

EXPERIENCE, SELF AND INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A.H. Almaas¹

Abstract: This paper addresses the phenomenological givens of all experience: first personal givenness, reflexivity of consciousness, and unity of experience in space and time. The discussion so far has focused on pure consciousness, the ground of being in many Eastern spiritual teachings and the illusion of an individual self. I contend that this does not fully account for these phenomenological givens and propose an individual consciousness through which pure consciousness expresses itself. I relate this notion to Western notions of soul.

Introduction

Are there irreducible elements in the phenomenology of experience? Do these imply some kind of self? If they do, what kind of self is necessary to account for them? If not, then how do we account for them? And how do all these figure in actual lived experience?

I am somewhat familiar with the discussion amongst philosophers and scholars about the phenomenology of experience and its implications for self. I am indebted for my knowledge of this discussion mostly to the excellent book, *Self, No Self*, edited by Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, plus my familiarity with Advaita Vedanta and the various Buddhist views of self. [In using quotes from this book, I will simply state the name of the

¹ <http://www.ahalmaas.com/>

author and the page number, in the rest of this paper.] While drawing on these sources, my participation in this discussion and my suggestions and solutions directly reflect my own research and experience of spiritual illumination and the wisdom of the teaching that forms its context, the Diamond Approach. Therefore, my discussion of this topic will rely heavily on experiential verification, whether of ordinary experience or the illuminated realization of many of the traditions. In my view, the discussion of the phenomenology of experience in its relation to self or no self cannot be settled without some of the insights that occur in the experience of spiritual illumination, as some of the participants have already done by using insights from Advaita Vedanta and some of Buddhist schools. Furthermore, according to my understanding, it cannot be satisfactorily settled by only one kind of spiritual experience, like the realization of pure consciousness of Advaita Vedanta or transparent empty awareness of Mahayana Buddhism.

This discussion is quite significant for spiritual teachings and traditions, for the question of self is central in almost all of them. There is an almost unanimous agreement that the ordinary self, of seeing oneself as an entity with independent existence, agency and ownership, is the primary obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, and is the repository of human suffering, misery and ignorance. However, there is no agreement about what the experience of freedom from such reified self is like. The focus of this study will not be on the freedom from the self and the differences in spiritual teachings, but on accounting for the primary and unconstructed phenomenological characteristics of experience in general, whether ordinary or spiritually illuminated. By attempting to account for such characteristics, we have to deal with the question of self, whether it exists, or what form of it is necessary for experience.

The Phenomenological Givens

The discussion that has been occurring has usefully reduced the elements of the phenomenology of experience to three primary elements. All three tend to allude to the possibility of a self, and hence the investigation is of these three elements and whether they imply a self, what kind of self, or no self at all. Thus, this present study will focus on these three elements and discuss how we can account for them.

First is the fact of first personal givenness to any experience, that whatever experience occurs it always occurs to someone. Experience naturally and inherently possesses a first personal character to it. We all have this particular first-hand mode of access to the goings-on in our heads, consciousness, or perception. Experiential phenomena are never given anonymously, but always first-personally. There are no floating experiences; experiences are always ontologically and epistemologically owned by someone, some consciousness or self.

According to Zahavi: “First personal self-givenness is meant to pinpoint the fact that instinctively conscious mental states are given in a distinct manner, with a distinct subjective presence, to the subject whose mental states they are, a way that in principle is unavailable to others. ... The first-personal self-givenness is distinctive even before, say, a child becomes explicitly aware of it.” [Zahavi 2011: 60] This property highlights the inherently perspectival character of all experience, not in the sense of occurring from a mentally held point of view, but of phenomenologically and readily belonging to someone. We will leave till later what we mean by *someone*, for much of the discussion is about exactly the nature of this someone.

Zahavi clarifies this notion: “For a subject to own something in a perspectival sense is simply for the experience, thought, or action in question to present itself in a distinctive manner to the subject whose experience, thought or action it is.” [Zahavi 2011: 61]

It is from this consideration, and the other two to be discussed later, that Zahavi posits the existence of what he terms *the minimal self*. “I wish to insist on the basic and quite formal individuation of experiential life as well as on the irreducible difference between one stream of consciousness and another stream of consciousness. ... Only my experiences are given in a first-personal mode of presentation to me.” [Zahavi 2011: 68]. Zahavi here points also to the fact that our experiences happen in a stream, we each have our own stream of experiences, and we do not confuse ours with others. Ganeri connects first personal self-givenness to the sense of ownership, not the psychological inference of owning something, but the unconstructed and natural phenomenological mineness inherent in all experience, at least in all ordinary experiences: “The mineness is not something attended to; it simply figures as a subtle background presence.....everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else.” [Ganeri 2011:182]

It is difficult to argue with this observation, but the question becomes whether this implies a perceiver, a subject, a self. In other words, how do we account for this undeniable property of experience, and does our accounting necessitate a constructed entity or not? An important part of the discussion is Zahavi’s solution: “What the careful consideration of phenomenal character can support is a minimal self, the subject whose existence is allegedly disclosed in and through the reflexive nature of consciousness.” [Zahavi 2011: 15]

The second property is that of the reflexivity that is always present in experience. The observation, dated by some of the participants back to Hume and Husserl but obviously appearing much earlier in some spiritual teachings, is that whenever we are aware of an object, we are also aware that we are aware of the object. You do not simply see an apple; you are always aware that you are seeing an apple. To put it more neutrally: there is normally not simply the seeing of an apple, but always accompanying such seeing there is simultaneously the awareness or recognition of seeing the apple. (This observation holds whether our experience is dual or nondual, just as first personal givenness does.)

