

compos mentis

Enaction, Anātman, & Episodicity: The Self in Principle & Practice

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I consider various accounts of selfhood as articulated in certain traditions of Buddhism, phenomenology, and enactivism. First, I present arguments from the Abhidharma movement of early Buddhism against the existence of an ontologically independent self. Then, I discuss enactivism. I contend that the existence of autopoietic systems contradicts Abhidharmic mereological reductionism, thus undermining early Buddhist arguments for nonself (*anātman/anattā*). Next, I draw on Dignāga's principle of self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*), and examine phenomenological and enactivist theories of selfhood. I endorse a notion of prereflective self-awareness that constitutes a thin self/subject. Finally, I situate this account of selfhood within Galen Strawson's discussion of episodic lived experience. I put forth the ethical Episodicity thesis, which maintains that the episodically-lived life is desirable because it 1) aligns with the actual nature of selfhood and 2) can reduce suffering, thus preserving the Buddha's insight that attachment to a false notion of self promotes dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

KEYWORDS

Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, Buddhism, Cognitive Science, Selfhood, Phenomenology

Changing it rests.
—Heraclitus

I. ANĀTMAN

Early Buddhists of the Abhidharma movement argue against the existence of an ontologically independent self. That is, they argue against some unchanging entity that gives each person an individual identity. This entity would hypothetically persist across time and physical change. This might be conceived of as a soul. From the time one is born until death, one's mind and body are under incessant transformation. The atoms of which one's body is constituted are in constant flux. We finish each year with almost none of the same physical material as when we brought in the new year. Similarly, the beliefs, desires, motivations, and even personality traits that characterize our mental lives are subject to change over time. So what accounts for the seemingly persistent sense of identity that sets each one of us apart as individuals? Here one might posit a self that maintains our identity throughout the lifetime. It is this kind of permanent self that early Buddhists reject.

The Buddha holds that we suffer because we are ignorant of impermanence (*anitya*), the true nature of suffering, and the reality of nonself (*anātman/anattā*). Understanding nonself is vital in Buddhist soteriology: *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth characterized by suffering) continues as long as we misunderstand the self (Siderits 2007, 32). The doctrine of nonself maintains that there is no part of a person that accounts for permanent identity over time. In short, people are empty of selves (33). If there were an independent entity that accounts for individual identity, it would probably be a part of a person, since, after all, it is what makes that person *them*. So nonself arguments analyze the constituents of the human person in order to see if we can find anything we might call a 'self.' According to this view, humans consists of five *skandhas*, which include: *rūpa*: anything physical (i.e. your body), *feeling*: positive, negative, and neutral sensations (here *feeling* is a technical term that doesn't denote emotions, but instead refers to responses of varying valence to changing phenomena), *perception*: mental events involving sensing characteristics of an object (e.g. seeing the color blue), *volition*: mental forces responsible for activity (both physical and psychological) such as hunger and wakefulness, and *consciousness*:

awareness of physical and psychological states. Collectively the *skandhas* are referred to as *nāma-rūpa*, which translates as name and (physical) form. *Rūpa* — physical matter — can be seen, while the latter four *skandhas* can only be named, since they are not immediately observable by others (*ibid.* 35-37).

Early Buddhism mounts two arguments for nonself: the argument from impermanence, and the argument from control. The argument from impermanence holds that *nāma-rūpa* cannot constitute the self, since the *skandhas* are impermanent. The argument proceeds as follows:

1. *Rūpa* is impermanent
 2. Sensation is impermanent
 3. Perception is impermanent
 4. Volition is impermanent
 5. Consciousness is impermanent
 6. If there were a self it would be permanent
- IP. [There is no more to the person than the five *skandhas*]
- C. Therefore there is no self. (Siderits 2007, 39)

Physical matter is under constant change: atoms move and are replaced all the time. So *rūpa* cannot be permanent. Sensations arise and pass away, e.g. one's back can feel fine one instant, and then one can be gripped with pain, and then be fine again later. Perceptions come and go depending on what is going on in one's environment — they depend completely on external phenomena. Volitional desires emerge only in response to specific situations (e.g. pulling one's hand back from a hot stove) and then pass away. Once away from the stove, that volition passes, and others will soon take its place, and so on. So therefore sensation, perception, and volition are impermanent. What about consciousness? Consciousness here is merely the awareness of psychophysical events. This can't be permanent since it depends on being aware (you can't be asleep or unconscious). Would we say that we're a different person each morning following a deep sleep? Would getting surgery mean the pre-surgery 'you' was extinguished and a new and numerically different 'you' came about? Few would grant these

points. Therefore consciousness is impermanent as well. Since there is no more to a person than the *skandhas*, and the *skandhas* are impermanent, we see that there is no permanent self (Siderits 2007, 39-46).

