and the analytic self-consciousness of consciousness is actually the one about whether, whatever the way in which self-consciousness is secured, the consciousness that possess that feature is a persistent entity or not. The question of whether a stream of self-conscious states—that is, whether phenomenal continuity—implies a self, is now being tackled in the philosophy literature (Dainton 2005: 1–25). An extended and elaborate debate on this, of course, is central to the Buddhist–Hindu debates of classical India. The outline of a specific Advaitic critique of the Buddhist position therefore also shows the potential of that hoary debate to

contribute to current inquiry into the relationship between individual moments of self-consciousness and the possibility of a conscious self.

The classical Indians do not conflate these two debates. They have a separate debate on the constitutive nature, the presence as it were, of consciousness. This takes the form of auto- and hetero-luminosity (*svataḥ* and *parataḥ prakāśa*) theories, on how consciousness ‘illuminates’, that is, in what phenomenality consists. This debate is initiated with the terminologically different, but conceptually similar, *svasaṃvedana* doctrine of the Buddhist Dignāga. In effect, it looks at the self-consciousness of consciousness, but clarifies that it is not about the question of the self (even if intimately connected to it).

In general, earlier Advaitins simply assert the self-evident nature of (the phenomenality of) consciousness to consist in its reflexive access to itself: the self’s intrinsic nature is of being ever-present (*sarvadā vartamānasvabhāvavāt*) (Śaṅkara 1917: 2.3.7; 585). (Fasching too, in this volume, deals with the notion of presence in Advaita.) In short, the self has nothing to mediate its access to itself. By contrast, knowledge of things is mediated by transactions involving epistemic instruments and their objects (*pramāṇaprameyavyavahāra*). To say that something is known is for there to be (i) the subject of knowledge (*pramātā*), (ii) its object and (iii) the mediation of epistemic instruments such as perception and its organs. But the self has no such distinction between itself and its awareness of itself. So the self is not an object of knowledge (Sureśvara: 2.98; *ātmano aprameyatvam*). By ‘object’, the Advaitins mean precisely that—things in the world that are accessible to epistemic instruments. The Naiyāyikas would hold that that exhausts all the elements of any ontology. But the Advaitins cannot mean quite that: indeed, quite the opposite, because in their ontology, there ultimately and irreducibly exists only universal consciousness—precisely that which is not an object! So they must be distinguishing between that entity alone which is real—consciousness—and objects of knowledge, which have some sort of sub-real, provisional, transactional existence.¹¹ In that sense, they are committed to cognitive closure, a denial that epistemic states can ever take the subjectivity of the epistemic agent—that is, consciousness as such—as their content.

¹¹ On the Advaitic position on the status of the world of objects through a variety of concepts, see Ram-Prasad 2002.

As it became clear that others—especially the Naiyāyikas and the different sub-schools of the Mīmāṃsakas—interpreted the nature of the self and its consciousness very differently, later Advaitins sought to define more precisely their understanding of the presence of consciousness to itself as its ‘autoluminosity’.¹² The aim of these later works¹³ is to clarify that the distinctive and constitutive feature of consciousness is its transparency to itself: all content is presented as if to the perspective of a particular subject, while in reality, consciousness is the ‘pure’ presence of itself to its own occurrence, which does not in fact enter into the content of specific mental states. Following the earlier Advaitic position, the most important feature of the definition of the autoluminosity of consciousness is that it is unknowable (*avedyatva*). This is not the self-defeating claim that nothing can be known about consciousness, since that very fact could be known about it. Madhusūdana points out that what is known is the theoretical claim about the nature of consciousness as unknowable in the strict sense in which knowable things are objects of epistemic procedures like perception and inference, but consciousness itself is that which is aware (i.e. that which is only ever the subject) of the claims regarding its nature and never the actual object.

The Advaitins therefore deny many different sorts of self, and what they affirm is hardly self in any recognizable way, apart from the reflexivity of consciousness being, in some very abstract sense, the essence of consciousness, the ‘self’ of consciousness. In effect, they assert a stable subjectivity, or a unity of consciousness through all the specific states of individuated phenomenality, but not an individual subject of consciousness. What we see here is that, unlike Zahavi (in this volume, section 4, response 2), the Advaitins split immanent reflexivity from ‘mineness’. At the same time, like him, they do not think selfhood can be distinguished from subjectivity. They therefore insist that they are committed to self and reject no-self views.

¹² A more detailed and systematic taxonomy of position, looking at Yogācāra-Madhyamaka (the Yogācārin being the first to comment on the constitutive nature of consciousness), Bhāṭṭa and Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya and Advaita is given in chapter 2 of Ram-Prasad 2007.

¹³ The locus classicus is Citsukha’s *Tattvapradīpikā* (Citsukha: 1–5) with Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s clarifications on the same topic in the *Advaitasiddhi* (Madhusūdana Sarasvatī: 767–9).

7. Conclusion

Metzinger's argument that the constructedness of the individual self is transparent to consciousness appears to apply equally to both Advaita and most schools of Buddhism. If we set aside the historical development of a Buddhist commitment to the view that all elements of reality, consciousness included (or consciousness alone if it constructs the rest of reality), are momentary, then Metzinger might be made to fit some reinterpretations of both Advaita and Buddhism. After all, in this volume, Albahari sets aside the reality of momentariness within a Buddhist denial of self. However, if more conventional interpretations of Buddhism preserve the doctrine of momentariness, then a Metzingerian account that does not appear to require any denial of a unified system of consciousness, nor ask explicitly for consciousness to be a sequence of momentary states, appears more easily to allow of a cross-cultural comparison with Advaita than with Buddhism. This is because the heart of the Advaitic critique of Buddhism is a two-fold argument: one in support of the unity of consciousness, and the other against the doctrine of momentariness (Śaṅkara 1917: 2.2.18–25). (Fasching has more to say about both these Advaitic arguments, albeit from another text attributed to Śaṅkara.) But in the end, the interesting point about Metzinger is that he seems to offer possibilities for cross-cultural articulations (both Advaitic and Buddhist) of how our most robust and intuitive sense of self might be an illusion, intrinsic though it may be to how consciousness functions in relation to the world.

Zahavi certainly yields riches for the cross-cultural philosophy of self, his concept of the minimal self being very amenable to being read through Advaitic lenses. The slight differences in emphasis between my paper and Fasching's—especially my argument that the Advaitic position is somewhat more radical than Zahavi when it comes to the first-person—drives home the point that there is still much to be done with such genuine cross-cultural philosophical engagement.

Advaitins, then, within the specific debate about the nature and existence of the formal subject-self (*ātman*) of phenomenal consciousness, while seeming to side against the Buddhists in affirming the existence of *ātman*, mean something very different about it than the objective self with the quality of consciousness espoused by Nyāya or Mīmāṃsā. Their insistence

that the irreducible essence of being is subjectivity, rather than an objective self with the quality of being conscious, seems somewhat akin to some versions of Buddhist denial of *ātman*. Advaitins also take that subjectivity to be unified, not consisting of a process of momentary events, while yet denying that the use of the ‘I’ accurately picks out such a unified consciousness. The *ātmanic* self of Advaita is indeed an elusive one. That was its gnoseological attraction to the tradition and that is its philosophical interest today.

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