Phenomenology refers to this as the reflexivity of consciousness. According to Dreyfus: “The object does not appear directly or nakedly to consciousness but through the phenomenal form it gives rise to in the cognitive process, its manifestation within the field of consciousness. ... The implication of this view is that consciousness is intrinsically self-aware.” [Dreyfus 2011:120] Thompson puts it this way: “One of the central theses found in the phenomenological tradition is that intentionality (the object-directedness of consciousness) essentially involves self awareness. [Thompson 2011: 157] And quoting Husserl: “Every experience is ‘consciousness’, and consciousness is ‘consciousness of.’ But every experience is itself experienced ... and to that extent also ‘conscious’” [Thompson 2011: 158] Quoting Sartre: “The necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge of its object, is that it be consciousness of itself as being that knowledge. Every consciousness exists as consciousness of existing.” [Thompson 2011: 158] Quoting Merleau-Ponty: “All thought of something is at the same time self-consciousness, failing which it could have no object.” [Thompson 2011: 158]

This observation is not as readily or easily evident as that of first personal givenness, but becomes undeniable upon reflection on our experience. There seems to be agreement by all participants about this property of experience. I will be discussing later how this property masks two different kinds of reflexivity, one is characteristic of ordinary experiences and the other is available only in spiritual realization. It seems that some of the participants gloss over this difference, with no one differentiating these two kinds.

The third property is unity of experience which is both synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic unity is the fact that at any moment all the elements of our experience are known to be our experience. They are unified as belonging to the same consciousness. Your thoughts, feelings, sensations, seeing of external objects, hearing of sounds, tastes and smells, are all integrated into one whole, as your experience. There is no claim that they are harmoniously integrated, or that there might not be fragmentation in mentation or perception, but there is usually no doubt that they are all yours, whether you take yourself to be a self or not. It is clear how this observation can be taken to mean that there is a self that is at the center of this synchronic unity, which, of course, raises the question of the nature of this self, if we believe in it.

The synchronic unity is always streaming, for each moment is followed by another moment of experience. However, we are ordinarily aware that all the moments are our moments, not somebody else's. In other words, my experience yesterday is united with my experience of the day before it, and both with my experience today, by the mere fact that they are all my experiences. This is diachronic unity, the unity of the stream of experiences along the time axis. Zahavi uses Husserl's notion that the moment has thickness: "I would propose that the

unity of the stream of consciousness is constituted by inner time-consciousness, by the interplay between what Husserl calls primal impression, retention and protention.” [Zahavi 2011: 72] Impression is directly of this moment; retention is the glimpse or sense that it is a continuation from a previous moment; protention is the future orientation or expectation that another moment will follow. He sees such diachronic unity implied by the fact that all moments of experience share the same first personal givenness: “My present act of remembering and the past act of that which is being remembered both share similar first-personal self-givenness.” [Zahavi 2011: 73] We must remark here that in spiritual realization of pure consciousness or awareness, the realization can be so complete that there is only the sense or impression of now, with no sense of retention or protention. However, ordinary experiences all contain the protention and retention components of the present moment. Zahavi uses first personal self givenness with diachronic unity to posit his sense of self, the minimal self: “In my view the continuity provided by the stream of consciousness, the unity provided by shared first-personal self-givenness, is sufficient for the kind of experiential self-identity that I am eager to preserve.” [Zahavi 2011: 76]

The Extant Discussion

Zahavi is not referring to the ordinary sense of self of being an individual entity that independently exists and is the center and agent of perception and actions. The idea of the minimal self is that there is a sense of I that does not mean there is an abiding entity, but simply a sense of subjectivity that is inherent in the experiencing itself. This sense of I that

gives us the sense of mineness is what is common to all the experiences of one stream of consciousness. This sense of I is prereflective and is based on the instinctual and prereflective first personal givenness: “The self is defined as the very subjectivity of experience, and is not taken to be something that exists independently of, or in separation from, the experiential flow.” [Zahavi 2011: 60]

But what is this minimal I, and how do we account for the stream of experience anyway? Most participants seem to not question what the stream is, except to recognize it as the flow of experiences. And the self, minimal I for Zahavi, or thin subject for Strawson is then something that accompanies and characterizes the stream of experience. Such a formulation fits well with some of the Buddhist schools, since for them there is no substantial self-abiding I, only a sense of I that characterizes the stream. In other words, the stream has a sense of identity, of recognizing itself.

In our view, this does not fully account for the phenomenological elements we are discussing. Why is there a stream of experience, and what is it? And what is this identity that it seems to have? We see them experientially, but do we understand them? Let us investigate further. AlBahari subscribes to the idea that there is a stream of consciousness, but posits that it is fundamentally a witnessing consciousness that is always simply witnessing the flow of experiences and that the witnessing consciousness should not be confused with the particular experiences: “The heart of the self-illusion will instead, I contend, lie in the personalized identity that seems to place a boundary around the real unified perspective, turning it into what I call a personal owner. ... What remains after the sense of self has dissolved is a unified perspectival witness-consciousness, that insofar as it lacks the illusion of a personal

self, is intrinsically ownerless.” [Albahari 2011: 82] Albahari goes as far as contending that what is fundamental to the stream is simply seeing itself, not something that sees: “The subject describes that aspect of the ordinary self which is the inner locus of the first-person perspective ... Witness-consciousness is nothing but seeing itself.” [Albahari 2011: 83]

This takes us to the Vedantic view that Fasching uses in his discussion. He explores the consciousness that always characterizes any experience: “Witness is not understood as an observing entity standing opposed to what it observes, but as the very taking place of witnessing itself, and witnessing is nothing other than the taking place of the experiential presence of experiences, in which the experiences have their very being-experienced and thereby their existence.” [Fasching 2011: 203] Fasching seems to understand the flow of experience as pointing to the witnessing which is continuous throughout the whole stream, and takes this witnessing as the self, or his idea of what the self is that the phenomenology of experience points to: “Consciousness is the witnessing [experiencing] of the experiences, and while the experiences change, experiencing itself abides. The shining itself [is] the principle of revealedness. ... It is present and it is precisely its presence that is the medium of the presence of everything.” [Fasching 2011: 201]

Fasching proposes this solution as an alternative to the Buddhist view of the Abidharma, which posits that the sense of self does appear but it is an integration of a conglomeration of elements: “A person is, in the Buddhist view, nothing but a certain psychophysical complex, that is, an appropriately organized collection of skandhas...[Fasching 2011: 196] For this Buddhist school, when this organization is deconstructed, the sense of self disappears, and

there is no self. In other words, even the stream is questioned and seen as a string of moments whose organization as a self is an error.