Here one might object that the *skandhas* are not an exhaustive list of what constitutes the human person. Could there be more to a person than *nāma-rūpa*? Here we might posit a permanent entity 'hidden' above or among the *skandhas*. This entity might be called a soul, and would be what gives each person her individual identity. The early Buddhist response to this appeals to the 'principle of lightness,' which holds that we should choose the 'lighter' or more parsimonious of competing theories in order to arrive at the best explanation. We should do this since otherwise we would posit and believe in things that are unobservable and for which have no evidence. If we're trying to explain something, why respond by positing an entity which itself requires further explanation? If we were to posit an unseen self, we would need further explanation and evidence. We can instead turn to what is observable and needs no further explanation (Siderits 2007, 43-46). Siderits writes that the "Principle of Lightness says we should resort to positing unobservable entities only when the world tells us we have no alternative" (45). And in the case of the *skandhas*, the principle of lightness applies, leaving us with no hidden permanent entity.

The control argument begins with the assumption that, if there were a self, it would be the thing from which executive control emanated; it would be the source of autonomy. The self would be able to respond to feelings and change them when unpleasant. The self would be in control. The control argument appeals to the anti-reflexivity principle, which states that a thing cannot operate on itself. The classic metaphor for this is a knife: a knife can cut other things, but it cannot cut itself. But what about a doctor that operates on herself? Here again, the doctor is not truly operating on herself, but is operating on a *part* of herself, say, her foot. She would likely need her hands to do this. Her feet are not operating on themselves, her hands are. Thus, the anti-reflexivity principle holds. The control argument goes as follows:

1. 'I' consist only of *skandhas*.
2. I can change the *skandhas*.
3. An entity cannot operate on itself.

4. A self would be the part of the person that performs executive functions.
- C. There is no self.

Since the *skandhas* are subject to executive control, they cannot be the source of control (anti-reflexivity). If there were a self, it would be the part of the person that is in control. Yet we consist only of *skandhas*, so there is no abiding self (Siderits 2007, 46-49).

The Abhidharma movement of early Buddhism lays a foundation for arguments for nonself in mereological reductionism/nihilism. On this view, wholes are not ultimately real. What is real are the most fundamental parts that constitute the whole. Anything that can be reduced to smaller entities is not ultimately 'real,' but rather is conveniently labelled as a whole in order to make communication and interaction easier. The only real things are impartite entities. The classic example is a chariot. A chariot is not really a whole thing, since it can be broken down into its subcomponents. It has wheels, a carriage, shaft, axles, and other parts that, when assembled in a particular way, are referred to as 'chariot.' We designate this assembly as its own entity, but the whole 'chariot' depends on its parts for existence, so it is neither fundamental nor independently existent. Thus a chariot is not ultimately *real*. We don't call chariots the collection of chariot-parts; we call them chariots since it is easier to communicate that way. It is in our interest to refer to chariots as independent wholes.

Mereological reductionism is justifiable because our interests do not determine reality. Just because something is useful or convenient for us to believe doesn't necessitate that it is ultimately real. (Siderits 2007, 54-56). The same applies to living beings. Since what we call a 'person' can be analytically reduced to the *skandhas*, that person is not an 'entity' existing independent of its constituents. Though we refer to people as independent selves, selves do not really 'exist' independently of their parts. This is why we can't label each collection of changing *skandhas* as a self.

For the sake of communication and getting by in daily life, early Buddhists advance the concepts of convenient designation and conventional truth. For the purposes of day-to-day life, we have to use words such as "I." "I" is a convenient designator or helpful fiction we use to refer to the collections of *skandhas*. 'Persons' are not the wholes we refer to them as, but are instead their

fundamental parts. But for daily life, we must refer to wholes as wholes and not as a fiction superimposed on a bunch of impartite components (Siderits 2007, 49). Here we see a distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. Something is conventionally true if and only if it is commonsensical and leads to successful practice. Something is ultimately true if and only if it corresponds to reality as it really is and does not assume the reality of any conceptual fictions (56). It is unhelpful to think of chariots as not real. Sometimes it is helpful to think of oneself and others as whole persons. But suffering arises from attachment to the self, which for Abhidharma Buddhists is illusory. So understanding that what we refer to as 'selves' are really impermanent packets of *skandhas* is necessary for *nirvāṇa* (*ibid.* 56-64).

II. THE AUTOPOIETIC SELF

In *Mind in Life*, Evan Thompson discusses the enactive approach to cognition, also called enactivism. Enactivism is a type of embodied dynamicism, which maintains that cognitive systems are self-organizing systems which emerge from circular, nonlinear causality of continuous sensorimotor interactions between brain, body, and environment. The metaphor for this is not a neural network enclosed by skull and flesh, but instead a mind as an embodied dynamical system in the world. Embodied dynamicism draws from two approaches. The first is the dynamic systems approach to cognition, which maintains that cognition is a temporal phenomenon and must be understood in terms of dynamic systems theory. The second is embodied cognition, which holds that cognition is the use of skillful know-how in situated and embodied action (Thompson 2007, 11).

