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TAKING THE INTENTIONALITY OF PERCEPTION SERIOUSLY: WHY PHENOMENOLOGY IS INESCAPABLE



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Just as newcomers to philosophy of mind often find it hard to concede that pain is a mental state, so, too, newcomers to phenomenology tend to resist the notion that intentionality, as Brentano puts it, is the mark of the mental.¹ In the naive view, pain is located in the body and defined by its qualitative aspect, though one may refer to anxiety or distress as states of mental pain. As one attends to the experience of pain, however, one learns to recognize that pain is an event in consciousness, and that its qualitative aspect is complemented by an awareness of what pain discloses: a minimally cognitive state of bodily damage or mental distress. A similar perspective on the mental basis of sensory experience is also at work in the Buddhist Abhidharma. Here, too, we come across systematic efforts to identify sensations, volitions, desire, and so on, as mental states.

In his now classic compendium of Abhidharma philosophy, the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu draws an interesting analogy meant to illustrate the relation between mind and mental constituents: just as it may be difficult to discriminate between the flavors of different plants, which we know by means of one sense only, taste, so, too, it may be difficult to discriminate between sensation, volition, desire, and so on in a single instance of cognitive awareness, despite the fact that their constitutive elements are always present.² Do I *sense* a slight drop in temperature or am I *wishing* the room were warmer? Do I *judge* that my talk might be too long or am I simply *hoping* to finish on time? Indeed, it takes a well-developed capacity for reflection to discriminate between a mental event and its constitutive elements. We may ordinarily talk about sensation as being a somatic event, but, as Vasubandhu reminds us, all sensation (just like all judgment and desire) is in the mind.³

It is in large measure following Vasubandhu that Dignāga advances the notion that reflexive awareness (*svasamvedana*) is constitutive of perception. In doing so Dignāga simply extends his commitment to the reflexivity thesis, without which, he claims, we are unable to account adequately for the phenomenal character of conscious experience. By singling out reflexive awareness as a constitutive aspect of perception, Dignāga seeks to account for the specific mode of presentation of all mental states insofar as they arise laying bare the intentional structure of consciousness. Indeed, by stating that each cognitive event arises in the form of an intentional relation between apprehending subject and apprehended object, Dignāga in effect posits the aspectual nature of intentional reference.

The Structure, Character, and Content of Experience

The question I want to address here is the following: in conceiving of reflexive awareness as constitutive of perception, do Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their successors share a common ground with phenomenologists in the tradition of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, who contend that perception is best understood as bearing intentional content?

Let me begin by acknowledging that the claim advanced here, namely that (for the Buddhist epistemologists) perception is intentionally constituted, is controversial. Georges Dreyfus, for instance, has recently argued that for Dharmakīrti bare sensations such as aches and pains are not intentional: perceptions “do not identify [*sic!*] their objects” because they are non-conceptual (and it takes conception to grasp an object as such, that is, as the bearer of specific characteristics and/or identity relations).⁴ Taking a different line of argumentation, Dan Arnold thinks the self-intimating aspect of perceptual experience, as defined by Dignāga, cannot explain the subject-object relation or how the subjective aspect can be phenomenologically about something, in this case about the objective aspect.⁵ Finally, for Birgit Kellner the self-aware aspect of perception does not reflect the intentional structure of mental states but simply provides ‘access’ to the mental domain.⁶

For my own part I am not at all convinced that Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers can be unambiguously interpreted as claiming that perception lacks intentionality. Apart from the fact that such a position denies that perceptual experiences are inherently indexical, which is incontrovertibly the hallmark of the Buddhist epistemological project, it also goes against what I take to be certain salient features of first-person phenomenology. In the Buddhist epistemological context, as shall become clear below, the account of intentionality is articulated mainly in terms of the structure of perceptual experience, which does not reveal an object *simpliciter* but rather the object as perceived under a specific aspect that also discloses that perceiver’s intentional stance. Similarly, in a phenomenological account of intentionality, to perceive an object (or to have a perceptual experience) is to apprehend an intentional relation: the question is not whether the object intended in perception (that is, the one the perception is *of*) is a real object but whether perception is characterized by a certain orientation or directedness toward its content (regardless of whether this content is veridical or not). Indeed, the central feature of intentionality is that it reveals the co-constitutive nature of *perception* and the *perceived*. Perception, in this case visual awareness, not only is characterized by a relation to elements within one’s surroundings, but also discloses one’s location and intentional stance within these surroundings: I see the smoke on the hill *from afar*.

Simply put, one cannot first identify *perceiving* subject and object *as perceived*, and subsequently establish a relation between the two, for the relation only make sense in reference to each other. As a distinctive feature of consciousness, intentionality thus discloses the world as a *domain of experience* rather than establishes a relationship between mind and a discrete, ‘external’ world. This world as experienced is what Husserl called the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*), and what the Buddhist canonical

literature refers to as the “phenomenal world of experience” (*lokasaṃjñā*). The Buddhist view of this constantly changing world of phenomenal experience is well articulated in the canonical literature:

In the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world of the Noble One’s Discipline. And what . . . is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world? The eye is in that world by which one is a perceiver of the world. The ear . . . The nose . . . The tongue . . . The body . . . The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world.⁷

As this passage seems to suggest, in the transient world of sensory awareness entities are presented as aggregated phenomena of experience. But these entities are not simply the phenomenal counterparts of corresponding physical objects, for what lies outside the sphere of perception is always already constituted by the dynamic structures of our cognitive architecture. I perceive color because I am sensitive to light, but my sensitivity is also a disposition to affect light. The world *as perceived* is brought into existence through cognitive activity and goes out of existence with the cessation of cognitive activity. This is not an ‘objective’ world that exists over and above its intersubjective apprehension, for such a world, devoid of any reference to subjective experience, is not within the purview of empirical awareness. For the Buddhist, empirical awareness is an awareness of a specific domain (of visibles, tangibles, audibles) as disclosed by a specific cognitive modality (visual awareness, auditory awareness, and so on). The Buddhist, thus, appears to advocate the view that what we mean by world (*loka*) is the diversity and manifoldness of empirical phenomena that find their ultimate source in the activity of various modes of cognitive awareness. However, the notion of a world *as experienced* does not imply that the elements of existence and/or experience (*dharmā*) are not empirically real, only that their reality cannot be ascertained independently of any reference to their mode of givenness. From a first-person perspective, the body—as an aggregate of such elements of existence and/or experience—is both the medium of contact with the world and the world with which it comes into contact.

