# 7 Tibetan Buddhist Accounts in Dialogue with Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

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## 7.1 The Contemporary Context: The Hard Problem of Consciousness

The final section of this study will examine how the issue of self-awareness is currently addressed in contemporary debates within the philosophy of mind. This part of the volume aims to initiate a dialogue between the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and present-day philosophical discourse by engaging with some of the most recent perspectives while also tracing the foundational concepts upon which they are built. The objective is to explore whether and in what ways elements of the traditional accounts discussed in the preceding chapters might offer a fresh and potentially transformative cross-cultural contribution to ongoing discussions on consciousness and its reflexivity.

The issue of self-awareness is widely debated in contemporary philosophy of mind and locates itself within the complex inquiry into the nature of subjective experience. To start with an obvious but significant point: contemporary philosophical studies on the nature of awareness and its characteristics, including reflexivity, are deeply rooted in a rich tradition that traces back ultimately to ancient Greece. Subjectivity, consciousness, and experience have been fundamental

philosophical topics for centuries. Within the materialist and reductionist frameworks that have become increasingly prominent over recent decades, the nature of consciousness has regained scholarly attention largely due to Chalmers's (1995; 1996) articulation of the "hard problem of consciousness", which has reintroduced this topic into the foreground of contemporary philosophy of mind. The problem engages ontological and epistemological dimensions, as well as the question of the validity of the first-person perspective. Despite its recent and innovative articulation, the issue itself is not new but, rather, a reformulation of the longstanding mind-body problem.[1] Chalmers presents the conundrum as follows:

> What makes the hard problem hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions. To see this, note that even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioral functions in the vicinity of experience – perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report – there may still remain a further unanswered question: "*Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?*" (Chalmers 1995, 202; italics in the original)

When consciousness is the phenomenon under investigation, the commonly used 'reductive explanation' (Chalmers 1995; 1996) is bound to fail. This type of explanation seeks to establish an identity between the *explanandum* and a lower-level physical phenomenon or one that is easily reducible to the physical. The reasoning proceeds from two key premises: the first defines the phenomenon in question through its functional role while the second identifies an empirically observed entity that fulfills this role. Based on the principle of the transitivity of identity, it is then inferred that the target phenomenon and its identified realizer are, in fact, one and the same. Nevertheless, when it comes to consciousness, since it cannot be functionally characterized, the reductive explanation does not work. The following main alternatives remain: either consciousness is denied altogether or it must be included in the ontological scenery as an irreducible feature of reality itself. Either way, the problem lies beyond the reach of standard reductive approaches. The range of reactions and responses to the hard problem extends from eliminativism, which denies this very issue, and reductionism in its multiple versions, to panpsychism and mind-body dualism.

Before continuing this inquiry, it is necessary to mention the distinction Chalmers makes between the 'hard' and 'easy' problems of consciousness. This division helps to give a clear definition of the nature and focus of the hard problem. The 'easy problems'

**1** Levine (1983, 361) considers, "this kind of intuition about our qualitative experience seems surprisingly resistant to philosophical attempts to eliminate it. As long as it remains, the mind/body problem will remain".

include, for instance, the ability to categorize stimuli and integrate information, as well as the focus of attention, the control of behavior, and the deliberation system (Chalmers 2010, 4).[2] Although no fully satisfactory explanations of these phenomena have been provided, there are already well-established approaches for addressing them. For this reason, Chalmers (2010) refers to them as the "easy problems". To obtain a proper explanation of them through cognitive science and neuroscience might take centuries of work; nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the standard methods will succeed. These problems are easy precisely because they concern cognitive abilities and functions, which only require the specification of the mechanisms that can perform these functions for their explanation.

On the other hand, the so-called 'hard problems' are phenomena that seem to resist these usual methods.

> The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of *experience*. When we think and perceive, there is a whir of information processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. As Nagel (1974) has put it, there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism. This subjective aspect is experience. (Chalmers 2010, 5; italics in the original)

Emotions, sensations, the stream of conscious thought and related phenomena are all experiential states characterized by a distinctive felt quality. "Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does" (5).