Enactivism contends that "the human mind emerges from self-organizing processes that tightly interconnect the brain, body, and environment at multiple levels" (Thompson 2007, 37), and is based on two ideas: autonomous or self-determining systems, and emergence, which describes large, collective patterns of functioning. Enactivism unifies several ideas:

1. Living beings are autonomous agents that generate and maintain themselves and thus enact their own cognitive domains.
2. Nervous systems are autonomous agents that actively generate and maintain their own coherent and meaningful patterns of activity in

conformity with their operation as circular and reentrant networks of interacting neurons. Nervous systems create meaning; they don't process information as in the computationalist account.

3. Cognition is the exercise of skillful interaction in situated and embodied action. Cognition emerges from recurrent sensorimotor loops of perception and action.
4. A being's environment is not represented internally in its mind, but instead is a relational domain enacted by that being's agency and means of interacting with the environment.
5. Experience (sentience) is not epiphenomenal, but rather is central to understanding minds.

Enactivism thus offers a new way of understanding cognition not as the doings of a neuronal computer situated within the skull, but as the activities of organisms situated within meaning-imbedded environments, and the interactions of brain and body with the world (13).

Dynamic interaction between organism and environment begins at the "lowest" level of organism. Thompson's philosophy of the organism depends on the notion of autopoiesis, which contradicts Abhidharmic mereological reductionism, and thus undermines arguments for nonself. Autopoiesis (literally "self-making") is a property of living systems, such as cells, that permits those systems to maintain and renew themselves by creating and regulating their boundaries (e.g. a cell wall), and by regulating its composition by means of metabolism and other processes. Autopoietic systems are a form of emergent dynamical systems, such as tornadoes, but are different from other dynamical systems because they regulate and maintain themselves. In an autopoietic system, the whole depends on its parts, but the existence of the parts depends on the whole as well. For instance, a cell is not reducible to its subcomponents, since its organelles cannot exist except within a functioning cell. We can see how autopoietic systems undermine mereological reductionism. Abhidharmic arguments in favor of mereological reductionism presuppose that wholes are able to be reduced to their constituents. Living things such as cells *cannot* be reduced to their parts; the whole is something different than its parts. The groundwork of Abhidharmic mereological reductionism is thus in trouble.

Thompson's ontology of the organism establishes notions of identity and minimal selfhood. Autopoietic systems are emergently but immanently purposeful; meaning that purposiveness is constitutive of the system, and is not determined from the outside. This consists of two "modes": identity and sense-making. *Identity* holds that autopoietic systems create and maintain an identity amidst change. *Sense-making* posits that autopoietic systems interact with and make sense of their environments in order to remain viable; enaction endows the otherwise insignificant physicochemical environment with significance and valence, creating an *Umwelt* or environment (Thompson 2007, 146-147). Thompson lays out two propositions that complement each other and describe two aspects of the autopoietic process:

1. An organism is fundamentally a self-affirming, identity-producing process based on autopoiesis.
2. A self-affirming identity establishes logically and operationally the reference point or perspective for sense-making and a domain of interactions. (147)

Organisms thus create for themselves an identity. This identity is not independent of an organism's environment, but instead is established *in relation* to the environment. The organism's sense of meaning — what it takes as good or bad, what is useful or not, etc. — is not 'built into' the environment, but is endowed onto the world by that specific organism by means of ongoing interaction.

An organism's dynamic identity and sense-making gives it a sort of minimal selfhood. By autopoietically differentiating themselves from their environments, organisms maintain their identities. Thompson maintains that "a living cell stands out from a chemical background as a closed network of self-producing processes that actively regulates its encounters with the environment" (Thompson 2007, 149). The difference between a cell and the chemical soup in which it is situated is its active maintenance of its boundary and composition. The autopoietic minimal self is not the *what*, but the *how*. Numeric identity/ontological independence refers to what something *is*, especially in contradistinction to other things. The self cannot be the things of which it is constituted, since these are impermanent, as the Buddhists noted. So the self must be the *way in which* matter is organized

— the pattern that endures amidst perpetual material change. Thompson puts it well:

An organism is a material being, and its reality at any given moment coincides completely with its material constitution. Yet its identity cannot be based on the constancy of matter because its material composition is completely renewed...Only at the level of form or pattern can we find constancy in the flux. (150-151)

Metabolism is the constant regeneration of an island of form amidst a sea of matter and energy. Metabolism establishes a self with an internal identity marked off from the outside world and whose being is its own doing...An organism must subordinate every change it undergoes to the maintenance of its identity and regulate itself and its interactions according to the internal norms of its activity. Life is thus a self-affirming process that brings forth or enacts its own identity and makes sense of the world from the perspective of that identity. The organism's 'concern,' its 'natural purpose,' is to keep on going, to continue living, to affirm and reaffirm itself in the face of imminent non-being. Incessant material turnover and exchange with the environment is both a reason for this concern and the only way to meet it. (*ibid.* 152-153)