Such a view finds an interesting parallel in Husserl’s account of the paradoxical nature of the body as revealed through phenomenological reduction. For Husserl, phenomenological reduction (*epoché*)—essentially a method of bracketing ontological assumptions about the natural world in order to examine the intentional structures of consciousness—reveals the twofold appearance of the body: first as a biological entity connected to the continuum of life, and second as a medium for the expression of life.⁸ The body as the vehicle of empirical awareness is thus the locus of lived experience and, as such, has the capacity for both exploration and receptivity. It is this intuition about the dual nature of embodied awareness, in its transitive and intransitive aspects, that led Husserl to the concept of the life-world: a world of lived experience whose boundaries are not fixed but constantly shifting in relation to the desires, actions, and attitudes of an agent.⁹ As Merleau-Ponty, who appropriates Husserl’s notion of the life-world as the lived-world (*le monde vécu*), observes, “I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it

myself," for "my body appears to me as an attitude with a view to a certain actual or possible task."¹⁰

The world or, better still, the environment that I inhabit is not just a structured domain of causally nested objects and relations but also a meaningful world of experience. The question that both Buddhist philosophers and phenomenologists must address is whether intentional experiences—of the sort that disclose a world as pre-reflectively but meaningfully given—presuppose that consciousness itself, as the disclosing medium, is a knowable object. My claim is that the Buddhist epistemologists (and the Abhidharma traditions they draw from, in particular those of the Sautrāntikas and the Yogācāras) answer this question in the negative: consciousness is not diachronically known by a subsequent instance of cognitive awareness, but rather is inherently self-reflexive, even if only minimally so. Though we may intend a previous moment of conscious awareness in introspection, this retrospective apprehension of consciousness as an object cannot be its essential feature. If that were so, we would be confronted with the well-known problem of infinite regress. The Buddhist epistemologists are thus concerned, in true phenomenological fashion, not with how things, including mental states, are judged to be (without any reference to their mode of presentation) but with how things show up to us, with the phenomena of experience just as they appear to us before we set out to reflect and theorize about them.

Reflexive Awareness and the Aspectual Theory of Mental States

For the purpose of the present analysis, I am concerned less with achieving a historically accurate reconstruction of the semantic evolution of the notion of reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvitti*, *svasaṃvedana*) as gleaned from the works of the Buddhist epistemologists¹¹ than with working out a consistent account of the role that perception and intentionality play in the Buddhist epistemological context. The Buddhist epistemologists share with the Abhidharma the view that the defining characteristic of consciousness is its discrete apprehension of objects.¹² Even though the Abhidharma traditions distinguish between mind (*citta*) and mental constituents (*caitta*), they do not regard the latter as attending to different objects. The same object is consciously apprehended by a particular mode of apprehension such as, say, visual awareness and at the same time disclosed as an event in the mental stream—for instance, as a sensed patch of color. At least in the context of Indian Buddhist Abhidharma, the general assumption is that all cognitions are inherently intentional: they are necessarily about an object of their own. But this Abhidharmic understanding of intentionality requires that there be particular types or modes of cognitive awareness that are uniquely constituted as such, that is, as always being directed to, or being about, something.

In keeping with the Buddhist metaphysical commitment to the momentary nature of all phenomena, this something is but a temporal instance in the stream of psychophysical events that arises together with a moment of cognitive awareness. This account, however, poses a problem: how can (presumably non-cognitive or sub-

personal) factors contributing to the arising of cognitive awareness in turn become a subject of reflective inquiry? That is, to use an example, how can an experience of reflected light and an apparent surface give rise to a metacognitive awareness of blue? Many of those who find appealing the idea that conscious awareness is the hallmark of the mental consider it improbable that there should be mental events, such as bare sensations, that are non-cognitive until they are attended to in a subsequent moment of awareness.¹³

Indeed, the concept of 'reflexive awareness' (*svasaṃvedana*) is meant to capture both the *character* and the *content* of mental events. First, there is the intentional aspect of experience, the 'what it is like' character of perceiving a sunset, remembering a childhood experience, or imagining an object such as Escher's impossible staircase. Second, there is the intentional object of experience, that of which the experience is an experience of (the sunset, the childhood experience, or Escher's impossible staircase). Every state of cognitive awareness, according to Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and their followers has this dual aspect: that of a self-apprehensive intentional act (*grāhakākāra*) and that of a world-directed intentional object (*grāhyākāra*). The subjective aspect is constitutive of an implicit openness to what is given, while the objective aspect is characterized by what is thus intended: an object or a mental state of some kind. According to this account, even the subjective aspect can become the object of an intentional act when it is reflected upon. Given their commitment to reflexivity, the Buddhist epistemologists must therefore reject the notion that cognitive states such as sensations, volitions, and desires lack intentional content. So it may be worth investigating how a Buddhist epistemologist should understand the intentional structure of perceptual awareness.