Since an organism is said to have consciousness if there is something it is like to be that organism – this being 'subject'-consciousness – the same applies to mental states. A mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that state – this being 'state'-consciousness. Terms such as 'phenomenal consciousness' and 'qualia' are also used, but Chalmers prefers 'conscious experience' or simply 'experience' (Chalmers 2010, 5). Here, the phenomenal, subjective, first-person dimension takes center stage. Examining the issue of the hard problem as a whole, Majeed (2016) detects two distinct targets that would be encompassed by it: on the one hand, the explanation of the relationship between the physical and the phenomenal that arises from it and, on the other hand, the explanation of the phenomenal

**2** Please note that, as Chalmers (2010, 4 fn. 1) clarifies, "The list should be understood as calling attention to the functional rather than the experiential aspects of these phenomena". The list is based on Chalmers's first work (1995) on this topic.

itself in terms of its own nature. The debates on the hard problem address one or both of these aspects.[3]

Thanks to Chalmers's formulation of the hard problem of consciousness, the split between explaining the functions and abilities of consciousness, on the one hand, and explaining experience itself, on the other, becomes subject to debate. Already prior to Chalmers, in 1983, Levine formulated the 'explanatory gap', targeting a closely related issue. In fact, as Chalmers comments,

> We know that conscious experience *does* arise when these functions are performed, but the very fact that it arises is the central mystery. There is an *explanatory gap* (a term due to Levine 1983) between the functions and experience, and we need an explanatory bridge to cross it. (Chalmers 2010, 8; italics in the original)

Why should any physical process make experience emerge?[4] This issue boasts a long and ubiquitous heritage. In 1714, for instance, continuing the reasoning he started in *Commentatio de anima brutorum* (Leibniz 1840, 463), Leibniz dedicates § 17 of his *Monadology* to the issue of the (*ante litteram*) hard problem:

> 17. Moreover, it must be confessed that perception and that which depends upon it are inexplicable on mechanical grounds, that is to say, by means of figures and motions. And supposing there were a machine, so constructed as to think, feel, and have perception, it might be conceived as increased in size, while keeping the same proportions, so that one might go into it as into a mill. That being so, we should, on examining its interior, find only parts which work one upon another, and never anything by which to explain a perception. Thus it is in a simple substance, and not in a compound or in a machine, that perception must be sought for. Further, nothing but this (namely, perceptions and their changes) can be found in a simple substance. It is also in this alone that all the internal activities of simple substances can consist. (Leibniz 1898, 227-9)

**3** The literature on the hard problem is extremely rich; for a multifaceted approach to the issue, see, in particular, Shear 1997.

**4** Levine explains, "Indeed, we do feel that the causal role of pain is crucial to our concept of it, and that discovering the physical mechanism by which this causal role is effected explains an important facet of what there is to be explained about pain. However, there is more to our concept of pain than its causal role, there is its qualitative character, how it feels; and what is left unexplained by the discovery of C-fiber firing is *why pain should feel the way it does*! […] [I]t is precisely phenomenal properties – how it is for us to be in certain mental (including perceptual) states – which seem to resist physical (including functional) explanations" (Levine 1983, 357-8; italics in the original).

Interestingly, this idea has recently been reimagined, refined and modernized by Bieri (1995, 49-54) in a humorous "guided tour of the brain". In this story, explorers enter an enlarged human brain, much as one might tour a factory, hoping to discover what makes a human being a subject with experiences and an inner world. The guide is a brain scientist at the cutting edge of present-day knowledge, ready to answer all their questions. However, as the explorers persistently press philosophical inquiries, the guide eventually becomes overwhelmed and leaves them empty-handed. When it comes to exploring consciousness as the capacity for sensing, one could inquire either about the specific process that results in a particular sensing event or, in general, about the very reason for experience itself. In either case, Bieri makes it clear that those

> two questions amount to one and the same problem[.] If we knew why a particular neural process results in a particular experiential quality – so that the connection would no longer appear accidental but necessary – we would thereby know why it has to be an *experience*. (Bieri 1995, 50; italics in the original)

If today the hard problem arises within a general philosophical framework that tends towards physicalism, this does not imply that the link between the hard problem and physicalism is a necessary one. In fact, something comparable to the hard problem has also been debated in the idealist Indo-Tibetan tradition. In this regard, Arnold's (2021) attempt to read the hard problem in light of Buddhist idealism reveals that the issue of physicalism, predominant nowadays in the debate around the nature of experience, may not be central to the hard problem itself. The hard problem is not, after all, a problem just for physicalists: in its idealist version, the same point is addressed but is nevertheless independent from whether or how consciousness can emerge from the physical. For instance, Dharmakīrti's celebrated proof of rebirth is an idealist argument where he is not concerned with how to reconcile mental and physical but rather with showing that mental continuity is basic or, in other words, that the mental – and not the physical – is what ultimately exists. Moreover, following Arnold (2021), Dignāga's idealist project also gets stuck with something like the hard problem or, perhaps, an even more basic version of it: the problem of reconciling first- and third-person perspectives on mental content. Maybe, what turns out to be hard about getting subjectivity out of objectivity is not whether or how the former can emerge from the latter but, rather, trying to reconcile two different perspectives, each of them involving different temporalities. In terms of experience, what is relevant for a 'third'-person perspective identifies psychological factors as causing moments of experience, moments that must precede it. On