The Abidharma school does not actually give the stream much importance and does not have a concept that unifies it except the view that it is an illusion or error. Albahari and Fasching give it more inherent coherence, as does Ram-Prasad: “The Advaitin rejects the idea of an individual self which happens to possess the capacity for consciousness. ... Advaita therefore has a complex and ambiguous view of the perspectival nature of consciousness: on the one hand admitting that that is constitutive of subjectivity, and on the other denying that that implies an individual subject.” [Ram-Prasad 2011: 226] Ram-Prasad identifies consciousness with *atman*, the higher self of Vedanta: ‘What the Advaitins call atman is not the self of individuated consciousness. For them, atman is simply the consciousness itself that does the taking of itself as an individual. Consciousness is not designated even by the bare I.” [Ram-Prasad 2011: 230] And further: “For the Advaitin, consciousness of individuality is an illusion, atman is not one particular entity but the consciousness which mistakenly generates individuality.” [Ram-Prasad 2011: 232]

We question the Advaitic idea that consciousness mistakenly generates individuality. We will get back to this important point but first we want to continue with our thread of how the phenomenology of self has been understood. Advaita Vedanta, unlike Buddhism, adheres to the point of view that there is an underlying unchanging ground of pure consciousness and that spiritual illumination is awakening to this truth. Pure consciousness, whether referred to as *atman*, *satchitananda* or *Brahman*, is the self, and the I always refers to this self, whether we know it or not. That was actually Ramana Maharshi’s assertion, one of the leading figures

in Advaita Vedanta in the twentieth century. The error is misidentifying the self with the reified separately existing entity.

Buddhism tends to partly agree with Advaita Vedanta that there is an error of identifying with the separate self, but its solution is different. It considers the Vedantic solution as substantialist and eternalist, believing in an unchanging substratum that exists. One strand of Mahayana Buddhism believes that recognizing the lack of inherent existence of self and all phenomena is the ultimate truth, the apprehension of which constitutes liberation. Emptiness is seen not as a substratum but as the negation of existence that leaves no remainder. All of reality is then perceived as illusory appearance. From this perspective, Advaita Vedanta negates reality of phenomena but affirms the existence of being or *satchitananda*, while emptiness is a non-affirming negative. According to the 14th Dalai Lama: “Therefore, an ultimate truth, or emptiness, is a non-affirming negative. ... This means that to a mind decisively realizing from the depths this non-affirming negative, the object of apprehension is just this elimination of the object of negation—just this absence of inherent existence.” [The Fourteenth Dalai Lama 1984: 198]

However, another strand of Mahayana Buddhism, as expressed in Mahamudra and Dzogchen, thinks of the ultimate truth not simply as emptiness, but as an awareness whose very essence is this non-affirming negative. Such awareness or clear light is referred to as *rigpa* in Tibetan. In the same book His Holiness writes: “It is basic knowledge (*rig pa*), clear light (*'od gsal*), the fundamental innate mind of clear light (*gnyung ma lhan cig skyes, pa'l 'od gsal*) which is the final status (*gnas lugs*) of all things.” [The Fourteenth Dalai Lama 1984: 208] This points to a split in Mahayana Buddhism, mostly around the meaning of the term

tathatagarbha or Buddha nature. One school (Shentong) sees it as the luminous awareness that is the nature of all phenomena, and the other (Rangtong) sees it as simply the emptiness of inherent existence of any phenomena. “Thus, the Yogachara Madhyamika came to be known as Shentong and the other Madhyamikas received the slightly derogatory name of ‘Rangtongpas.’” [Hookam 199:140]

We see here that the Shentong school of Buddhism is close to Advaita Vedanta, but they differentiate themselves by emphasizing that their pure nondual awareness is empty of existence, that it is characterized by emptiness, which is more like nonbeing than being. Yet, for our study here this is not the relevant area; what matters is that both Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism negate the reality of individual self, though there are differences in how they understand it. Another salient point is that both assert that the enlightened condition is nondual in its perception, where all phenomena and objects of perception are not separate from consciousness or awareness, while also being manifestations of it and inseparable from it. This makes empty awareness a kind of permanent truth, albeit referred to as primordial. This is how Dudjom Rinpoche put it: “All phenomena of existence, *samsara* and enlightenment, are a groundless and rootless display. Realize the all-inclusive natural state in encompassing, pervasive space is inexpressible empty clarity. This is Great Perfection Inconceivable view.” [Dudjom Rinpoche 2005: 93]

Reflexivity

Here, we can discuss the two kinds of reflexivity. In the above mentioned nondual kind of experience, whether we are positing the presence of consciousness or the empty expanse of awareness, the mode of knowing is reflexive. However, this reflexivity is different from the ordinary knowing in which we know our thoughts and feelings. It is also different from knowing that we are perceiving something, as in being aware that we are aware of an apple. In spiritual realization in general, and so obviously the case in nondual consciousness or awareness, the knowing is not reflexive in this manner. The knowing of consciousness is not simply the knowing that we are conscious of the fact that we are seeing an apple. It is more importantly the knowing of consciousness itself, as the luminosity of knowing. This is true for both Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism and in most mystical experiences. In both Dzogchen and Mahamudra, the main nondual Buddhist teachings, awakening is nothing but the recognition of the empty pure awareness itself. This means recognizing it by being it, and this way, recognizing its emptiness and clarity as inseparable. But it is not by looking back at it and examining it. It is knowing by being. We might think that there is some kind of reflexivity here, but if reflexivity is seen as looking back at awareness, or looking inward to see it, then the mode of knowing is dualistic, and hence not realized.

I am differentiating this kind of reflexivity from the one discussed by phenomenologists, which is more akin to ordinary reflexive consciousness. The participants in this discussion are not simply referring to the ordinary looking back at experience, or reflecting on it. They are concerned about the naturally given and prereflective consciousness of consciousness, that we know that we know when we know something. But this is a knowing of a function, of a capacity that consciousness possesses, not a knowing of consciousness itself, in its essence

or its being. In other words, the phenomenologists are perceiving a capacity of consciousness, not its facticity. Some Vedantists and even some Dzogchen writers express the realization as simply experiencing or witnessing, which sounds as if it is referring to an activity or a functional process, similar to what the phenomenologists are referring to. But this is not usually the view of these traditions about consciousness or awareness. Even though pure consciousness or pure awareness is timeless and not a thing, it is still conceived of as possessing properties like luminosity, emptiness, bliss, peacefulness and so on. When it is referred to as inexpressible or having no qualities, it is still a truth that realizes itself, that knows itself and knows that even though all phenomena are its expressions, it still can differentiate its essence and purity, regardless of how qualitless it is.