Let me begin by illustrating what I mean by the notion that perception is intentionally constituted. In taking the intentionality of perception as fundamental, phenomenology describes our perceptual encounter with the world in the most concrete sense possible. There is thus a unique way in which perception intends an object or a particular state of affairs: it gives us the object as immediately experienced in its concreteness.¹⁴ The perceptual experience is also fulfilling (or, in Dharmakīrtian terms, pragmatically efficacious [*arthakriyā*]), for, unlike imagination or desire, it actually attains the object: as I stroll down Fifth Avenue the Empire State Building looms larger and towers higher than I have imagined it to be from seeing it in pictures or in movies. It is relatively easy to see why that is the case. My direct encounter with the Empire State Building happens within a certain horizon of background intuitions about size and height based on foreground-background relations, conditions of luminance, and personal expectations. Seen under a low-hanging cloud cover obscuring the upper floors, it might well appear even higher (high enough to warrant the 'skyscraper' appellation). Thus, what sets the intentionality of perception apart from that of thinking or imagination is its directness: indeed, for Husserl all indirect modes of cognizing are forms of representation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) that ultimately derive from an original presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*).¹⁵

Note that phenomenologists do not use the concept of representation in the same way that Locke, Hume, and most contemporary analytic philosophers of mind

do, that is, in reference to a specific medium such as ideas, mental imagery, or propositional content (which acts as intermediary between the perceived object and its internal apprehension). Indeed, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi have recently argued, phenomenologists tend to dismiss representational theories of perception as both empirically false and conceptually nonsensical.¹⁶ To claim that perception generates an internal image of some external reality that resembles it in some way is to assume that there is a direct way of knowing that the representation corresponds to the object. But I can only know that *x* resembles *y* if there is a way to access *y* without the mediation of *x*. But if there is such a way *z* of accessing *y*, then how do I know that *z* correctly discloses that *y* is accurately depicting *x*, if not by some subsequent cognition? Barring infinite regress, there is no way of knowing that *x* is a resemblance of *y*. What is problematic about representational theories of perception is the presupposition of what they seek to explain: the representational medium.

Phenomenology, thus, operates with a non-representational theory of perception. In this phenomenological account of perception, as Merleau-Ponty has clearly demonstrated, there are no such things as self-evident sensations that together constitute the representational content of perception.¹⁷ Rather, perceiving is an integral experience, which involves at once the perceived something, the field of perception, and the perceiver, as well as her disposition, interests, and orientation. Taking his inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, Alva Noë has recently proposed—against certain tendencies toward pure phenomenology present in Husserl’s earlier work—that we regard perceptual experience as essentially amounting to an “involvement with or entanglement with situations and things.”¹⁸ Aware of the kinesthetic nature of embodied experience, Husserl, too, insisted that movement is not necessarily something that we perceive but something that perceptual intentionality must presuppose, for to perceive is to understand how we cope with the environment we inhabit.¹⁹

Now, let’s consider Dignāga’s account of perception as worked out in his major work, the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. Notwithstanding the critical and polemical aspect of this work, the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* advances what I take to be essentially a phenomenological account of cognition. First, Dignāga singles out perception and inferential reasoning as the only two reliable sources of knowledge, and he claims that perception apprehends unique particulars whereas inferential reasoning apprehends only generalities. But he also insists on the primacy of perception, and offers an ingenious way of translating logical arguments back to their perceptual source, the intricate (and controversial) aspects of which shall not detain us here.²⁰ For now, all I want to suggest is that in taking the individual properties of a perceptual event as providing a basis for conceptual meaning, Dignāga, much like Husserl, seems to be claiming that all cognitive differences (and/or similarities) find their ultimate source in experiential differences (and/or similarities). In seeing a cow, I do not perceive a generic entity (a token of a type) characterized by dewlap and so on, but a unique cow, from a specific point of view, in particular circumstances, and with a specific disposition or interest, say, in feeding it, milking it, or simply petting it. Without getting into the complexities of the semantic theory of exclusion (*apoha*), my meaningful deployment of the concept of ‘cow’ can be said to be rooted in specific perceptual experi-

ences: a farm stay in Transylvania, a ranch visit in Joseph, Oregon, or, as was the case with my first trip to India, simply stepping out of Bombay International Airport.

It is primarily this notion that there is no distinction between what seeing seems (or feels) like and what one thinks seeing amounts to that Dignāga challenges, particularly in response to realist definitions of perception such as those advanced by Nyāya. It is thus that Dignāga takes reflexive awareness to be the mode of presentation of all perceptual experiences. He does not merely systematize into a system of epistemic warrants what had traditionally been known as empirical awareness and self-awareness. He goes a step further and describes the characteristics of these cognitive modalities: perception does the job of apprehending particulars as uniquely characterized phenomena, but only if operating in a non-conceptual mode. If accounting for the sense of intimation that accompanies each cognitive event is the goal, naive realist assumptions about how the mind interacts with the world are to no avail. We must turn to the phenomenology of perception for answers. For Dignāga, who adopts the Abhidharma analysis of consciousness and cognition, perception appears in its dual aspect as awareness of something coupled with self-awareness. As he explains:

[PSV at PS I 9a] Every cognition comes about with a double appearance, namely that of itself [i.e., as awareness of itself] and that of the object. The awareness of itself as [possessing] this double appearance is the result [of the intentional act]—

[PS I 9b] because the determination of the object [to be cognized] conforms to it.

[PSV *ad cit.*] When a cognition intending its [own] object itself becomes an object of apprehension, then one apprehends it as either desirable or undesirable in conformity with self-awareness. When, on the other hand, the object to be apprehended is an external entity, then

[PS I 9c] the source of knowledge is simply the cognition taking on the [intentional] aspect of the object.

[PSV *ad cit.*] In this second instance, the source of knowledge refers simply to cognition as intending the object, thus ignoring the character of cognition as self-awareness, even though it is self-awareness that brings it forth [as such]. Why? Because the object as perceived [namely the external object]

[PS I 9d] is apprehended only by means of this [intentional aspect].