the other hand, especially in terms of the Cittamātra *bīja* 'seeds' theory, what is relevant for a 'first'-person perspective is the content of an experience. Being part of the experience itself, however, the mental content cannot at the same time be one of its causes, that is, a cause of the very event that contains it. Thus, Arnold argues that the main problem is how to reconcile first- and third-person perspectives on what is allegedly the same cognitive event. This implies a remarkable shift towards a different angle for approaching the hard problem, a perspective reminiscent of the difference, in actual terms, between the neural correlations of a mental state and its own phenomenological experience.

In short, this issue has turned out to be deeply affected by the multidisciplinary approach to its study, so much so that, as Metzinger remarks,

> in the present state of interdisciplinary research on consciousness the *explananda* still remain undefined: it is not at all clear *what* it is that has to be explained. Conscious experience is not a single problem, but a whole cluster of problems. (Metzinger 1995b, 7; italics in the original)

Among the wide range of issues and nuanced questions, it might be useful to observe at least a few correlations among topics: as Güzeldere usefully explains,

> the line that separates Chalmers's 'easy' and 'hard' problems is the counterpart of the line that separates 'access' and 'phenomenal' consciousness in Block, which also aligns well with the distinction between the 'causal' [that is, what consciousness does from the third-person perspective] versus 'phenomenal' [that is, how consciousness feels from the first-person perspective] characterizations of consciousness. (Güzeldere 1995, 124)[5]

Certainly, such a multifaceted approach to consciousness, with no place for transcendental concerns, establishes a framework markedly different from that of Buddhist debates, where there is broad consensus regarding the foundational role of consciousness, its basic definition, the principle of mental causation – crucial for ensuring the viability of the Buddhist path – and the soteriological process of inner transformation.

**5** On the distinction between phenomenal- and access-consciousness, see Block 1997; for further discussions on this division, see Block, Flanagan, Güzeldere 1997, 355-442.

## 7.2 Reflectivity and Reflexivity Today: Challenges and Directions

Having laid out the context for the contemporary conversation on the nature of mind, attention now turns to how this issue is approached today, particularly in combination with self-awareness. The most relevant challenges in the current discourse will be discussed in order to envisage the most compelling directions for further investigation. To this end, this inquiry will draw upon the depth of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist legacy alongside insights from the European phenomenological strand.

In order to frame the topic in contemporary terms, it will be useful to consider that, among the main features of the mental, Chalmers (1996, 339) identifies phenomenal "[c]onsciousness and intentionality [as] perhaps the two central phenomena in the philosophy of mind". In his view,

> neither consciousness nor intentionality is more fundamental than the other. Rather, consciousness and intentionality are intertwined, all the way down to the ground. (371)

Chalmers also observes that, in recent decades, philosophical approaches to consciousness and intentionality have increasingly diverged, relegating the connection between the two to the background. However, two emerging tendencies have sought to reestablish this link. The first grounds consciousness in intentionality, as exemplified by higher-order theories, according to which a mental state becomes conscious when it is the intentional object of a higher-order mental state that represents it. The second approach grounds intentionality in consciousness, a view often found in the phenomenological tradition, where consciousness is considered to be inherently pre-reflectively self-aware, and its intentionality is seen as rooted in this fundamental feature. In other words, these two positions outline the main avenues for explaining self-awareness from a mentalistic perspective: either by appealing to another mental state or by appealing to the structure of the state itself (Gennaro 1996). This framework will serve as the focal point of the final section of this inquiry.