Thus an organism's identity is not established independent of its environment, but instead it is in relation and interaction with the world that organisms create and maintain identity and meaning. The cell paradigm of selfhood (i.e. enactive or autopoietic identity) is therefore a 'verbal' conception of selfhood, in which 'self' is more verb than noun. Autopoietic systems such as cells are first-order autopoietic systems, whereas multicellular organisms, like human beings, are second-order autopoietic systems. In either case, the system establishes for itself its own identity, its own 'self' (*ibid.* 105). This selfhood is "minimal autopoietic selfhood," which does not imply consciousness or "phenomenal selfhood," which requires a nervous system (*ibid.* 162). So Thompson here is not claiming that individual cells are sentient, nor is he endorsing panpsychism. Instead, he is establishing that autopoietic systems have distinct, irreducible identities that persist through time.

Though the existence of autopoietic systems contradicts mereological reductionism, it is clear that there is still no need to indulge the idea of an eternal and ontologically independent self. Thompson's notion of minimal autopoietic selfhood is quite different from the self with which early Buddhists were concerned. Now that we have arrived at a basic conception of selfhood that is more than mereological reductionist nonself but much less than an eternal soul, let us build upon this 'middle ground' between the two extremes.

III. THE MUTE SELF

Before discussing alternative theories of selfhood, we must explore the notion of self-awareness as articulated by the Buddhist logician and scholar Dignāga (c. 480-540 ce). Dignāga's concept of self-awareness (*svasamvedana*) holds that all mental states are intrinsically self-aware. This awareness is not the result of another mental state, but instead is an intrinsic property of mental states, such as memories, sense-perception, et cetera (Kellner 2010, 204). Self-awareness is not when one is consciously aware of something or of oneself, rather, it is prior to conscious recognition of an object of cognition. Self-awareness describes how one is aware of both an object of perception and also the awareness of *being* aware. For instance, when one sees the color blue, one is aware of blueness, but one is also aware of *seeing* the blue. Self-awareness is "an immediate, non-conceptual mode of awareness that provides access to how mental content (including feelings, etc.) presents itself subjectively." In this way, self-awareness is an explanation of the *how* of mentality, not a descriptor of *what* constitutes mentality (227-228). Self-awareness is not reflective or introspective, since both of these require a higher-order mental state (*ibid.* 215).

Why can't each mental state be made aware by another mental state? Dignāga's proof of self-awareness addresses this objection (Kellner 2010, 213). It must be the case that either 1) self-awareness is an intrinsic property of cognition/ cognitions are self-experiencing, or 2) cognitions are made aware by separate cognitions. Option 2) implies an infinite regress of cognitions, since perception A would be cognized by cognition B, which would be cognized by cognition C, which would be cognized by cognition D, and so on *ad infinitum*. Dignāga chooses 1) over 2) as the best explanation, because the regress implied by 2) would itself need further explanation, while self-awareness by Dignāga's account would

explain experience and why experience seems first-personal. Self-awareness is prior to becoming consciously or reflectively aware of experience. Self-awareness is logically independent of intentional self-awareness (in which one is consciously aware of being aware of something), and intentional awareness itself may require self-awareness (206).

As a Buddhist, self-awareness for Dignāga does not constitute a self. Like Dignāga, Dan Zahavi maintains that consciousness is self-aware, yet for Zahavi this constitutes a thin or minimal self (Zahavi 2011, Zahavi 2017). According to this view, phenomenal consciousness or experience is intrinsically first-personal, even when one cannot linguistically articulate it (such as in the case of infants and nonhuman animals). Hence the label 'prereflective,' since one need not have any advanced cognitive or linguistic abilities to be a self. Selfhood is prior to reflection, that is, prior to thoughts and words. Sentience is "self-disclosing" or "self-revealing" (Zahavi 2017, 198). The first-personal character of consciousness is what differentiates sentience from non-sentience, and one's own experience from the experiences of others. Zahavi puts it nicely:

Some might object that there is no property common to all my experiences, no stamp or label that clearly identifies them as mine. But this objection is misplaced in that it looks for the commonality in the wrong place. The for-me-ness or mineness in question is not a quality like scarlet, sour, or soft. It doesn't refer to a specific experiential content, to a specific *what*, nor does it refer to the diachronic or synchronic sum of each content, or to some other relation that might obtain between the contents in question. Rather, it refers to the distinct givenness or *how* of experience. It refers to the first-personal presence of experience. It refers to the fact that the experiences I am living through are given differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anyone else. It could consequently be claimed that anybody who denies the for-me-ness or mineness of experience simply fails to recognize an essential constitutive aspect of experience. Such a denial would be tantamount to a denial of the first-person perspective. It would entail the view that my own mind is either not given to me at all — I would be mind- or self-blind — or

present to me in exactly the same way as the minds of others.”
(2011, 59, emphasis original)

This says nothing about the contents of consciousness. Instead, the prereflective self is the reflexive *what-it-is-like-for-me-ness* of consciousness (2017, 194). Here Zahavi is not positing a new and permanent entity, nor is he arguing for anything more than what a materialist account of the human person would grant. Instead, Zahavi submits that the self is “the very subjectivity of experience, and is not taken to be something that exists independently of, or in separation from, the experiential flow” (2001, 60). The very nature of consciousness makes a subject out of each sentient organism.