[PSV *ad cit.*] Thus, in whatever way the object may be apprehended, for instance as something white or non-white, it is an object in that form [namely as intended] that is thus perceived.²¹

Dignāga appears to be making two important claims here. First, all cognitions are self-intimating: regardless of whether an object is present or not, and of whether the present object is real or imagined, cognition arises having this dual aspect. Second, Dignāga tells us that the determination of the object, that is, how the object appears in cognition, conforms in effect to how it is intended: for example, as

something desirable or undesirable. It should be possible, therefore, to interpret Dignāga's descriptive account of cognition as providing support for the dual-aspect nature of intentional acts. On the one hand, intentional experiences span a whole range of cognitive modalities: perceiving, remembering, judging, and so on. On the other hand, each intentional experience is also about a specific object, whether it be something concrete, like a pot, or something imagined, like a unicorn, or, to use a stock example in the Sanskrit philosophical literature, a city in the sky (*gandharvanagara*).²²

What role, then, does self-awareness play for Dignāga? Given his allegiance to the Yogācāra epistemology, Dignāga interprets self-awareness as playing the role of an intentional self-revealing aspect of cognition. As far as the object is concerned, cognition operates simply by revealing its intentional aspect or its object-directedness. In this regard, I find myself in complete agreement with Jonardon Ganeri, who claims, I think rightly, that the problem of self-awareness for the Buddhist epistemologists cannot be properly addressed without taking into account the intentional structure of awareness. Indeed, the double-aspect theory of mental states serves as the only non-problematic way by means of which "one can distinguish between thoughts and thoughts about thoughts, the intentional object of the latter being the subjective aspect of the former."²³

An Epistemological Conundrum: Explaining the Subject-Object Relation

As I briefly noted above, in taking Dignāga to be operating with an internalist account of cognition (especially in his *Ālambanaparīkṣā*), Arnold thinks the Buddhist epistemological account of self-cognition is best characterized as advancing a full-blown idealism. His interpretation rests on the premise that 'self-cognition' (*svasaṃvedana*), which Arnold renders (following Kant) as 'apperception,' is to be understood as endorsing the view that mental events are all that we can directly know. The problem with Dignāga's account of self-awareness, claims Arnold, is the assumption that all cognitions (at least all veridical ones) are ultimately about the subjective aspect. If that were the case, then one would be dispensing with the need to explain the subject-object relation. However, read through the phenomenological lens I am proposing here, the Buddhist epistemologist's understanding of the intentional aspect of perceptual cognition would be less problematic, and it will also be less amenable to the sort of transcendental interpretation of self-cognition that Arnold proposes. More recently, Arnold seems to have revised his view, by offering an interpretation of reflexive awareness as a bridging concept between the internal domain of first-person awareness and the external world of objects—one that guarantees that such objects do not have their conditions of intelligibility outside the bounds of awareness.²⁴ I will return to this point below.

Although she rejects interpretations that take Dignāga's account of self-awareness to suggest that such awareness is the only truly occurrent source of knowledge, Kellner nonetheless regards self-awareness as a resulting type of cognition, presumably because it provides 'access' to the subjective aspect of object appre-

hension, regardless of whether we are talking about intentional objects or mental constituents.²⁵ Kellner is in general agreement with Paul Williams that there appears to be a marked distinction between Dignāga's understanding of the role of self-awareness in intentional terms and Śāntarākṣita's account of self-awareness in terms of reflexivity or luminosity.²⁶ But she thinks Williams' notion that intentional states cannot be apprehending their objects or objective aspects unless they are also constitutively reflexive goes a step too far. Her rationale is that Dignāga's rather laconic treatment of self-awareness contains no proof as such that mental states are intentionally constituted, that is, that they have an aboutness of their own. Furthermore, she claims that the proof of self-awareness, at least in Dignāga's case, has nothing to do with the intentional aspect and everything to do with memory, presumably because Dignāga frames his proof of self-awareness in terms of access to experiences that can be recalled precisely because one is aware of having had them.²⁷ Kellner thus seems to imply that Dignāga's understanding of self-awareness is to be taken as lacking intentionality, something that, I claim, goes against basic first-person phenomenology. Let me clarify by appealing once again to the reflexive character of awareness.

The reflexivity of awareness does not suggest a contentless experience: conscious cognition—as a modality that discloses 'what is it like' to be in a particular state or another (to use Thomas Nagel's well-worn formula for conscious experience)—is not a generic type of awareness, for it is only realized in concrete modes such as perceiving, desiring, judging, and so on. Even assuming that Dignāga has in mind a non-objectifying or intransitive type of experience when he describes self-awareness, something akin to the Yogācāra notion of consciousness-only (*cittamātra*), or perhaps a type of primitive and prereflective self-awareness, of the sort that phenomenologists like Zahavi define as implicit and non-conceptual,²⁸ it is still the case that this is an intentional experience. If reflexive awareness were not implicitly intentional, it could not be a necessary condition for genuine aboutness. Even assuming, on metaphysical rather than phenomenological grounds, that there could be non-intentional modes of awareness, these could not serve as the basis for intentional experience. Being pre-thematically present to oneself (that is, being present in a way that does not entail any perceptual or conceptual apprehension of an object) does not mean that, as phenomenologists like Michel Henry have argued, there is no internal distance.²⁹ Reflexive awareness has a horizon structure that discloses the dual-aspect nature of mental states: the mineness and aboutness of experience are a co-constitutive and inherently intentional dimension of reflexivity.³⁰

In this regard, it may be worth considering the so-called existentialist phenomenology that Heidegger develops in his *Being and Time*. Heidegger occupies a pivotal role, in that he helped shift the scope of phenomenology from descriptions of the contents of experience, after the external world had been bracketed, to an analysis of existence in its concrete, ontological sense. Whereas Husserl saw intentional experiences as immanent in the subject, Heidegger thinks the only way phenomenology can escape the language of immanence is for it to describe intentionality as already world-constituted. Indeed, for Heidegger this intentionality must belong to the

ontological constitution of the Dasein (his term for the human condition, usually translated as “being there”), for Dasein only exists such that it is “always already with other beings.”³¹ Thus, Heidegger’s major contribution to understanding the intentionality of perception is to have disclosed the particular ways of our *being-in-the-world*. As he shows in his analysis of human experience, Dasein always already finds itself in the world, in one mood (*Stimmung*) or another, and never simply there, as bare existence.