It must be noted, first, that what lies behind this recent terminology is the rich European legacy on the topic of self-awareness, a tradition whose history reaches back to Aristotle (*On the Soul*, 3.2.415a16).[6] What is interesting about Aristotle's pioneering position is that he gets

**6** For further perspectives outside the Asian philosophical tradition concerning self-awareness and for an analysis of Aristotle's account of the awareness of one's own mental states as intrinsic to their very nature, see Caston 2002.

close to the relational suggestion of modern higher-order theories and yet insists that the self-awareness feature is intrinsic to the conscious state, thus going against those theories. For him, all perceptions occur together with a secondary awareness of themselves.[7] Aquinas takes up the Aristotelian track and the view that consciousness of external objects has priority over the consciousness it has of itself.[8] This view was widely held by early modern thinkers who tended towards empiricism. Avicenna's discussion of primitive self-awareness, albeit less known, is in line with Augustine's claiming (*The Trinity* 10.9.12) that the mind knows itself simply by being present to itself, through a pre-reflective knowledge of itself (Augustine, *The Trinity* 10.4.6). This is the deep root of a legacy and background that brought about many further developments. Among the philosophers who wrote about self-awareness in various forms are Descartes, Kant, Locke, Leibniz and the phenomenological philosophers. Interestingly, it was in the early modern period, around the 1720s, that consciousness started to be considered as an object of inquiry in its own right, mainly interpreted as a way of relating to one's own mental states. Thus, the ongoing debate largely constitutes a continuation and updating of a longstanding historical discourse, now enriched by a crucial new dimension, namely, the exchange and fruitful interaction with philosophical traditions from diverse cultural and intellectual contexts, which are more accessible to scholars today than ever before.

Thus, as MacKenzie (2007) outlines in his thoughtful paper, the interpretations of self-awareness formulated in the European and Indian traditions generally fall into two broad typologies: one gathering the reflective theories or 'other-illumination' (SKT *paraprakāśa*) perspectives, and the other collecting the reflexive or 'self-illumination' (SKT *svaprakāśa*) theories. While their Indian and European philosophical formulations are remarkably different in arguments and formulations, there are also striking similarities, which MacKenzie focuses on in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of both models. For him, reflexivism is not yet "an acceptable theory of self-awareness in either its Buddhist or its Sartrean forms" (MacKenzie 2007, 60). Thus, MacKenzie finds none of the approaches he examines completely adequate to account for all the fundamental issues relating to a contemporary

**7** Caston claims, "Aristotle holds that a single token perception can be about an external object *and* about itself. This sort of awareness is therefore *both* intrinsic *and* relational" (2002, 799; italics in the original). More in detail, "Aristotle rejects the notion that our perceptions, or parts of them, literally embody the qualities they are about. But he also rejects a strict intentionalist stance" (799). And concluding, "Aristotle thus attempts to do justice to the intuitions on both sides, while avoiding their respective errors; and we might well regard this as a step forward" (799).

**8** For a quick overview of these and the following sources, see Thiel 2011, 6 ff.; Siewert 1998.

theory of self-awareness. However, many sources provide valuable contributions that could form the foundations of a more adequate theory. Contemporary debates have identified a range of challenges that any robust philosophical theory of self-awareness must confront. In light of recent developments in psychology, neuroscience, and related disciplines, numerous dimensions of self-awareness demand careful examination.[9] The objective here is to shed light on the central questions a contemporary framework must tackle in order to delineate the unique contributions and potential of ongoing philosophical reflection on consciousness and its reflexivity. This investigation draws upon the rich legacy of philosophical, psychological, and scientific traditions while also engaging with insights from contemplative systems rooted in other cultural and intellectual contexts.[10]

### 7.2.1 The Inner Structure of Self-Awareness: Reflectivity, Intentionality, Temporality and Spatiality

The first challenge for a contemporary theory of self-awareness is a methodological one, made in relation to the subjective and phenomenal character of experience. This first point targets the possibility of studying, examining and describing it without objectifying it, thereby avoiding its reification, and without being restricted to discussing it only *via negationis*.

This challenge has always posed a threat to the possibility of expressing experience within a linguistic framework, and yet a convincing theory of self-awareness must be able to tackle this difficulty. In the previous section of this work (§ 6.2), it was shown that the rDzogs-chen tradition in particular has been characterized by a wide use of apophatic expressions, hinting at a non-dual experience of reflexivity within the semantics of the kaleidoscopic luminosity of mind. Those formulations are meant to encourage going beyond reifications and conceptualizations. A recent attempt to preserve the subjective feature of experience, without excluding it from thought and description, can be found in Nagel's position (1986). His entire project left aside, of particular interest is his attempt to formulate a philosophical perspective on consciousness that respects

**9** For some lists, see MacKenzie 2007, 60-1; Zahavi 1999, 38-42; 2005, 28-9; 2006, 282 ff.; 2007, 281-5.

**10** See, among others, Tormen 2023 for an emphasis on the importance of engaging with contemplative traditions, Buddhist and otherwise, as a means of nourishing and advancing contemporary developments in Consciousness Studies. In particular, Tormen underscores this point in relation to the philosophical challenges posed by current technological innovation.