If the requirement for selfhood is only to be conscious, it isn’t much to be a self. Hence the alternative terms ‘thin self’ and ‘minimal self.’ The prereflective self is a ‘thin’ or ‘minimal’ self in the sense that it is not a rich enough concept to contain every sense of the word ‘self,’ such as a social self, but rather is prior to *all* uses of ‘self’ (Zahavi 2011, 67). In this way, the prereflective self predicates any interpersonal or narrative sense of self, but does not contradict it (2017, 194-195). Zahavi’s notion of prereflective selfhood is useful because it allows for more highly-elaborated conceptions of self. Any account of self, however, will necessarily presuppose the prereflective self.

In *Engaging Buddhism*, Jay Garfield challenges prereflective selfhood. Garfield identifies several tautologies in contemporary phenomenological accounts of self. Consider the claim that self-awareness is the “‘first-person givenness or manifestation of experiential life.’” Garfield responds that this is tautological: “How else could I know my own life?” (Garfield 2015, 163). Or examine the claim that “‘if there is no awareness of the experience, the object does not appear at all.’” This again is a tautology: this basically says “‘if there is no appearance of the object, there is no appearance of the object’” (165). Once more, Garfield writes that “Kriegel claims that consciousness consists in a kind of penumbral halo around every experience, whether perceptual or cognitive, that reveals it as *mine*...If the argument is meant to show that when I have an experience, it is *mine*, the claim is an empty tautology” (*ibid.* 166, emphasis original). Garfield is arguing that invoking ‘experience’ explains nothing, and that claiming consciousness is simultaneously aware of its content and its own awareness is to make an empty and false claim.

Garfield here does not consider why these claims are ostensibly tautological. The arguments for prereflective selfhood sound this way for a reason: they are describing what it is to be conscious, something with which all of us are intimately acquainted. To lay out the properties of A is not to say that "A is A," but rather to make a descriptive claim about how A is. These 'tautological' claims seem this way because to say that consciousness has first-personal character is seemingly to state the obvious. Garfield's accusations of a dearth of scientific or philosophical evidence (Garfield 2015, 166) miss the point: does the fact that consciousness is first-personal need any further defense? At the level of prereflective selfhood, we reach a certain epistemic bedrock.

Thompson defends the reflexive prereflective self by reconstructing a classic memory argument and addressing its objections. The argument goes as follows:

1. When one remembers (say) yesterday's vivid blue sky, one remembers not simply the blue sky, but also seeing the blue sky. In other words, one remembers not just the object seen, but also the visual experience of seeing. Thus the memory comprises both the objective side of the perception (the object seen) and the subjective side of the perception (the seeing). (Phenomenological claim)
2. Thus no additional cognition is necessary in order to recall the subjective side of the original experience. (Phenomenological claim)
3. To remember something one must have experienced it. (Conceptual claim)
4. The causal basis for features of the present memory is corresponding features of the past experience. (Causal claim)
5. So the past visual perception must have included an experience of the seeing, along with the object seen. In other words, the perception must have included an awareness of itself as a visual perception, which is to say that it must have been reflexively self-aware. (Conclusion) (Thompson 2011, 162)

Thompson contends that this argument is an appeal to the best explanation (163). One may object to premises 1 and 4, and argue that the experience of seeing blue is only inferred after the fact upon visiting the memory of seeing blue. One has the memory of seeing blue, and infers that one was aware of seeing blue at the time of the original perception. Thompson submits that this objection is false because it gets the nature of memory wrong.

Memory entails an intrinsic "character of pastness" that imbues it with a feeling of being a former experience. Perception is presentational, while memory is re-presentational (Thompson 2011, 164). When we remember an object, it is "re-presented" to us in consciousness in the present. Yet, though we are conscious of a memory in the *present*, the object of memory retains an historical tone. The experience is given to us as having already happened. The objection fails to explain why memories retain this character of pastness, that is, why they 'feel' different from perceptions of presented objects and imagined futures. The Husserlian account of memory as presented by Thompson contends that every memory contains in it not only the object of memory, but also the implicit awareness of experiencing that object (164-166). This implicit "character of pastness" emerges because of the nature of time-consciousness: the "now-phase" of consciousness retains the "just-past" phase, and is retentionally self-aware, allowing one to be aware of objects over time. The previous *conscious experience* of perceiving the object, as well as the *object* of consciousness itself, is re-presented in consciousness. Each conscious moment retains an impression of the moment that just passed, giving consciousness a temporal character. Thus one is implicitly aware of having experienced something in the past, allowing one to nonreflectively differentiate between a presented perception and a re-presented object of memory (*ibid.* 166-167). Thompson argues that this implicit awareness is only possible by means of the reflexively self-aware nature of consciousness (*ibid.* 166-167). Again, consciousness is simultaneously aware of its object and of experiencing the object, which includes the "pastness" of experience reconstructed in memory. This, Thompson contends, is a better account of memory than that presented by objectors.