Now, I am aware, of course, that there could be limitations to this Heideggerian perspective on intentionality as world-constituted. There is a long-standing debate in the Buddhist literature on meditative attainments about the nature and indeed possibility of mental states of pure awareness, in which there is complete cessation of all cognitive activity (*nirodha-samāpatti*).³² Unfortunately, these accounts are not accompanied by any positive descriptions and are thus phenomenologically opaque. However, mention must be made that even the Buddhist epistemologists rest their proof of self-awareness on the experience of states of pure luminosity that transcend the subject-object dichotomy. From the point of view of self-illumination theorists such as Śāntarakṣita, ultimately the phenomenal character of cognition and its phenomenal content, its subjective and its qualitative character, are indistinguishable.³³

Let me now turn, if only briefly, to a passage from Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika*, which raises the issue of whether self-awareness is a constitutive aspect of all mental states, not just of perception:

Various [feelings] such as pleasure, pain, desire (*abhilāṣa*), etc. are nothing but cognitions, inasmuch as [they] arise differently in accordance with the differences of [their] basis (sense faculty), object-support (*ālambana*, i.e., external object) and repeated practice (*abhyāsa*). They are perceived [by themselves]. And apart from them, no other [factor] that cognizes them becomes manifest. If one knows [these feelings] by other [cognitions], another [person] would also experience these [feelings, e.g., pleasure and pain].³⁴

In this passage, Dharmakīrti claims that various feelings and moods are intrinsically self-revealing insofar as they occur in specific modes of apprehension (vision or hearing), intend particular kinds of objects, and result from past habituations (a view similar to that put forward by Vasubandhu³⁵). Dharmakīrti’s argument is that such feelings are inherently cognitive; that is, they do not require a second-order thought in order to become known. This quality is taken as proof that the reflexivity of awareness is a defining characteristic of all experience, not just of a narrow range of states of metacognitive awareness. Now, Dreyfus understands Dharmakīrti, I think correctly, to be advancing the notion that self-awareness is neither introspective nor reflective, but rather simply a non-thetic awareness of mental states.³⁶ This self-awareness is really nothing over and above a mode of apprehension in which a subjective aspect beholds an objective aspect. Dreyfus claims to be drawing support for such a non-thetic, prereflective view of self-awareness from Zahavi’s (2005) recent work, though that view of self-awareness can ultimately be traced to Sartre.

While self-intimation is an essential characteristic of a cognitive event, Dreyfus claims that it is not sufficient for intentionality, and does not guarantee its status as a

source of knowledge (that is, as a *pramāṇa*). Veridical perceptions, the kind that are free of any conceptual determination (*kalpanāpoḍha*), are necessary in order to provide a pragmatic anchorage for cognition. But Dreyfus takes Dharmakīrti to be claiming that bare sensations are non-cognitive and that they become cognitive only when integrated in a conceptual schema (which, given his generally nominalist stance, Dharmakīrti presumably cannot avoid). This interpretation, however, goes both against Dharmakīrti's claim that raw feelings like pleasure and pain are self-revealing and against a basic phenomenological description of experience. Pain appears as a mode of conscious apprehension not because it corresponds to a given notion of painfulness, but because it discloses to us the state of our being. The prereflective reflexivity of awareness is key to this phenomenological appraisal of pain. I am not merely *conscious of* pain; rather, *I am* in pain, and the pain is of a particular kind: throbbing, stinging, or burning. It is part of the very nature of sensory experiences such as pains and pleasures that there is something it is like to be in them and for them to have the specific qualitative aspects that they do.

Drawing on the long-standing debate in phenomenology regarding the status of what Husserl called *noema* or the *object-as-intended*, Georges Dreyfus comes in on the side of those, like Hubert Dreyfus (1970) and Dagfin Føllesdal (1969), who take the *noema* as referring to an ideal sense that mediates the intentional relation between the cognitive state and its object. Given the importance of the so-called theory of cognitive aspects (*ākāravāda*) for the Buddhist epistemologists, Georges Dreyfus interprets Dharmakīrti as advancing the view that direct experience only supplies the raw sense data, which is apprehended as such only by means of an aspectual cognition, that is, by a cognition representing or taking the form of whatever it cognizes. Georges Dreyfus does concede that perception, especially in certain meditative states, might have something like 'phenomenal intentionality.'³⁷ But he understands intentionality as a 'function' that perception has, namely that of 'delivering impressions.' To say about a perceptual state that it is intentionally constituted, I claim, is to mark its orientation and mode of disclosure. To the extent that the notion of 'function' can be used at all in an analysis of intentionality, it is only in order to capture the two facets of experience. Colin McGinn, in fact, makes this point quite clear when he argues that intentionality is not a contingent aspect of conscious experience but rather its essential dimension: "what the experience is like is a function of what it is of, and what it is of is a function of what it is like."³⁸

Beyond Representation: Uncovering the Intentional Structure of Awareness

I have already explained—when considering the intentional structure of awareness—why representational theories of knowledge are problematic. Basically, if intentional experiences are always about something, then, as Gallagher and Zahavi have argued, they cannot "achieve a reference to the world by virtue of some intermediate representational entity."³⁹ The *noema* or the *object-as-intended*—that is, as perceived, desired or judged—cannot be understood in this alternative interpretation as a concept, sign, or propositional content. If that were the case, then

perceiving, desiring, and judging would lack intentionality until such moment as when the object *as perceived* or *as desired* was attended to in conceptual analysis.⁴⁰ But to perceive is already to open up to a horizon of experience that presents or rather re-presents objects in their immediate mode of givenness. And while the mode of givenness of the object may be constitutive of experience, its properties are not fixed by the object alone but also in some sense determined by the intentional stance: in seeing a white lotus on a clear lake, my visual experience is not simply constituted by the properties of the object (i.e., whiteness, bloomingness, etc.) but also by the phenomenal character of my awareness. I can only experience the white lotus in a specific mode of first-person givenness that is only available to conscious subjectivity.⁴¹