the subjective character of one's own and others' experience. In so far as it is a feasible way to ascribe consciousness to other beings, this approach has a slightly different orientation: Nagel's suggestion tries to rescue the other's subjectivity from one's own objectifying perspective. Nevertheless, what is at stake is indeed the intersection between subjectivity and objectivity – the issue under discussion here. If there are, in fact, other beings in the world, one has to

> conceive of experiences of which one is not the subject: experiences that are not present to oneself. To do this it is necessary to have a general conception of subjects of experience and to place oneself under it as an instance. (Nagel 1986, 20)

What is particularly noteworthy in Nagel's proposal is his notion of "the first stage of objectification of the mental". Despite the potentially misleading labels he employs, this refers to the effort to consider both one's own and others' subjective experiences "without depriving them of their character as perspectives" (Nagel 1986, 20). In order to do so, he suggests viewing experiences as events in the world, representing "an experience from outside by imagining it subjectively" (21). Nagel's attempt basically hints at a "dual aspect" theory, where one thing can have two sets of mutually irreducible and equally essential properties, that is, the mental and the physical. This is a departure from the issue here, but what is of interest is the fact that Nagel lingers on the threshold between the subjective and perspectival points of view, on the one side, and the objective one, on the other, thus seeking a way to rescue subjectivity from the thematizing gaze of the other, being the gaze of reification. Of course, this main methodological issue has a long history and is perhaps bound to find no easy solutions.

A set of additional challenges that a theory of self-awareness must address concerns the inner structure of self-awareness. Here four topics will be touched upon: the inner articulation of self-awareness in relation to the possibility of reflectivity; self-awareness in relation to the intentionality of consciousness; the inner temporal structure of self-awareness; and the 'spatial' boundaries of its framework.

Concerning the first, it must be said that reflectionism has not been decisively eliminated together with its problems, despite the wealth of non-dual accounts of self-awareness in both Asian and European traditions (cf. Gennaro 1996; 2004). The tension between reflective and reflexive articulations has traversed the Indo-Tibetan tradition in various forms, and this same dialectic is echoed in contemporary exegetical approaches to the interpretation of textual and philosophical sources. The implications of this tension, as explored in the preceding sections of this volume (particularly in § 4.1), have been examined through the lens of modern philosophical discourse.

At this juncture, it is necessary to offer a few considerations on the specific contribution of phenomenology to these issues.

If reflectivity is not banned from the philosophical discourse on self-awareness, the question arises as to how exactly pre-reflective self-awareness, being non-relational and non-dual, is thought to give rise to reflective self-awareness. Indeed, the gap between reflexive and reflective models is substantial, and any adequate theoretical framework must account for the transition from a non-dual mode of awareness to the structural and intentional 'rupture' introduced by reflective cognition (Zahavi 2007, 282). While reflexivity posits consciousness as an intrinsic feature of the mental, reflectivity considers it as an extrinsic feature. Within this last account, two distinct theories emerge: the higher-order thought (HOT) and the higher-order perception (HOP) theories. Both hold that self-awareness consists of a higher-order consciousness that takes an inner mental state as its object. While the HOT theories[11] claim that this consciousness is of the nature of thought, the HOP theories[12] consider it a perception of a mental state. However, the conceptual challenges involved in articulating the relationship between pre-reflective, non-dual self-awareness and its reflective manifestation[13] have prompted a more recent tendency to bring these two levels of mental states into closer alignment. For instance,

> Gennaro […] has argued that […] the HOT [higher-order thought] is better viewed as *intrinsic* to the target state, so that there is a complex conscious state with parts. Gennaro calls this the "wide intrinsicality view" (WIV) and he has also recently argued that Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of consciousness can be understood in this way […]. Robert Van Gulick […] has also explored the alternative that the HO state is part of the "global" conscious state. He calls such states "HOGS" (= higher-order global states) within which the lower-order state is "recruited" and becomes conscious. (Gennaro 2004, 4; italics in the original)

**11** Cf. Rosenthal 1986; 1993; Carruthers 1996; 2000; Dennett 1991.

**12** Armstrong 1968; 1984; Lycan 1987; 1996.

**13** Van Gulick (2004, 72) claims, "Thus the transformation from unconscious to conscious state involves no change in the state itself but only the addition of a purely external and independent state which has it as its intentional object. Yet in so far as one interprets the conscious/unconscious distinction as dividing states in terms of whether they are conscious in the sense of there being 'something that it is like to be in them' it seems difficult to accept the idea that the division involves no differences in the intrinsic properties of the states themselves but only differences in purely relational facts about which other states if any are intentionally directed at them".