This mode of reflexivity, of knowing by being, is the well known spiritual capacity recognized by most spiritual traditions. It is termed *yeshe* in Tibetan, *Jnana* in Sanskrit, *Ma'rifa* in Arabic, *noesis* in Greek and *gnosis* in English. Without it there is no spiritual illumination. It is like the light knowing it is light by being the illuminating light, both perceptually and epistemologically. Here is what Plotinus had said about it (where by Intellectual Principle he meant his second hypostasis, the realm of divine intellect): "Hence, we may conclude that, in the Intellectual Principle itself, there is complete identity of Knower and known, and this not by way of domiciliation, as in the case of even the highest soul, but by Essence, by the fact that, there, no distinction exists between Being and Knowing." [Plotinus 1991: 241]

I have brought in a Western perspective for many reasons that will become apparent. One is that nondual perception is known in many of the Western traditions, in fact, in the mysticism of all of the three monotheistic traditions and in the Greek tradition. Second is that these

traditions contain elements lacking in Advaita Vedanta or the Buddhist nondual schools. We might just want to say that in our view, they contain a different kind of wisdom, a wisdom that can help us account for the phenomenology of experience more adequately than the Eastern ones.

This brings us to an important observation and some questions. Using Advaita or Buddhist thinking to account for the three phenomenological elements of experience is actually unconvincing and somewhat inadequate, both for my experience and my thinking. Pure consciousness or pure awareness does not say anything about first personal givenness, the reflexivity of consciousness, or the synchronic and diachronic unity, and hence cannot truly account for the sense of self. Pure awareness, pure consciousness or being can account for the fact that there is experience, that there is perception, for that is their primary element. It is what gives the capacity for experiencing, for perceiving. However, the mode of experiencing is of the nondual kind of reflexivity, where the known, the knower and knowledge are one. Some even think it is simply the perceiving. How do we then account for the ordinary reflexivity and its associated kind that the phenomenologists have noticed? Where does self reflection come from if pure awareness knows by being, by identity? How does the ordinary capacity of looking back at our experience come about, if our true nature and the nature of our consciousness is nondual knowing by identity? This is the first question that has not been asked in the discussion by the various contributors to the Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi volume.

Furthermore, in the nondual teachings the nondual truth is boundless and infinite, nonlocal and totally pervasive. In the realization of nondual truth, which in most cases is the heart of

any genuine enlightenment in a spiritual or mystical tradition, all experience is unified; there is no separation of one thing from another. By recognizing we are the consciousness we recognize we are everything, for everything is simply the manifestation of consciousness. Furthermore, in such realization, there is no self or self centeredness, no separate self or entity. We are all and everything, which is a nonnumerical oneness. The Vedantist will call such condition Self and the Buddhist will call it no self, though certainly, there are some differences in the experience between the two. The important point, however, is that there is no sense of being an individual in such illuminated experience.

This is one reason there is a danger of solipsism in this kind of spiritual illumination. There is no experience of being an individual, but rather of being the whole. How do we then account for the personal self-givenness of experience? The various writers have used the expression “stream of experience” in order to not use the terms self or individual, but we can say that this is simply a linguistic device and does not get us off the hook. The expression “stream of experience” still indicates the presence of some individuation, if simply for the fact that there is more than one stream of experience. You have your stream of experience, and I have mine. Your stream of experience might be of nondual realization of satchitananda and mine might be of nondual empty awareness, but obviously there are two, and they are different. Such observation indicates that first personal givenness persists even in nondual experience, for it is not constructed. Nondual realization simply disposes of constructions of the mind, and since first personal givenness is not constructed by any mind, as attested to by all the writers in this discussion; it endures or perdures. What accounts for the fact that there are multiple

streams of experience, even though our experience might be of unity of everything? This is the second question.

We need to note that without the fact that there are multiple streams of experience, there will be no first personal givenness of experience. Without this subjective multiplicity, first personal givenness won't have any meaning or relevance, and we won't be having this discussion.

Advaita gives an explanation to this issue. As quoted earlier, Ram-Prasad writes: "The Advaitin rejects the idea of an individual self which happens to possess the capacity for consciousness. ... Advaita therefore has a complex and ambiguous view of the perspectival nature of consciousness: on the one hand admitting that that is constitutive of subjectivity, and on the other denying that that implies an individual subject." [Ram-Prasad 2011: 226] And again: "What the Advaitins call atman is not the self of individuated consciousness. For them, atman is simply the consciousness itself that does the taking of itself as an individual.

Consciousness is not designated even by the bare I." [Ram-Prasad 2011: 230] Further, he explicitly states the view of Advaita Vedanta about how the stream of experience happens: "For the Advaitian, consciousness of individuality is an illusion, atman is not one particular entity but the consciousness which mistakenly generates individuality." [Ram-Prasad 2011: 232]

In other words, there is a need for some kind of individuality, or at least individuation of consciousness, that appears to us as a stream of experience. However, the view of most lineages of Advaita Vedanta is that such a stream occurs because the ultimate Self, pure boundless and infinite consciousness, creates or generates the illusion of individuality. It is traditionally expressed as "the ultimate truth manifests the illusion of an individual in order for

it to realize itself.” In other words, there is first personal givenness of experience and reflexivity of consciousness, all because of an illusion. We cannot deconstruct first personal givenness or reflexivity of consciousness because they are phenomenological givens. Therefore, this illusion is generated by pure consciousness itself because it needs it. It is sometimes referred to as a “convenient fiction.”