As a result of its intrinsically first-personal, reflexive nature, consciousness creates a subject, which, Thompson argues, constitutes a prereflective self. From the standpoint of phenomenology, we need not posit an enduring self independent of psychophysical events; rather, consciousness is first-personal,

which constitutes a 'thin self,' which is by definition prior to any reflective sense of "I" (Thompson 2011, 168). This constitutes a "self-as-subject" (172). Here Thompson and Zahavi are in agreement. Any sense of an enduring self emerges *within* consciousness, that is, it is *constituted* by consciousness. There emerges a "self-as-object" of consciousness, just as there are other objects of consciousness (*ibid.* 172-173). The "self-as-object" emerges only later, and is predicated on the existence of a "self-as-subject." The reflective sense of self emerges from its reflexive first-personal stream of psychophysical events, and is "fundamentally I-making (*ahaṃkāra*)."¹ Subjectivity implies a prereflective self, and later feelings of 'I-ness' emerge, giving oneself the impression that one has a self or ego which persists through time (*ibid.* 173).

The nature of time-consciousness influences the lived experience of one's self. As noted above, time-consciousness "comprises both awareness of external things and their temporal characters, and awareness of experience itself as temporal and as unified across time" (Thompson 2007, 318). Experience includes not only the objects of consciousness, such as changing perceptions and emotions, but also the "character of pastness" that gives one the impression of enduring through time. Though the stream of consciousness is in perpetual flux, we do not experience life as a series of instantaneous moments. Rather, our experience is constituted by a temporal character, giving rise to the impression that the *I* that exists in this moment was the same *I* that existed in the past. The present is not experienced like a "knife-edge," but as a "duration block." This duration block is an intentional object of time-consciousness, and is constituted by three intentional acts: *primal impression*: the "now-phase" of an experience; *retention*: the "just-now phase," directed towards the moment that just slipped away; and *protention*: the future-oriented phase, which anticipates something coming next (318-319). These three 'acts' occur together, and collectively make up the duration block that marks our moment-to-moment experience (The words *intentional* and *act* might be misleading here. *Intentional* refers not to an intention or something of which we are consciously aware, but instead is used in its phenomenological meaning, referring to how consciousness 'aims toward' or 'intends' something [*ibid.* 22]. *Act* here doesn't refer to anything done voluntarily or consciously, but is rather something that 'is done.'). To use Thompson's example, consider listening to a melody. At any moment of listening, one experiences the note or notes being played *at that instant*. At the same time, one is co-aware of a note having

just ‘slipped-away.’ One *retains* this implicit knowledge of having just heard a note. One is also simultaneously anticipating a new note to arise to follow the one being played right now. This threefold character of experience — retention, primal impression, and protention — makes up the duration block. If it were not for retaining and anticipating coming experiences, we wouldn’t experience a melody as a coherent unit. Instead, we would only hear a series of distinct and unrelated sounds.

The way we experience time gives rise to the impression of enduring through time. Thompson writes that “the unified operation of protention, primal impression, and retention underlies our experience of the present moment as having temporal width” (Thompson 2007, 319). Each moment we experience what is directly at hand, we retain what just happened (the object of experience as well as the experiencing of it), and expect something new to come soon. This continues as long as one is conscious. Consciousness is thus horizontally unified, and is related to itself, since the present moment of consciousness is implicitly aware that one was conscious in the past (322).

For Thompson, the duration block of time-consciousness *is* the prereflective self (Thompson 2007, 322-328). Continuing with the example of hearing a melody, Thompson asserts that “the threefold structure of time-consciousness entails prereflective self-consciousness. At the same time one is aware of the melody, one is implicitly co-aware of one’s ongoing experience of that melody, thanks to the threefold temporal structure of one’s experience” (322). The very nature of consciousness creates a subject, a prereflective self. Time-consciousness — the experience of the duration block — is the bedrock of all consciousness; it is presupposed by all other conscious experiences. It is not constituted by time but rather is *constitutive* of time (*ibid.* 323-325). Thompson follows Zahavi in equating inner time-consciousness and prereflective self-awareness. There is no transitive/object-directed experiential awareness, but instead:

there is only experience of temporal objects and events in the world, as well as the prereflective and intransitive self-awareness of those very experiences. When we listen to a melody we hear the melody (transitive consciousness), but we also subjectively live through our listening (intransitive consciousness). The listening has a subjective character that makes it immediately manifest, without observation or inference, as one’s own experience...The

subjectivity of the experience consists essentially in its being intransitively and nonreflectively self-aware. Or rather it consists in its being prereflectively self-aware, for it can come to be reflected upon but is necessarily prior to any such reflection." (*ibid.* 327)