In fact, Van Gulick introduces the higher-order global states (HOGS) model to avoid treating the meta-intentional element as a distinct and separate state. Instead, he embeds it within the overall structure of a global state, which he describes as follows:

> [a state] into which the formerly nonconscious state is recruited and of which it itself becomes a component. Thus the distinctness principle is weakened, but not totally abandoned. Although the object state is retained as a component of the global state, it is typically altered somewhat in the process. In that respect the transition to conscious status involves some changes in the state's intrinsic properties, as well as its gaining a new systemic significance in virtue of the larger active context into which it is recruited. It's the same state, yet importantly different. Indeed, […] the question of whether it is the same state or a different state gets somewhat blurry, and the answer largely turns on how we individuate states. (Van Gulick 2006, 25)

The HOGS model is still higher-order and, therefore, reflective; however, this is the case only insofar as the transformation from nonconscious to conscious states involves a process of recruitment into an integrated organization that entails both an intentional content and a higher-order component.[14] This is also what moves Kriegel (2006) to make awareness inherent in or 'built into' experience, rescuing it from its condition of being an extra mental state to be 'added' to experience. Only in recent years have the two mental states posited by higher-order theories, which are usually thought of as independent, tended to be formulated as having some kind of "*constitutive relation*, or *internal relation*, or some other *non-contingent* relation", thereby making them not logically independent of each other (Kriegel 2006, 143; italics in the original). This is what Kriegel strategically calls "the same-order monitoring theory" (SOMT). This view permits many possible versions of part-whole relationships between the two states, the strongest being holding a mental state to be identical with its higher-order

**14** For an alternative model of the relation between consciousness and self-awareness – one that combines a non-standard version of the higher-order theory of consciousness with the global neuronal workspace theory, and holds that implicit higher-order self-awareness is a pervasive feature of the globally integrative states – see Van Gulick 2022.

representation (as in the case of self-representationalism).[15] Although higher-order theories have enjoyed great popularity for two or three decades, they have recently turned out to be unsatisfactory, giving way to the alternatives mentioned above. Phenomenology offers promising alternatives to higher-order accounts, making analytical philosophy's traditional disregard of or hostility toward it counterproductive (Zahavi 2006, 293).

This recalls the debates examined in the previous sections of this volume, where the tensions between reflective and reflexive articulations of self-awareness in Buddhism were examined at various levels of the traditional and exegetical discourse. Interestingly, the contribution of phenomenology aligns closely with that of the Indo-Tibetan tradition while also offering a promising avenue for addressing this particular challenge. As Zahavi observes, drawing on Sartre's insight ([1943] 1994; 1978), reflective and pre-reflective modes of self-awareness should, in fact, be regarded as sharing a fundamental commonality:

> a certain affinity, a certain structural similarity. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how the prereflective cogito could ever give rise to reflection. It is a significant feature of the lived experience that it allows for reflective appropriation, and a theory of self-consciousness that can *only* account for prereflective self-consciousness is not much better than a theory that only accounts for reflective self-consciousness. (Zahavi 2006, 287-8; italics in the original)[16]

And the reason for the strong relationship between the two modes is clearly described as follows.

> In other words, reflection merely articulates the unity of unification and differentiation inherent in the prereflective lived presence: its ecstatic-centered structure of protending, presencing, retaining. (Zahavi 2006, 288)

Thus, most phenomenologists would argue that pre-reflective self-awareness must be considered as a dynamic and temporal

**15** By comparing various attempts at bringing the two mental states closer together, Kriegel comments on Gennaro's wide intrinsicality by saying that what makes them "two parts of a single mental state is simply our decision to treat them as such. There is no psychologically real relation between them that unites them into a single, cohesive mental state" (Kriegel 2006, 150). Van Gulick's model and his own would provide an account, instead, where the two states "are integrated and unified through a psychologically real cognitive process of information integration" (Kriegel 2006, 150).

**16** Cf. Rodríguez-Navas 2016.

self-differentiation, "a dynamic and differentiated openness to alterity" (Zahavi 1998b, 35).