I have always wondered how odd such a solution is, and how odd that many actually buy it. The fact is that many have accepted it and still take it to be the true explanation of our observations. Furthermore, more importantly, why would something like ultimate reality, the essence of all truth, need an illusion for it to know itself? What does convenience have to do with ultimate truth whether it is pure consciousness, empty awareness, or divine presence? One way to consider this is to ask: “Who’s fiction is it, whose error is it?” Most of the time, Eastern nondual teachings will say it is ignorance on the part of the individual. But this answer contravenes the truth of nondual realization. Nondual realization reveals that there are no separate individuals with separate wills. So what does it mean that one is under the illusion of being a separate entity? There are no separate entities, according to the truth of spiritual illumination, so they cannot have produced such illusions. The proposition, in other words, is that a nonexistent illusion of an individual has the illusion of being an existent individual! I am sure Vedanta has alternative solutions, but they have not been mentioned by any of the participants. One such solution is that the entity self is the construction of the mind. But we ask again, whose mind, and where does this mind come from? If there are fundamentally no separate selves, then whose mind could it be? Is it the mind of a fictive individual, or the mind of pure consciousness itself? If it is the mind of pure consciousness, then how come it is

located in time and space and appears as many streams, each with the illusion of an entity self?

The Buddhists give several solutions, depending on what school we consider. We have mentioned the Abidharma tradition that considers the entity self as an illusion created by the integration of five elements, the 5 skandhas theory. Abidharma, however, does not really consider the stream in any satisfactory way, for it considers it as a string of moments not connected together except through the illusion of an abiding self. Dreyfus gives the view from the later Mahayana school, that of Yogachara: “Although we have a sense of a constant presence in our psychic life, this constancy seems to be better accounted for as a constantly changing but always renewed background of awareness, rather than an unchanging presence.” [Dreyfus 2011: 141] and further: “Several Yogachara texts describe the basic consciousness as a person. ... Although the basic consciousness has a close connection to the notion of the person it is not a self in the sense delineated here, since it is neither enduring nor is it bounded or endowed with a sense of agency.” [Dreyfus 2011: 145] Here the proposition is that the stream of consciousness is explained by the basic consciousness, referred to as *alaya* or *alaya vijnana*. This becomes more precise and clear in later tantras, especially the Anuttara class of tantras used by various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Here is an account by a Tibetan lama from the Gelugpa school: “While the gross body and mind are temporary bases upon which the ‘I’ is imputed, the primary and continuously residing bases of imputation are the very subtle mind and its mounted wind. ... The subtle body of the continuously residing continuum on the other hand, never dies.” [Gyatso 1982: 195]

There are two important propositions here: first, there is such a thing as a subtle mind, which is a residing continuum that accounts for reincarnation; second, it functions as the deeper and subtler bases of imputation of a sense of I. The 14th Dalai Lama makes this even clearer: “The mere self or mere I—a self that does not inherently exist—goes from one lifetime to another. Also, even though consciousness is closely related with matter, consciousness is an entity of mere luminosity and knowing. ... The existent self or I is designated upon this continuum of mind.” [The Fourteenth Dalai Lama 1984: 166]

We get here something similar to Zahavi’s minimal self, but also an explanation of the stream of experience and its diachronic unity. The Dalai Lama makes this very clear in another occasion when he teaches that the higher tantras conceive of two levels of mind, gross and subtle. The gross level is what most people are aware of, and the subtle level is of the nature of clear light: “This twofold continuum is forever unbroken, from beginningless time to endless future; and this is the subtle basis of designation for self. So the self can be designated on the basis of gross physical and mental aggregates, and also on the basis of these very subtle phenomena.” [Varela 1997: 93]

This kind of account is much more convincing and more in line with the phenomenological considerations of experience. The relation between this continuum of clear light and the clear light of pure awareness is not discussed in these quotes but Buddhist texts refer frequently to what happens in enlightenment, a central element of it being the union between the son and mother clear light. My understanding is that the son clear light is a reference to the individual continuum of subtle consciousness, and mother clear light refers to the fundamental nature of reality, the clear light that is the basis and nature of everything. It is not clear, however,

whether the notion of a continuum of subtle consciousness, which is of the nature of empty clear light, accounts for reflexivity of consciousness, for the subtle continuum of mind is of the nature of clear light, which is the same clear light that is the nondual pure awareness that is the nature of all phenomena. The fundamental pure awareness which is clear light has the mode of knowing by being, without reflection upon itself.

A View of Individual Consciousness

The notion of a continuum of subtle consciousness implies that it is the carrier or medium where all experiences occur. It clarifies how there is a stream of experience and why there are multiple streams of experience. The individual subtle consciousness is what gives experience a diachronic continuity and gives a convincing accounting of first personal givenness. It is not the sense of I, but the I is imputed upon it as its basis. Hence, the I is like an identity tag for the particular stream of experience.

In order to account for the other phenomenological elements we need to consider the notion of individual consciousness, which is important in our Diamond Approach teaching. The notion subscribes to the Buddhist tantric notion of an individual continuum of subtle consciousness, but does not divide it into subtle and gross levels. It is the same continuum with the potential of revealing itself as clear light, as gross consciousness, as both together, or something altogether different. It is first of all not simply pure universal consciousness, but an individual form of consciousness that pure consciousness manifests and which possesses many of its inherent properties. We know from nondual realization that pure consciousness or

awareness manifests all forms as expressions of itself. This teaching does not see them as illusion, the way some Vedantists like Shankara take them, but illusion-like, the way some Buddhists refer to them. They are not illusions, but seeing the forms as separate, the way ordinary experience takes it, is an illusion. More accurately, their separateness and independent existence is an illusion, as seen from the view of nondual realization. They are all expressions of the fundamental truth of Being, consciousness or awareness. One such form is different from other forms as rocks and clouds are different without being fundamentally separate from one another. These are the individual consciousnesses that form individual beings. These beings are not entity selves, but direct expressions of pure consciousness and carriers of its properties. They are like the waves of the ocean, not separate from the ocean. Pure consciousness is simply water, but usually experienced as infinite and beyond time, while individual consciousness is individual and experienced as a continuum where all experiences appear. Hence we experience it as the stream of experience. The fact is that the stream is a flow of consciousness that specifies its appearance as particular experiences. Awakening is simply pure awareness, boundless and infinite, recognizing *through the individual consciousness which it manifests* and what it is.