To sum it up: consciousness is prereflectively, intransitively, and reflexively self-aware. It is prereflective since one need not express it, and we can assume that non-speaking beings like infants and sentient nonhuman animals are subjects as well. Consciousness is fundamentally intransitive, since the fundamental subjective nature of consciousness is not 'directed at' any object. Subjectivity is prior to all experiences, so it doesn't matter what is *in* consciousness. Subjectivity abides as long as one is conscious. And relatedly, consciousness is reflexively self-aware because it is simply a property of consciousness to give the impression of first-personal subjectivity. That is, consciousness makes a subject. We might refer to this notion as minimal phenomenal selfhood. I find this theory of selfhood, as articulated by Thompson and Zahavi and supported by Dignāga's argument for self-awareness, to be not only convincing, but also existentially interesting, as we will see in the next section.

IV. THE LIVED SELF

In 'Against Narrativity,' Galen Strawson argues against two popular claims: the *psychological Narrativity thesis*, and the *ethical Narrativity thesis*. The psychological Narrativity thesis is a descriptive theory that claims humans experience their lives narratively (i.e. like a story) (Strawson 2004, 428). This thesis contends that humans are natural story-tellers, and we all tell ourselves stories about our own lives, with each of us the protagonist of one's own story. This is a descriptive claim, so it doesn't say whether our self-concerned narrative predilection is good or bad — it just *is*. The ethical Narrativity thesis, on the other hand, is a normative theory that maintains that humans *should* view their lives narratively, because a rich personhood necessitates a story-like outlook on one's own life (428). On this view, self-narration is necessary for leading a healthy and moral life.

Strawson submits that both of these claims are false. Strawson draws a distinction between two types of lived experience: diachronic and episodic self-experience. In diachronic self-experience, "one naturally figures oneself,

considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" (Strawson 2004, 430). In this type of self-experience, one remembers one's own past, is aware of the present, and can expect a future. One views oneself as persisting as the same person through time. In episodic self-experience, on the other hand, "one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" (430). Life is a series of 'episodes.' Although one has memories of being a person in the past, and can expect to exist in the future, one does not feel like the same 'person' or 'self' that was there in the past, and doesn't expect to be the same 'person' there in the future. Diachronic self-experience typically involves narrativity, while episodocity implies a non-narrative outlook (*ibid.* 430-432).

In order to understand what episodic self-experience is like, Strawson expounds two ways to think about one's 'self.' One can consider oneself as a human being, an organism (i.e. a second-order autopoietic system/a minimal autopoietic self). One is, of course, the same organism from the beginning of one's life until death. Each human being has memories, experiences, desires, personality traits, can think about existing in the future, etc. Strawson does not deny this. Being the same organism makes memories and expectations possible. But one can also think about oneself as a "mental entity," as an experiencer or locus of consciousness (i.e. phenomenal selfhood, but a richer notion than Zahavi's prereflective self). Strawson refers to this experiencing 'thing' as I*, me*, my*, and so on (Strawson 2004, 429-430). I exist as a human being, and did in the past. But only I* exist now, as a subject. Strawson maintains that "I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there's a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now, including special emotional and moral relevance. At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact" (434). One's past as an organism does shape what it is to be me* right now, but that does not mean that I* existed in the past. One can expect to exist and be conscious in the future, but one cannot expect I* to exist in the future.

While it is true that some people experience life narratively, the psychological Narrativity thesis is false because not *all* humans experience life that way. Strawson writes that he himself, like many others, experiences life episodically, thus contradicting the psychological Narrativity thesis (Strawson 2004, 433-434). Strawson also argues that the ethical Narrativity thesis is false because it

is possible to live a healthy, fulfilling, moral, and emotionally rich life without thinking of oneself narratively (432-433). The episodic life is in no way deprived of meaning or morality, and the narrative life is no more desirable than episodic self-experience. In short, narrative self-experience is not the only, nor the best or healthiest, way to experience one's self.

In *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, Thompson considers how one should think about the self as a living person. Thompson contends that, though we are routinely deceived about the nature of selfhood, the "mineness" of conscious experience is not a delusion (Thompson 2015, 359). Prereflective minimal selfhood (which gives rise to the feeling of "mineness"), as we have seen above, implies a subject and an agent, but not a substantially existent (ontologically independent) ego. The minimal self distinguishes 'my' experiences from everyone else's experiences (361). "I" is a label given to individuated streams of conscious experience. Using the word "I" doesn't imply the existence of an enduring ego. Instead, saying "I" is a performative utterance: "I" appropriates experience as one's own in contradistinction to the experiences of others (*ibid.* 362-363). The fact that phenomenal experience is available to you and only you, makes you *you*; it makes you a subject and permits you to say "I."