This consideration leads to what has been introduced as the third challenge in this set: explaining the temporality of self-awareness, or how self-awareness can be maintained over time. In other words, it seeks to address why a past experience can be remembered as one's own. However, before proceeding, one further point should be considered: the second of the challenges mentioned earlier – the problem of intentionality. This is closely related to the issue of the transition from pre-reflective to reflective modes of awareness, as the former pertains to the inner intentionality of the mind, while the latter refers to its outer intentionality. In other words, consciousness is co-originally and simultaneously aware of itself and the world.

In the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist context, this issue arose during the discussion about the role of *ākāra*s (TIB *rnam pa*) and the problematic interaction between consciousness and its objects. In Europe, this topic has been discussed in great detail by Brentano (1995, 78-120), who specifically talks about self-awareness or, as he calls it, "inner consciousness" (*inneres Bewußtsein*). Brentano argues that the inner consciousness in question, rather than being a further mental state, is an internal feature of the primary experience. Thus, a mental state is conscious insofar as it is intentionally directed at itself, taking itself as its 'secondary' object and therefore preventing any infinite regress. At the same time, there exists another 'primary' object: that which pertains to the world; for instance, the sound that is heard while one is simultaneously aware of the act of perceiving it. Within the structure of such a conscious episode, two objects can thus be identified for one single mental state: the heard sound, which functions as the primary object, and the perception of that sound, which serves as the secondary object.[17] Interestingly, as Brentano (1995, 127-8) points out, the perception of sound and the awareness of that perception give rise to one single mental phenomenon: the apparent separation between them is a merely "conceptual" differentiation (Brentano 1995, 98).

> In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon

**17** Brentano explains, "We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the *secondary object*. Temporally they both occur at the same time, but in the nature of the case, the sound is prior. A presentation of the sound without a presentation of the act of hearing would not be inconceivable, at least *a priori*, but a presentation of the act of hearing without a presentation of the sound would be an obvious contradiction. The act of hearing appears to be directed toward sound in the most proper sense of the term, and because of this it seems to apprehend itself incidentally and as something additional" (Brentano 1995, 98; italics in the original).

> itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. (Brentano 1995, 98)[18]

The entire discussion bears a striking resemblance to the complex discourse on the subjective and objective aspects of cognition found in the Indo-Tibetan tradition.[19] Interestingly, in Brentano's contemporary exegesis, there is no agreement on whether to consider his view a reflexive or reflective one. Brentano's account is often cited as emblematic of the philosophical challenge of reconciling self-awareness with intentionality, the latter being what opens cognition to the world. A persistent tension throughout the history of philosophy has linked the significance of pre-reflective immediacy in self-awareness to discussions on its inner articulation, which is often conceptually analyzed in reflective terms.[20]

Thus, the first of these four challenges concerns the problem of rendering intelligible the transition from pre-reflective to reflective self-awareness. Drawing on the phenomenological account, it has been suggested that pre-reflective self-awareness should be regarded as subject to a dynamic and temporal process of self-differentiation – a view that naturally leads into the nuanced and complex topic of the temporality of self-awareness.

This relates to the Buddhist controversies on the mental function of memory which were examined in the epistemological context, first in relation to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and then to Tsong-kha-pa and the subsequent Tibetan tradition. MacKenzie (2017) summarizes this point by affirming that, for Buddhist reflexivists, *svasaṃvedana*

**18** This is in reference to Aristotle's *On the Soul* (3.2.425b12).

**19** Moreover, it is interesting to note that, similarly to Mi-pham, for instance, Brentano also takes self-awareness to play an epistemologically foundational role: "Moreover, inner perception is not merely the only kind of perception which is immediately evident; it is really the only perception in the strict sense of the word. [T]he phenomena of the so-called external perception cannot be proved true and real even by means of indirect demonstration. For this reason, anyone who in good faith has taken them for what they seem to be is being misled by the manner in which the phenomena are connected. Therefore, strictly speaking, so-called external perception is not perception. Mental phenomena, therefore, may be described as the only phenomena of which perception in the strict sense of the word is possible" (Brentano 1995, 70). This idea is comparable to some understandings of the Buddhist doctrine of self-awareness seen thus far: since inner perception is uniquely indubitable, the kind of certainty this awareness uniquely bears must be considered as somehow basic to all other types of knowledge.