In this teaching, individual consciousness is not a conceptual construct or a created notion, but rather an experiential reality that reveals itself as part of the Diamond Approach path. This notion and experience of individual consciousness goes a long way to address the phenomenology of experience, and in our view, it does this more adequately than has been done before with only Eastern teachings and the philosophy of phenomenology. The moment we recognize individual consciousness, many veils fall away and many vexing questions are

answered. First, we recognize that what we usually think of as the self, which is the entity self with independent existence and volition, is simply a reification of the individual consciousness. Fully understanding individual consciousness in spiritually illuminated experience reveals it to be of the nature of consciousness but in a different way from other forms of manifestation. A nonsentient being such as a rock is a manifestation of pure consciousness, but we realize that, as an individual consciousness, we are a window for pure consciousness to perceive its manifestations. In fact, there is no experience without individual consciousness; *pure consciousness on its own is incapable of having experience*. It is pure awareness but this awareness needs a lens, an organ, for it to perceive and to experience. Just as the body needs the eyes to see, so pure universal consciousness needs the individual consciousness as an organ for experience. As some of the participants have indicated, experience is never anonymous; it is always someone's experience.

I am not aware of any of the Eastern Vedantic or Buddhist nondual traditions referring to this important point. Yogachara and Tantric Buddhism recognize individual subtle consciousness, but I am not aware of any discussion of its necessity for experience. It is discussed to explain the phenomena of reincarnation and diachronic continuity of experience. Other, usually Western, traditions have recognized this fact. A well-known statement by one of the great Sufis, Ibn Al-Arabi, puts this in clear relief: God needs the soul as much as the soul needs God. We will discuss later the relation of individual consciousness to the Western notion of soul.

We can now understand first personal givenness of experience without having to consider the question of self or no self. The conversation so far has resulted either in the positing of a

minimal self or the pure consciousness self of Vedanta or sometimes the no self of many schools of Buddhism. Said alternatively, first personal givenness points to individuation of consciousness, that consciousness has to express itself as individual consciousness for there to be experience. Whether this consciousness is a self or not is another question, which is also worthy of exploration. Yogachara does not consider the continuum of consciousness as a self but thinks of the sense of self as imputed on it. Such a mere self is reminiscent of Zahavi's minimal self or Strawson's thin subject. How does our teaching think of the self in relation to experience?

We can think of the individual consciousness as the self, but this means it has the ownership of experience. Even though any experience belongs to a particular stream, i.e., a particular individual consciousness, we need to remember that the individual consciousness is simply an organ of experience for pure universal consciousness and the true being of all reality. In other words, in illuminated experience of nondual awareness, we see that the true owner of all experiences of all streams is pure awareness itself. Pure awareness is the only subject, but it has multiple foci of experience, each of them an individual consciousness. We know of the human form as an example of individual consciousness. However, this means that pure awareness is the true self, which is the position of Advaita Vedanta. This teaching includes such realization, for it recognizes the experience of boundless or formless consciousness as our being, our nature. Such Advaitic realization of pure witnessing consciousness as the true Self is, on our path, a valid and true form of realization, a realization that is tantamount to liberation. Yet, this is not all. The teaching includes a different kind of nondual realization where awareness is empty of inherent existence, and hence totally selfless. This is similar to

the view of nondual Buddhist teachings. But there are two kinds of such emptiness of self, just as there are in Buddhism. There is the realization that pure empty awareness is the nature and ground of all phenomena, without the connotation of self or of subsistence in a substantial manner. In this realization, awareness can be seen as the rightful owner of all experiences. And then there is the realization of emptiness as the nature of all phenomena, and hence there is no owner of experience at all. There is perception without a perceiver, experience without a subject. This is recognized by the Madhyamika schools of Buddhism, as well as some of the Vedantist schools. In our teaching, both forms of realization are true liberation, even though they are different from the dominant Advaitic kind. Each is its own truth, valid in terms of affording true liberation.

Self

The question of self is more complex and more involved, and it requires a greater experience and understanding of individual consciousness and its relation to pure awareness (which we prefer to refer to as our true nature) to have a satisfactory understanding of the felt phenomena of self. Upon inquiry, we first encounter the ordinary self, which conceives of itself as an entity in time and space, bounded by the body, possessing a sense of agency, and functioning as the subject of all experiences. We can first recognize it as a narrative self, for it is a way we know ourselves, including the story of our personal history and the stories from others. Upon further inquiry, we recognize that the narrative self is a later development and that the sense of self has deeper roots. This has been seen by phenomenological

investigation. In his discussion of the narrative self, Krueger refers to two ways of looking at the narrative account of the self. The first is the narrative enhancement accounts of self (NEA): “NEA allows for the prior existence of self capable of being narratively explicated or enhanced in the first place. ... The salient point is that, for NEA, the narrative self is a derivative notion dependent upon a more basic pre-narrative self.” [Krueger 2011: 36-37] He continues: “The first-person perspective, or the subject to whom the world is given in a first-personal mode of presentation, is thus phenomenologically and ontologically prior to the narrative self.”[Krueger 2011: 38].

We find this to be true in our inquiry, but also that it bypasses other forms or dimensions of self. As we see through the narrative dimension of the self, we may recognize that this narrative is partly unconscious, and that structures and dimensions of the entity self that precede narration but are still constructed underlie it. These are dimensions related to the impact of experience on the individual consciousness. We find that the individual consciousness is impressionable, especially in early childhood. Therefore its early experience, some of it preverbal, impacts it in such a way that it leaves traces that then become agglomerated together to form a sense of entity. This agglomeration corresponds to the body and its experiences, as well as its experiences with its care givers. The individual consciousness, which begins life with no conceptual or explicit sense of self recognition, develops this sense gradually by integrating its various impressions into an overall sense of self with boundaries and identity. Most of these impressions that structure the individual consciousness are mental representations of early experiences, but some are preverbal and constitute unrepresentable impressions. We may include the representations in the narrative

self, but the more primitive early structures that precede the capacity to represent are prior and form the deeper strata of the sense of the ordinary self. This development of the sense of self has been studied extensively by schools of psychoanalysis, including ego psychology, object relations theory and self psychology. It is actually the content of these structures, both representational and precognitive, that contain most of the suffering and conflicts of the ordinary self and generates its future suffering by repeating the patterns that went into its structuring.