Drawing on Candrakīrti, Thompson posits that the self is "the dependently arisen and constructed appearance of an independent subject of experience and action" (Thompson 2015, 365-366). The metaphor for the self is an image in a mirror: the mistake is not in taking the mirror to be *real* — since it exists in some capacity — but rather in taking the image in the mirror to exist in its own right. The self is a construction, not an illusion. Cutting through the illusion of an independent and eternal self can still be done by means of contemplative practices and analytical insight (365).

So how should we think about our 'selves?' Thompson argues that wisdom does not entail annihilating all sense of self, but instead, it includes "knowing how to inhabit that activity ("I-making") without being taken in by the appearance of there being an independent self that's performing the activity and controlling what happens" (Thompson 2015, 366). That is, it is wise to understand that what we call "I" is a label placed on the stream of consciousness, which is predicated on the thin self. Yet where does the thin or minimal self actually get us? Given the importance of interaction in enactivism, and the importance of sociality for human well-being, how do we square such a sparse account of selfhood with

the need to act as enduring entities? Another way of putting it is this: don't we need some richer notion of selfhood that includes a sense of narrativity in order to meaningfully engage with others? Thompson's (and my) answer to this is "yes," but in a qualified way. Memory and prospection are necessary for constructing a narrative of self. Memory endows us with an autobiographical history, and prospection allows us to imagine ourselves in the future (348). These allow one to feel like the same person throughout the 'story' of one's life.

Yet one need not *identify* with one's memories or prospective thoughts — one can instead take them for what they really are: they are just *thoughts* arising and passing in a moment full of other arising and passing phenomena, such as sounds and feelings (Thompson 2015, 349-350). Being lost in thought generates so much of the suffering individuals put themselves through: rumination over past embarrassments and failures, worries over the uncertain future, etc. These thoughts are harmful insofar as one takes them to define who one is. But one can choose not to identify with one's thoughts, and instead recognize them simply as occurrences in experience. One can *feel* the difference between identifying as the "I" of those thoughts, and identifying that a thought is passing by within one's greater experiential field (350). Here Thompson distinguishes between "narrative focus," in which one identifies with descriptions of oneself, and "experiential focus," in which one can observe one's phenomenological experience from moment to moment without identification or judgement (*ibid.* 354). One can train to be more experientially focused by means of meditation and other contemplative activities. After reviewing neuroscientific studies of mindfulness practices, Thompson asserts:

it's easier to disengage from narrative forms of self-identification when we have the kind of training in present-centered awareness that mindfulness practices provide. Although we need narrative thinking to understand ourselves as individuals with personal histories and plans for the future, and as members of traditions and communities, we can easily get stuck in worrisome rumination about our past and future selves, or become attached to some mental representation of ourselves. Individuals with mindfulness training seem better able to adopt an experiential focus and avoid getting stuck in the narrative focus. In other words, they seem able to move flexibly between narrative thinking about

themselves and present-centered, embodied awareness, and imaging their brains accordingly brings to light the distinct neural systems supporting these two kinds of self-experience. (*ibid.* 355)

Accordingly, episodic lived experience is not a theoretical goal or something only certain people are born to do: it can be learned and practiced. There is a place for narrativity in one's life. We have to indulge some illusions in order to get by. However, exactly how much narrativity is necessary for a good life? Thompson doesn't say, and there may not be just one answer. Maybe it's up to each of us to discern that relationship for ourselves. Perhaps wisdom entails contemplative practices such as mindfulness in conjunction with deep reflection about how much narrativity one really needs in one's life.

Strawson's notion of episodocity squares nicely with Thompson's advocacy of experiential focus and mindfulness. To abet episodic self-understanding, one might employ mindfulness practices. Given the amount of suffering brought on by narrative conceptions of self, I see little reason to entertain the ethical Narrativity thesis. I would like to put forward, to parallel Strawson, the *ethical Episodicity thesis*. One should live/view one's life episodically because 1) it is closer to the truth about selves (the minimal self is a constantly fluctuating and egoless *process* of subjectivity), and 2) I think the Buddha is right in his assessment of the self: seeing the self for what it is reduces suffering. I see the success of mindfulness as support for the ethical Episodicity thesis. Through some forms of meditation, one can discover for oneself the centerlessness or egolessness of consciousness. One can reap real benefits from meditation. Episodicity and mindfulness allow one to cultivate for oneself a mature relationship with one's thoughts, memories, goals, and anything else we would usually ascribe to an enduring self. In this way, we can better understand ourselves as organisms and as mental entities. In doing so, hopefully we can save ourselves from some unnecessary suffering.

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