

Selves: subpersonal, immersed, and participating

A Review Essay of Jonardon Ganeri, *The self: naturalism, consciousness, and the first-person stance*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 374 pages ISBN 978-0-19—965236-5

Christian Coseru

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This book marks the beginning of a new phase in the philosophical investigation of classical and contemporary accounts of the self: canonical boundaries have been crossed and doctrinal justification abandoned in favor of a cosmopolitan ideal of syncretic, theoretically perspicuous, and historically informed systematic reflection. That such reflection bears on so central a concept as the self is only fitting given its implications for a broad range of questions concerning agency, the mind-body problem, and self-knowledge that are now pursued across a number of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology and neuroscience. But Ganeri is not simply interested in bringing the wealth of Indian speculations on the self to bear on contemporary discussions, in the hope of supplying a much-needed corrective lens, fill in some important lacunae, or bring another voice to the table. Rather, the goal is to think *with* these classical Indian thinkers (of which, no less than 21 are debated at length) and *beyond* prevailing Western views in forging a new and in many respects original conception of the self.

In a work of such breadth and complexity, the question naturally arises: what sort of approach is best suited to integrate the range of perspectives at hand into one unified account? Ganeri clarifies his methodological stance from the outset: following a distinction introduced by Strawson (1966) between the ‘hard’ naturalism of scientific explanation and the ‘liberal’ naturalism embedded in ‘our nature’ as human beings, Ganeri opts for a version of the latter. The result is a framework of analysis that allows for the sui generis naturalistic thought of first-millennium India to be presented in an uncompromising light, while making space for a conception of ‘mindedness’ free of any Cartesian assumptions about the tension between mental and natural. Along the way he succeeds in constructing a rich analytic taxonomy that is able to supplant, and in many ways correct, prevailing models, chiefly those of Cartesianism, Physicalism, and Reductionism (whether of the Humean or the Buddhist variety). Two central concepts, that of ‘base’ (*āśraya*) and of ‘place’ (*ādhāra*) serve as heuristically useful

C. Coseru (✉)

Department of Philosophy, College of Charleston, 66 George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA
e-mail: coseruc@cofc.edu

devices for conceptualizing a key distinction Ganeri employs in articulating his ownership view of the self: the distinction between the question of whose mental state it is and the question of what grounds it metaphysically. Insofar as they capture the sense of ownership and individuation, these concepts parallel another important distinction Ganeri adopts from P. F. Strawson: that between ‘a kind of causal dependence’ (necessary for explaining the constitutive elements of agency) and a ‘non-transferable kind of possession’ (as an ineliminable aspect of the first-person stance) (39).

Grouped under the ownership view, one finds, for instance, the constitution view (body and self are co-constitutively related), the natural self view (associated with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika), and the minimal ownership view (that the Cārvāka, the ancient Indian naturalists, are said to share with the likes of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Henry). Other variants include the pure consciousness view of Advaita Vedānta, which retains a notion of ownership while denying there is a place for it. On the other hand, taking individuation or ‘place’ as the defining criterion, one comes across trope and property theoretical accounts of the self such as one finds in Abhidharma Buddhism. As Ganeri keenly observes, some streams of thought within Buddhism, chiefly those associated with Madhyamaka, deny not only the self, but also the notion that there could even be a place for it. Most others adopt a version of the base view, as is the case with Sautrāntika and Yogācāra (the latter takes this base to exhibit something like reflexivity or reflexive self-awareness). That Buddhism should provide such a fertile ground for conceptions of personal identity is ironic, given its singularly unique stance as champion of the no-self view.

Philosophical accounts of the self, which span the whole arc of the history of philosophy, have tended to conceive of the self either in metaphysical terms (the self as an immaterial substance) or in naturalistic terms (the self as a process). The challenge for systematic cross-cultural accounts of the self such as Ganeri advances is the integration of ontological and experiential accounts of the self. What is the relation, for instance, between self and self-consciousness? Answering the question of what a self is, and how it emerges, demand that one distinguish between different aspects of the self. But it also requires that metaphysical questions not override phenomenological concerns about how best to describe what it is like to be a self or to have a sense of agency. Questions about the idea of emergence and the condition for supervenience aside, it is hard to make the case that selves are mereologically complex objects that have properties with causal powers not entirely derivable from the object’s structure and configuration. Furthermore, appealing to non-linear dynamic system theory, as Ganeri does, in order to make a case for going beyond ‘weak’ emergence to non-supervenient emergence might give the impression that it is the ‘basis’, rather than the ‘place’ view, that supplies all (or at least the better) criteria needed for both ownership and individuation conceptions of self. But such a proposal effectively shortcuts descriptive accounts that see selves as defined by their proprietary phenomenology. Even though the Indian physicalists, the Cārvāka, liken the achievement of self-consciousness with the intoxicating power of fermented spirits, consciousness cannot be simply a product of the type of material organization typical of biological organisms, for such a view makes no allowance for its properly phenomenological features (purposiveness, subjectivity, intentionality, etc.) to play any constitutive role in experience.