However, we do recognize that even the primitive and preverbal or precognitive structures, which are structures that can be deconstructed and are deconstructed in deep practices of spiritual paths, rely on the even more fundamental and unconstructed phenomenological elements of experience, those of first person givenness and reflexivity. This is one reason why we find the conversation about the phenomenology of the self to be of soteriological benefit in the spiritual path.

We have not yet explained the reflexivity of consciousness, important both for the narration that constitutes the narrative dimension of the self and the mental representations of its historical experience that structure its patterns of later experience and behavior. We have seen that pure awareness does not possess such reflexivity, so where does it come from?

When we explore the individual consciousness we recognize that it is not simply consciousness, but an organism of consciousness. In other words, it is a self-organizing flow of experience that organizes experiences of the various sensory modalities and all the inner dimensions of experience. We find the individual consciousness to be endowed with a discriminating capacity and knowing, this way giving it a mind that thinks, remembers and

reflects. We also find it to be endowed with an affective dimension of cognition and responsiveness to experience and perception, this way giving it a heart. The individual consciousness possesses what we ordinarily think of as mind and heart, and this way possessing the capacity not only to be able to experience but to reflect on its experience. We find it to be a living and alive continuum or medium of consciousness with multiple capacities for awareness. It is capable, when free of constructed lenses, of direct gnosis, that is, of knowing by being. It is also endowed with the capacity of consciousness that can look back and deliberate upon or contemplate its present and past experience. This capacity is not lost upon realization of our true nature, or of nondual awareness, but is illuminated by it and recognized as possessing the potential of obscuring the basic noetic capacity of pure consciousness. (For further elaboration of the potential of individual consciousness to obscure its nature, see Almaas 1994.) Its mind gives it memory, and its heart gives it emotive responsiveness and motivation. It is this latter capacity for conscious reflection that makes it possible for it to have the reflexivity that phenomenologists have observed. In some sense, we can say that this reflexivity is midway between the direct gnosis kind of reflexivity and the ordinary looking back at experience kind of reflexivity. It combines both and points to both. It knows that it knows when it knows an object because it is capable of simply knowing its knowing, its own luminosity, and the pure presence of its consciousness. Yet, this knowing that it knows is not yet the gnosis that is the basis of consciousness per se. It points to the possibility of this later gnosis, but if it was already possessing this kind of reflexivity then all ordinary individuals will be realized and awakened.

Spiritual traditions engage in many lengthy and sometimes complex practices to develop this noetic reflexivity, which is more unlearning than learning. This is so because the direct gnosis kind of reflexivity is inherent to the individual consciousness because it is an individuation of pure consciousness which is mostly characterized by this kind of reflexivity. However, the individual consciousness which at this point views itself as an entity self has forgotten such immediacy, and its lens has been covered over by layers upon layers of egoic structures and narration about itself and reality.

Spiritual practice and contemplation is basically a divesting of the individual consciousness of its stories, structures, concepts and ideas of itself and reality. Such baring reveals the individual consciousness in its purity as a clear medium of consciousness, totally transparent and capable of immediate experience of its nature. It will not be a static medium, but a flowing medium. In spiritually illuminated experience the flow is not in time, but from nonmanifestation to manifestation, which is experienced as an upwelling of experience. Time becomes an external concept which can be used to measure changes, but it does not determine the flow of consciousness. This reveals the nature of the streaming of the stream of experience that is ordinarily experienced by all people.

The individual consciousness can then recognize that its true identity and being is not its body, ideas or stories, but the pure awareness or consciousness and the true being of not only itself but of everything. Its sense of identity, or its center of gravity, can move then from individual consciousness to formless or boundless consciousness. There is then recognition of pure being or pure empty awareness as what is real, and that it is that. One is the formless and mysterious truth that perceives through a clarified individual consciousness. So it has the

capacities of individual consciousness which are now illuminated by the pure light of primordial and universal awareness. In such nondual experience, there is no sense of being an individual consciousness. Rather than individuality, there is a sense of being the whole, or more exactly of indeterminate boundaries. Many individuals who come upon such an experience, especially if they do not first clearly encounter individual consciousness or if they adhere to a tradition that does not include it in its worldview, conclude from such an experience that the individual is an illusion, and there is only the unity of being or the nonduality of awareness. However, first personal givenness is still present, for their friend might not be in the condition of nondual realization. Upon deeper inquiry we can understand that the individual consciousness is present in this experience virtually and implicitly as simply the locus of experience. For regardless of how vast or boundless, how inclusive and formless the experience is, perception is always located in some environment. We can understand that what accounts for this locatedness is the individual consciousness, which is now functioning as simply the organ of perception for pure consciousness. However, in nondual awakening, it is not in one's perception, just as the eye does not see itself when it sees.

Individual consciousness as an organ of perception is not an illusion, and it is not a fiction, for pure consciousness simply grows an organ for its experiencing. It is an extension of pure consciousness and embodies its sensitivity for experiencing. At the same time, it has more organization since it is an individual stream, instead of a nondifferentiated continuum. And because of such self-organization, it has further capacities, one of which is ordinary reflexivity of consciousness.

Individual Soul

The notion I am introducing here is not novel and not original to this teaching. The notion of individual consciousness is well known in all the Western spiritual traditions and is usually referred to as the individual soul. These teachings do not as a whole take the nondual realization as the center or the primary attainment of the path, but as one of the stages of the path. In fact, for these teachings, the individual soul is the central player, rather than pure awareness or consciousness. It is true, the concept of God is central in these traditions, but when it comes to practice and illumination the question of soul is more central. Directly and clearly experiencing and understanding soul becomes important, for such understanding is the opening to the various realizations, nondual or otherwise.