Now, Dharmakīrti in effect seems to be making precisely such a point in a passage of the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* in which he requires that all cognitions be intrinsically reflexive:

Awaiting the end [of a series] of apprehensions, a person does not comprehend any object, because of the non-establishment of all [cognitions] when there is non-establishment of one [i.e., of the first-personally known one]. And since there is no end to the arising of apprehensions, the whole world would be blind and deaf. If there is [to be] any termination [to the series of cognition], that [cognition must] intrinsically apprehend itself and the aspect of an object simultaneously.⁴²

If, as Dharmakīrti seems to be arguing here, we were to reject the reflexivity thesis, then we would be confronted with the absurd situation of there being an interminable series of cognitions that are non-cognitive until an instance of self-awareness first occurs. Arnold does interpret Dharmakīrti in this context as advancing the notion that self-awareness must be an integral aspect of the mode of presentation of all cognitions in order to avoid the idea that we could somehow be “non-cognitively acquainted with the world.”⁴³ But, if I read him correctly, he still insists that Dharmakīrti’s defense of the reflexivity thesis commits him to precisely the type of epistemic idealism that is threatened by transcendental arguments about the structure of experience. His interpretation rests on an overtly Kantian approach to the role of apperception for cognition. Basically, Arnold claims that Dharmakīrti (like Dignāga before him) understands the reflexivity of awareness to function in much the same way that the transcendental unity of apperception does for Kant (who, arguably, treats all forms of consciousness as a species of self-consciousness).⁴⁴

But Dharmakīrti adopts a thesis that is exactly contrary to Kantian anti-foundationalism: intuitions (or, in this case, perceptions) are not blind without concepts. Perceptions are indeed cognitive, even though only as prereflective modes of experience. Most importantly, perceptions are intentionally constituted in the wider sense in which phenomenologists understand intentionality to operate: not merely as object-directedness, but as openness to what is present within the structure of awareness itself. The self-aware aspect of perception that captures its intentional constitutiveness is a non-positional (thus non-reflective) but conscious experience. To use one of Sartre’s well-known examples of such an instance of perceptual self-

awareness: "When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I. There is consciousness-of-the-streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken, etc., and non-positional consciousness of consciousness."⁴⁵

That the reflexivity principle must be an integral aspect of the mode of presentation of all cognitive events does not mean that self-awareness is transcendently constituted as a form of radical subjectivity. Rather, it simply means that the subject of experience can also become an intentional object of experience when it is reflectively apprehended, when, as in Sartre's example, I attend not simply to the portrait but also to my experience of contemplating the portrait. The intentional content and the intentional act, however, lack reference to a presumably transcendental subject or self. My reason for belaboring this distinction rests precisely on a phenomenological understanding of intentionality. Even such apparently non-intentional experiences as moods are not without reference to the world, for a cognition's self-referentiality is always embedded within a wider horizon of experience that also affects the way the world appears to us. Rather than being simply attendant phenomena, moods act as radical modes of disclosure: happiness is likely to disclose a world that is brimming with significance and potentiality.

Regarding the issue of whether the Buddhist epistemologists recognize that cognition must be intentionally constituted in order to be counted as a source of knowledge, Arnold identifies Dharmottara (one of Dharmakīrti's important commentators) as making the clearest statement to this effect (that is, as arguing that only "intentional [*prāpaka*] cognition" is a source of knowledge).⁴⁶ But Arnold seems to imply that the intentionality of perception is to be understood (in this particular case) in terms of perceptual 'judgments' concerning empirical objects.

As mental states or states of cognitive awareness, perceptions, desires, and judgments are characterized as such by the objects they intend, and cannot be understood independently of these intentional objects. But the intentional object is neither just the empirical correlate of experience nor just the mental aspect; rather it is the object *as intended*, the pain *as felt* or the state of affairs *as judged*. This does not mean, however, that there is no difference between the object *as intended* and the object *that is intended*, though of course the nature of this distinction is subject to debate.

Whereas most philosophers agree that mental states such as beliefs and desires have intentional content, the claim that states of perceptual awareness are also intentional is controversial. Perceptions, in particular a broad class of bodily sensations and moods, are regarded as lacking intentionality. For instance, in articulating the position of those who deny the intentionality of perception, David Rosenthal makes a distinction between two types of mental states: thoughts and desires, usually classed under the rubric of propositional attitudes, and sensations and sense impressions, which are said to lack intentional content and instead to be characterized by qualitative properties or qualia.⁴⁷ The basic intuition behind this distinction is that sensations are not *about* a specific object but *characterized by* a specific qualitative feel. However, as critics of this distinction have noted,⁴⁸ it does not take much reflection to realize that qualia are conscious mental states and as such share certain features

with propositional attitudes, and, vice versa, that propositional or intentional content in turn displays qualitative features: I can suddenly become aware that I need to remind one of my colleagues to proctor my finals and, at the same time, be aware of the *seeming* character of that sudden realization.