Unsurprisingly, Ganeri finds in Nyāya's analysis of bodily supervenient mental states a more robust conception of naturalism, specifically one that is compatible with classical accounts of supervenience of the mental on the physical as have been proposed, for instance, by Kim (1988). Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika thinkers, it turns out, operate with a version of the ownership view that welcomes the idea that there are distinct but dependent domains of individuals. Indeed, built into the very definition of the self is a conception of metaphysical relationships between the body (together with the senses, their objects, and consciousness) and its constituent material elements. The supervenience-based relation between these elements ensures that one does not end up positing selves, as one would do on a many-domains picture, without telling some story about their emergence. Ganeri does an admirable job retelling the story of this emergentist view, and is sensitive both to various objections the theory faces and its applicability in the Indian philosophical context. Not only is there no room for the kind of disembodied existence Nyāya advocates, given that a conscious self is an embodied self; the conception of the eternity of the self is in effect incompatible with a naturalistically respectable theory of the self. Dependence on the physical body may be necessary for mental states to be owned (on the ownership view), and mere occurrence of such states may be insufficient for the adoption of a first-person stance. But these provisions pose no obstacle for the view that Ganeri sets out to defend, namely that of a subpersonal, immersed, and participating self.

On this view, ownership is not a first-order sense of experience (the sense that body and mental states are first-personally owned), but a fact about certain aspects of experience. This deflationary account of ownership, which distinguishes between perceptual states as properties of bodily states and judgments about them, however, denies that ownership has any intrinsic properties beyond what judgments about it (that is, about ownership itself) allows. By contrast, on an inflationary view, ownership would depend on how phenomenologically salient ownership is: that is, on the integration of various factors (sensory, proprioceptive, kinesthetic, etc.) into something like a phenomenal sense of self as first-personally given. Ganeri's deflationary account of ownership may ultimately be grounded in this fundamental Nyāya insight: that whereas paradigmatic sensations such as pains may 'occur at a place' (*pradeśav ttivād*) in the body, and thus represent only a part of it, beliefs and desires are properties of the whole (embodied) person. What does this explanatory gap mean for the 'liberal' naturalism he seeks to advance on behalf of Nyāya? It means there is a real opportunity here to advance a reformed Nyāya account, where mental properties are no longer autonomous, but rather continuous with other properties of the body (incidentally, Ganeri finds support for precisely such a view, that also aligns with P. F. Strawson's concept of a person, in the work of a modern Nyāya paṇḍit, Shukla (1984)). As continuous with the body, mental properties have thus spatial location, but in a phenomenological rather than Cartesian sense: they are located by virtue of their distribution within a domain of phenomenal content.

It is a remarkable strength of the book that the challenges this ownership view of the self faces are meticulously and persuasively addressed. Indeed, by engaging the mind-body problem, the nature of subjectivity, and problem of self-knowledge in the two central parts of the book (II and III), Ganeri takes these challenges very seriously. On the one hand, there are current views that take the self to be defined by a sense of embodied agency (as put forward, among others, by Bermudez (1998, 2011), Cassam

(1997, 2011), and Legrand (2007, 2011)), as well as thicker views of the self as constitutive of our capacity to entertain self-narratives or manifest social agency. On the other hand, there are the influential Buddhist theories of mind with their sophisticated nonegological accounts of experience. Ganeri shores up his defense of the ownership self-model most acutely in his querying of the latter's trope-theoretical model of the basic elements of existence and/or experience (*dharma*). Not only is this unpacking of the Buddhist no-self view truly exceptional in its conceptual and theoretical inventiveness, it also showcases in unprecedented detail the richness and real philosophical depth of the Indian materials and debates.

Undoubtedly, the primary target here is an audience of Western-trained philosophers looking to broaden the scope of their inquiry into the self; however, insofar as the book also addresses an audience of scholars of classical Indian and Buddhist philosophy, some of its conceptual innovations may not curry as much favor. Specifically, some may take issue with the somewhat idiosyncratic rendering of the basic elements of existence and/or experience as 'registering' (for *rūpa* or body), 'appraising' (for *vedanā* or feeling), 'stereotyping' (for *sa jñā* or perception), 'reading' (for *sa skāra* or disposition), and 'attending' (for *viññāna* or consciousness). Ganeri usefully clarifies that these basic constitutive elements (*dharma*) are neither property particulars in the phenomenal sense (the redness of a red apple), nor instantiated particulars as bearers of such qualities (a given red apple) in an ontological sense. But calling them 'tropes' raises another issue: as *abstract* yet not *universal*, and *particular* yet not *concrete*, tropes work as the sort of thing that can effect individuation in a number of disputed ways: they can effect object individuation or spatiotemporal individuation, or again serve as building blocks on an individuation scale from the concrete particular to the abstract universal (cf. Maurin 2013). It is a matter of debate whether blue qualia or the epistemic disposition of concern fits this trope theoretical approach, specifically when one considers that they are disclosed in an intentional setting of objects and meaning: for the Buddhist, the phenomenal quality of blueness is not a subpersonal psychological primitive but a minimally, though nonconceptually, self-revealing intentional experience. To say that *dharmas* (e.g., feelings, dispositions) occur jointly (*sahabhū*) as feature placements of experience is not necessarily to say that they supervene on either the physical or the mental. For even as Buddhist Abhidharma reductionism has a story about primitive atom-like 'qualitons' of experience, it also has a story about the irreducibility of discerning awareness. The question is whether such repository of experience is sufficient to advance a further thesis about the self-presentational character of intentional mental states.