This teaching has developed an extensive experience, knowledge and understanding of individual consciousness, and has realized it is what Judaic, Christian and Islamic mysticism have referred to as individual soul. Actually, the notion of individual soul goes further back in the Western tradition to the Greeks. It was Socrates who first gave a definition of it, as the totality of the human being apart from the physical body. In his extensive scholarly study of the history of ancient Western Philosophy, Reale writes that “no one prior to Socrates had understood by soul what Socrates understood by it, and after Socrates, the whole of the West. ... The soul for Socrates was identified with our consciousness when it thinks and acts with our reason and with the source of our thinking activity and our ethical activity. In short, for Socrates the soul is conscious self, it is intellectual and moral personhood.” [Reale 1987: 202]

It is not asserted here that all the Western traditions, including the Greek, had exactly the identical knowledge of soul. They agreed on its major outlines and meaning, but they each developed different approaches and knowledge regarding it, which are in our view, all complementary. [See Almaas. 2004, Appendix A for Western Concepts of Soul] It is important to recognize from Socrates' view that soul is not a disembodied ghost floating someplace but our psychic life in its totality. We are aware that many ordinary individuals nowadays think of soul as some kind of spirit that is far away and related to after death or in some rarefied dimensions. But this is not our view. We see soul as our individual consciousness now, at all moments, without which we will not have experience or be a stream of experience. It can be misidentified, or more accurately reified, as the separate individual entity self, but this self is simply an outer structure of the soul.

As this self is deconstructed we begin to see the true individual consciousness that we are. And in spiritual illumination, we recognize its relation to the basic consciousness, as its offspring with which it perceives, and without which it is as good as only nihil.

By recognizing the stream of experience as the external manifestation of individual consciousness, which is basically consciousness morphing into the particular forms of experience, we discover further properties and ranges of individual consciousness. We can see the similarity of this notion to that of basic consciousness of Yogachara, to the two levels—gross and subtle—of the stream of consciousness of Tantric Buddhism, and to some of the conceptualizations of other Indian traditions, where it is referred to as *jiva-atman*, not as *jiva* and not as *atman*, but combining both. [See Almaas 2004, Appendix B for Eastern Conceptions of Soul] We also see that when the individual consciousness is pure and bare,

there can be associated to it a sense of I, a sense of mere identity, or simply self-recognition. One perceives that this is what I am, this is my stream, even though I might recognize myself as the vastness of awareness or the mystery of being. In this path, realization can take various forms: individual consciousness experiencing itself as an inseparable extension or expression of boundless or formless true nature, as true nature in its inexpressible formlessness perceiving phenomena through the individual consciousness which is one of its manifestations, of both together as inseparable, or as the fathomless true nature, whether pure awareness or beingness, simply abiding as what it is without a hint of individual consciousness or self. All phenomena appear as the luminosity of true nature, yet perception is always enworlded, indicating the invisible presence of individual consciousness.

There are forms of spiritual illumination that reveal that diachronic unity has more basis than simply memory. We have already discussed the nondual realization of pure consciousness, which can be experienced as the unity of everything, where the unifying factor is pure being inseparable from immediate knowing. All experience is presence, and presence is not just a particular experience. In his discussion of the Advaitin approach, Fasching writes:

“Experiences have their very being in their being consciously present and while these experiences are permanently fleeting, conscious presence as such abides.” [Fasching 2011: 201] Abiding as conscious presence, one is the now of the moment. Presence and nowness become the same thing. However, since the presence of true nature is beyond time, the now is the now of all moments, not just the present moment. In other words, the true now which is the presence of pure timeless awareness cannot be divided into separate nows. There is only one now, and it includes the nows of all moments of one’s life. Such realization can make

accessible the direct immediate perception of the synchronic unity of all the moments of one's life, or at least many of the significant ones. Presence as now contains all moments of time, and hence diachronic unity becomes a result of direct knowing and perception, not simply memory. This may happen when true nature manifests as a radically nonlocal presence but still perceives through the stream of consciousness with all of its moments.

We may wonder then how memory is connected with such kinds of immediate perception of other nows. Is this immediate perception always operative in remembering, or is it simply giving us intuitively the diachronic unity of our particular stream of consciousness? This is a subtle point and addressing it will require realization of consciousness to move beyond the nondual to other kinds, including that of radical nonlocality. This exploration is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The important thing is that we can learn a great deal about being human by studying individual consciousness and by considering that pure consciousness can and does express itself individually, just like a current in the ocean. A whole realm of experience opens up where we can learn what life is, how life lives the body, and the nature of the relation between the ordinary capacities of intellection and feeling and the subtle spiritual capacities of discrimination and insight. This is not the place to get further into this, and the interested reader can refer to the author's work, *The Inner Journey Home* (Almaas 2004), for a detailed discussion.

Conclusion

To adequately address the phenomenological givens of first personal self-givenness and reflexivity of consciousness, in addition to diachronic unity, we proposed the notion that the stream of experience expresses an individual consciousness, which is more of a flowing medium. The moment we understand what individual consciousness is, and even better when we have a direct experience of it, it becomes readily obvious how to address these important questions of phenomenology. We see that the ordinary self is simply a reification of individual consciousness, not a truly abiding self nor an imaginary creation of an individual mind. We also understand what self and no self are in their various permutations, without contradicting the teachings of Vedanta or Buddhism. The minimal self of Zahavi can be seen as the identification tag of the particular individual consciousness. First personal givenness can be accounted for by the notion of individual consciousness, which is not exactly a self but a lens for pure consciousness. At the same time, the minimal self, if taken to mean the simple fact or feeling of self recognition, can also be present in the nondual experience of pure consciousness, so prevalent in Advaita Vedanta. It can also be missing, at least some of the time, in deep Samadhi or absorption, this way allowing for the Buddhist no self kind of realization.

The present study builds on the investigation of the authors of the Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi volume, some through the views of these two traditions, who have been fruitfully wrestling with the questions of phenomenology of experience. Writing from the perspective of a particular spiritual teaching, we appreciate this discussion, for it adds an angle or approach to the question of self, an angle rarely explicitly utilized by spiritual traditions. We have also

wanted to point out that the Western spiritual traditions, by the fact that they all hold the view of individual soul, can more easily and readily address the questions of the phenomenology of self. The teaching at the source this paper, the Diamond Approach, is a Western approach to spiritual illumination, but it is well informed by the above mentioned Eastern traditions.

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