It is for this reason, I think, that phenomenology, as a descriptive method for the analysis of experience, is inescapable. In disclosing to us the primacy of experience, the phenomenological attitude also invites a suspension and bracketing of theoretical assumption about experience. Foremost of all, it invites us to go beyond traditional positions in metaphysics concerning the relation between mind and world, thus beyond the externalist/internalist divide and its variants. It offers as an alternative an account of experience that requires a completely new vocabulary for its expression, one capable of capturing the specific ways of our *being-in-the-world*, a world that is inseparable from its mode of apprehension. This world, as Merleau-Ponty subtly puts it, "is given to the subject" only because "the subject is given to himself."⁴⁹

It is precisely to the extent that we go beyond the interplay between sense and object and seek to account for the structure of awareness that we operate within the phenomenological attitude. The anti-foundationalism that drives most debates in epistemology testifies to this oversight, lacking, as it mostly does, an account of intentionality. Until recently, most discussions in analytic epistemology either neglected intentionality or reduced it to analyses of the relational character of content.⁵⁰ While phenomenological analyses of intentionality have shifted the attention in most analytic epistemology away from reductive explanations of experiential content,⁵¹ much remains to be done.

Among the most influential reductive accounts of experience is Daniel Dennett's eliminativist theory of consciousness, which he first put forward in his *Consciousness Explained* (1991). The aspect of this theory that interests us here is the notion that our intuitions about the features of our perceptual experience are unfounded and therefore our judgments about the intentional aspects of consciousness must be fallible.⁵² According to this generic eliminativist view there are no such things as raw subjective qualities or seemings (the experiential or "what it is like" character of intentional states) but only judgments about, and internal representations of, such experiences. In short, Dennett is not willing to grant the phenomenologist access to the phenomenon as such but only to a judgment about it.⁵³ Indeed, for Dennett, there is no difference between what we apprehend perceptually and our reflection on the contents of such perceptual experiences.

But we cannot begin to make sense of our perceptual experiences if we empty them of intentional content: what makes perception instrumental for knowledge is precisely its intentional character, the fact that what we perceive is disclosed in an intentional setting of objects, dispositions, and meaning. The perception of an object devoid of any reference to its mode of presentation (that is, to the *object-as-perceived*), much like an abstract quale, has no basis in experience. How, then, do we come to conceive of perception as being essentially transparent, providing direct access to the sense data? Once again, Merleau-Ponty captures the problematic nature of naive, commonsense approaches to perception: we assume that perception is

shot through with conceptuality “because instead of attending to the experience of perceptions, we overlook it in favor of the object perceived.”⁵⁴

In the end, no discussion about perception and its mode of presentation can take place outside the horizon of consciousness. It is consciousness that ultimately provides the evidential ground for all modes of inquiry. For the Buddhist epistemologist, consciousness—in its dual-aspect mode of presentation—is not just another event in the chain of dependently arisen phenomena, but its *disclosing medium*. Insofar as phenomenology is concerned with analyzing the structure of experience (and, theoretically, with overcoming traditional positions in metaphysics about the ontological status of mental and physical objects), it can also help us to understand the reflexivity of awareness as intentionally structured. This is precisely the point I take Dignāga to be making when he claims that *we apprehend a cognition intending its own object as having a particular quality* (desirable or undesirable) only to the extent that *that apprehension is in conformity with self-awareness*. When we understand the intentional structure of reflexive awareness in a phenomenologically rich fashion, perceiving crimson red or feeling at ease appear not only as aspects of what-it-is-like-to-be-in a certain kind of state, but also as intentional states, for perception ultimately marks an intentional orientation in a world that cannot be thought of apart from its immediate horizon.

Notes

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Abbreviations are used in the text and Notes as follows:

PS *Pramāṇasamuccaya* of Dignāga. Chapter 1. See Steinkellner 2005.

PSV *Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti* of Dignāga. Chapter 1. See Steinkellner 2005.

- 1 – Brentano’s formulation captures specifically what he calls the “intentional inexistence of the object,” such that mental phenomena are by definition those phenomena which contain “an object intentionally within themselves” (Brentano 1981, p. 68).
- 2 – See Pradhan 1967 at *Abhidharmakośa* II 24.
- 3 – See Pradhan 1967 at *Abhidharmakośa* II 25.
- 4 – Dreyfus 2007, p. 106.
- 5 – Arnold 2008, p. 89.
- 6 – Kellner 2010, p. 227.
- 7 – *Samyutta Nikāya* IV, 96; translation per Bodhi 2000, p. 1190.

- 8 – Husserl (1962b, pp. 107–108) distinguishes between the physical body (*Körper*) and the living body (*Leib*), noting that one’s own body is never alien to oneself. We do not simply find the living body within our perceptual field; rather, the living body itself extends to this perceptual field that also allows one to encounter objects and to think of one’s body as a physical body. The living body, as Husserl makes quite clear, is essentially disclosed kinesthetically through such actions as lifting, carrying, pushing, and so on.
- 9 – Husserl 1970, III, A.
- 10 – Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 87, 114.
- 11 – The reader is directed to consult the comprehensive historical survey of the notion of self-cognition (*svasaṃvedana*) in Yao 2005, pp. 97–118; Yao finds its source in one particular Abhidharma school, that of the Sautrāntikas.
- 12 – See *Abhidharmakośa* I 16a.
- 13 – Of course, for theorists who reject the unity of consciousness (Rosenthal 2003, O’Brien and Opie 1998, Dennett 2005), there is no singular phenomenon of consciousness but rather a plurality of such phenomena as ‘phenomenal consciousness,’ ‘access consciousness,’ ‘monitoring consciousness,’ and ‘self-consciousness’ (see also Block 1995 for a critical take on the taxonomy of consciousness). Critics of this disunified view of consciousness point to a somewhat misleading assumption, namely that these so-called different phenomena underscore the subjective character of consciousness, which can be explored apart from its qualitative character (see Kriegel 2009 and Bayne 2010).
- 14 – Husserl 2003, p. 107.
- 15 – Husserl 2001, p. 216.
- 16 – Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 91.
- 17 – Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 5.
- 18 – Noë 2007, p. 235.
- 19 – Husserl 1962, pp. 196 ff.
- 20 – For a comprehensive recent treatment of the semantic theory of exclusion (*apoha*), see Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti 2011, and contributions therein.
- 21 – *PSI* 9 and *PSV ad cit.*:

dvyābhāsaṃ hi jñānam utpadyate svābhāsaṃ viśayābhāsaṃ ca. tasyobhayābhāsasya yat svasaṃvedanaṃ tat phalam. kiṃ kāraṇam. tadrūpo hy arthaniścayaḥ yadā hi saviśayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ, tadā svasaṃ vedanānurūpaṃ arthaṃ pratipadyata iṣṭam aniṣṭam vā. yadā tu bāhya evārthaḥprameyaḥ, tadā viśayābhāsataivāsya pramāṇam tadā hi jñānasvasaṃvedyam api svarūpam anapekṣyārthābhāsataivāsya pramāṇam. yasmāt so ‘rthaḥ tena miyate yathā yathā hy arthākāro jñāne pratibhāti śubhāśubhādītvena, tattadrūpaḥsa viśayaḥ pramīyate. (Translation, slightly adjusted for consistency, per Hattori 1968, p. 28; cf. Kellner 2010, pp. 207–210.)

- 22 – *Contra* philosophers whose conception of intentionality is limited to object directedness, the phenomenologist, following Husserl, does not take intentionality to be contingent on the presence for the intentional act of a given object. That mental states are intentionally constituted even in the absence of intentional objects becomes obvious, however, only after the operation of *epoché*.
- 23 – Ganeri 1999, p. 474.
- 24 – See Arnold 2010, p. 362.
- 25 – Kellner 2010, p. 226 and *passim*.
- 26 – See Williams 1998, p. 4. For Śāntarakṣita's account of self-awareness as luminosity see, *inter alia*, *Tattvasaṃgraha* 2020–2021 (Shastri 1968).
- 27 – For an illuminating discussion of the memory argument for self-awareness see Williams 1998, pp. 9–10; Yao 2005, pp. 115–117; and Thompson 2011, pp. 161–168. Thompson, in particular, offers an interesting reformulation of the memory argument in non-egological terms, thus eliminating appeal to higher-order or reflective cognition for explaining how the subjective side of experience (the fact that I remember myself perceiving the object) is recalled.
- 28 – See Zahavi 1999, p. 33.
- 29 – See, for instance, Henry 1963.
- 30 – For more on this account of the intentional structure of awareness in the context of debates about the psychological and psychopathological underpinnings of first-person experience, see Parnas 2000, pp. 119–121.
- 31 – Heidegger 1982, p. 157.
- 32 – See, for instance, Griffiths 1986, p. 103.
- 33 – See, esp., *Tattvasaṃgraha* 2000 (Shastri 1968) (*kriyākārahābhāvena na svasaṃvittir asya tu / ekasyānaṃśārūpasya trairūpyānupapattitaḥ*) and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*, *ad cit*. See also *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* 17 (Ichigō 1985). Incidentally, a similar view of the dual-aspect nature of phenomenal consciousness is defended in Kriegel 2009.
- 34 – *Pramāṇavārttika*, III (*Pratyakṣa*) 448–449: *āśrayāmbanābhyāsabhedād bhinnapravṛttayaḥ / sukhaduḥkhaabhilāśādibhedā buddhaya eva tāḥ // pratyakṣās tadviviktaṃ ca na anyat kiṃcid vibhāvyaṭe / at tajjñānam paro apy enāṃ bhujñīta anyena vid yadi //* (Miyasaka 1971–1972).
- 35 – See, esp., *Abhidharmakośa* II 34b2–d1.
- 36 – Dreyfus 2007, p. 102.
- 37 – *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 38 – McGinn 1991, pp. 29–30.
- 39 – Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 127 n. 7.
- 40 – See Zahavi 2005, p. 121.

- 41 – Note that while the Buddhist epistemologists admit that phenomenal character is an intrinsic aspect of conscious experience, they reject the notion that such character discloses something like a minimal phenomenal self. Rather, the Buddhist epistemologists put forward a self-illuminationist non-self theory (cf. Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011, p. 12). For an insightful account of how evidence for the phenomenal character of consciousness could be reconciled with non-egological views, see Krueger 2011.
- 42 – *tan na tāvad ayaṃ puruṣaḥ kañcid arthaṃ pratyety upalambhaniṣṭhāṃ pratīkṣamāṇaḥ, ekāsiddhau sarvāsiddheḥ. na cōpalambhānām utpattiṇiṣṭhety andhamūkaṃ jagat syāt. kvacin niṣṭhāyāṃ sa svayam ātmānaṃ viṣayākāraṃ ca yugapad upalabhata iti . . . tat siddhaḥ sahopalambhaniyamah, ekavyāpāre kramāyogāt, tasyāvīśeṣāt* (*Pramāṇaviniścaya*, in Steinkellner 2007, pp. 41–42).
- 43 – Arnold 2010, p. 362.
- 44 – See Pippin 1989, p. 20.
- 45 – Sartre 1991, pp. 48–49.
- 46 – See Arnold 2010, p. 343.
- 47 – Rosenthal 1994, p. 349.
- 48 – See Crane 2003, p. 35.
- 49 – Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. x.
- 50 – For instance, Drummond claims that such reductive treatments “reduce the immediate object of our experience from the object itself to the perceptual content, thus subjectifying the objective content, and they conceive this content as a psychic content” (Drummond 1991, p. 49). See also Drummond 2006 for a robust phenomenological response to reductive analyses of experiential content that argue against the presumption that the objects of experience could be examined as though they belonged to a world that is pre-consciously given.
- 51 – See Strawson 2005.
- 52 – See Dennett 1991, pp. 66 ff.
- 53 – Critics have claimed that Dennett’s eliminativist theory of consciousness rests on an implausible reduction of the phenomenal content of experience to cognitive judgment, with the result that how things seem to us is reduced to an account of how we think they seem (see, esp., Carman 2005, p. 76, and 2007, pp. 100 ff.).
- 54 – Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 4.

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