It is indeed reflexivism, the thesis that consciousness consists in conscious mental states being implicitly self-aware, that poses the greatest challenge to a naturalistic conception of the self modeled on the Nyāya account (where the relation between the self and experience is an external relation of ownership). Buddhist philosophers who follow a line of thought initiated by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti put precisely such a thesis forward. Conscious experience, these Buddhists argue, cannot have a basis outside experience itself (that is, in something non-sentient). Consequently, insofar as such experience is perspectively given, it has both phenomenal salience and epistemic valence. That is, reflexivity provides a principle by which the intentional or objective aspect of cognitive awareness and its subjective or perspectival stance emerge co-constitutively and simultaneously. Ganeri questions whether reflexively conscious

episodes provide sufficient ground for thoughts like ‘I am in pain,’ for such self-ascriptions demand that there be independent criteria for individuating streams of subjectivity. Lacking such independent criteria, the reflexivist is confronted with two sets of problems: first, an attenuated account of subjectivity leaves questions of the sort ‘Which one is me?’ unanswered; second, internalist accounts of the determination of mental content face the problem of other minds.

Of course, the Buddhist does not deny that such questions are warranted, assuming they do not lead to postulating a basis for experience distinct from experience itself. Nor is the covariance thesis (which postulates that mental streams are differentiated by virtue of being covariant with intentional behavior) threatened by pathological conditions like thought-insertion, because even mis-ascriptions are unintelligible without assuming that thought is transparent with regard to its occurrent for-me-ness: whether or not one adopts an ownership account, the first-personal givenness of experience is unmistakable. Indeed, following Dignāga’s memory argument, mental states do not just arise in a mental stream: rather, they arise as having a distinctive intentional content and phenomenal character. I don’t just remember *the content* of an experience; I remember it *as experienced*. With Dharmakīrti, reflexivism becomes a statement about the self-presentational character of mental states: there is no generic seeing of a blue patch. Rather, there is experiential or reflexive awareness of an occurrent blue-patch. To postulate a basis for reflexivity outside the structure of experience is to mistakenly assume that experience is an emergent property of something that is not itself experiential, but that has the functional organization to support such experiential self-ascriptions. By rejecting the Buddhist’s error argument about self-ascriptions, and by showcasing the difficulty of inferential accounts of other minds, Ganeri pleads in favor of taking facts about the ownership of experience to go beyond what is merely phenomenally available, a plea that is in keeping with the liberal naturalism that informs his metaphysical commitments.

In the end, the picture that Ganeri presents is that of a supervenient but irreducible self riding on various subpersonal processes and mechanisms (of comparison, information retrieval, and self-monitoring) that he variously characterizes as the ‘underself’. This underself is precisely the living body as a place from which mental states (owned rather than merely occurrent) emerge, and upon which they supervene. One question that arises here is whether the binding problem can be adequately addressed outside a framework of multiple-domain supervenience. Critics of the bundle theory account of personal identity (e.g., Clark 2000) think it cannot, for the image of an aggregate of qualities endowed with the capacity of self-reference presupposes an organization principle that merely occurrent series of mental states cannot provide. Against those Buddhists who restrict each sensory domain of awareness to its specific object, Nyāya argues for a conception of the self as a unifying principle of experience. Ganeri’s meticulous analysis of this important point of criticism makes it obvious that mere cross-modal sensory integration can no more provide a sense of unity than judgments of identity can effect binding. Ever-present worries that reductionism about persons is threatened (e.g. by the Kantian argument that self-consciousness acts as an enabling condition for the conception of an extended spatio-temporal world of individual selves) might well be unfounded. And one may find the argument that a peculiar feature of the concept of self is its isomorphism (e.g., how one “conceives of oneself as being is also the way one is” (300)) quite ingenious. But why such a view should entail

that the self is the necessary agent of experience (the thinker of thoughts) is far from clear. Tellingly, Ganeri singles out ownership-based models of the self that target pathologies like thought insertion as peculiarly analogous to the Buddhist view that ownership (and thus selfhood) is deceptive. Yet he grants that on some phenomenal analyses of the structure of reflexive awareness, an immersed sense of ownership need not have an agent-centric character (and some Buddhists, indeed, put forward precisely such a view).

Ambitious in scope, methodologically sophisticated, and analytically expedient in light of the plurality of the views explored, *The Self* is undoubtedly a landmark philosophical work. Analytic philosophers of mind looking for novel ways to conceptualize problems at the heart of their enterprise will find here a treasure trove of original material ripe for further exploration. Likewise, phenomenologists seeking to cast their understanding of the nature of subjectivity and selfhood in new light will be rewarded with a wealth of unique perspectives. Last, but not least, scholars of Indian and Buddhist philosophy now have before them a perfect example of how one may think *with*, rather than simply *about*, classical philosophical ideas and figures.

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