**20** For further discussions on Brentano's contribution to the doctrine of self-awareness, cf. the critical points made by Zahavi 1998a; Janzen 2008, 194 ff.; Montague 2017. On the topic of intentionality, see Ryle: "even though the self-intimation supposed to be inherent in any mental state or process is not described as requiring a separate act of attention, or as constituting a separate cognitive operation, still what I am conscious of in a process of inferring, say, is different from what the inferring is an apprehension of" (Ryle 2009, 144).

functions not only as the synchronic phenomenal point of view but also, following Dignāga's account, as a crucial component in the diachronic structure of access-consciousness, particularly in recollection. In this view, *svasaṃvedana* enables a later cognition to apprehend both aspects of a prior experience from within. Furthermore, as demonstrated in § 6.3, it plays a pivotal role within the soteriological framework, where the notion of memory – or, perhaps more aptly, 'presence' – serves as a key expression of the essential function of reflexivity in Tibetan rDzogs-chen practice. The issue of the inner temporality of consciousness could also be addressed by tapping into the phenomenological tradition, as Zahavi suggests (2007, 282), recalling Husserl's thoughtful notion of inner time-consciousness.[21] The first consideration to be made is about James's (1981) influence upon Husserl's thought on the structure of inner temporality, as Cobb-Stevens observes:

> I shall suggest that James' description of the "specious present" corresponds closely to what Husserl referred to as the "living present". Before developing this thesis, it will be helpful first to summarize the relevant themes from Husserl's lectures on "inner" time-consciousness. Husserl's mature writings on time-consciousness describe two closely interrelated presentations of the flow of our experiences: (i) the flow of intentional acts reflectively thematized as identities in a manifold of temporal phases (now-phase, past-phase, and coming-phase), and (ii) the "absolute" flow of unthematized experience whose phases (primal impression, retention, and protention) are the pre-reflective awareness of our acts. These two dimensions are not separate flows, but rather different modes of presentation of one and the same flow of experience. The key to their difference is the structure of reflection. Husserl points out that whereas perception, memory, and reflection explicitly posit or thematize their objects, the consciousness operative within the absolute flux precedes all objectification. (Cobb-Stevens 1998, 43)

In fact, prior to Husserl, James states:

> [The] content [of the specious present] is a constant flux, "events" dawning into its forward end as fast as they fade out of its rearward one, and each of them changing its time coefficient from "not yet" or "not quite yet" to "just gone" or "gone" as it passes by. Meanwhile, the specious present, the intuited duration, stands

**21** Also Sartre (1978, 22), for his part, recognizes Husserl's point: "C'est la conscience qui s'unifie elle-même et concrètement par un jeu d'intentionnalités 'transversales' qui sont des rétentions concrètes et réelles des consciences passées".

> permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it. (James 1981, 593)

A duration-block is described with a span encompassing the fading past and the arising future: it is "a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own" from which to look into time in both directions (James 1981, 574).

Following James, Husserl's analysis of the structure of inner time-consciousness identifies duration-blocks of protention, primal impression, and retention, which may be understood as an investigation of the self-luminous structure of inner consciousness.[22] Thus, Husserl outlines

> the various kinds of modifications of the type of lived experience, perception as such, of *retention* as still having consciousness of what has gone by as perceptual present, of having consciousness in the mode 'just-having been', of *protention* as the original foreseeing of what announces itself as 'just-coming'. (Husserl 1977, 155; italics added)

Retention and protention are automatic and involuntary processes, a two-fold temporal scene that opens up without providing new objects in the retention and protention phases but rather letting the temporal horizon of the phenomenon manifest and allowing the temporal flow of consciousness to be experienced. On the other hand, when one reflects and thematizes one's experiences in recollection and expectation, one's own acts become temporal enduring objects: a new temporal form is imposed upon them, and they are inserted or framed into a sequential timeline. Following Zahavi's (1998a) reading of Husserl's account of inner time-consciousness, such a specious present, pre-reflective yet temporally extended, can be interpreted as a means of introducing structural complexity into the immediate self-givenness of experience. This intrinsic complexity enables the pre-reflective awareness to unfold and subsequently manifest at a reflective level, thereby bridging the temporal and phenomenological gap between non-reflective immediacy and reflective articulation. Moreover, pre-reflectively, one's stream of consciousness is given as a flowing unity. Therefore, Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness explains not only how one is aware of extended temporal blocks but also how one can be aware of one's own stream of experiences. To put it differently, it also describes how consciousness unifies itself across time:

**22** For a detailed study on the mind's luminosity in Husserl's account, see Hart 1998.

> In this way, it becomes evident that concrete perception as original consciousness (original givenness) of a temporally extended object is structured internally as itself a streaming system of momentary perceptions (so-called originary impressions). But each such momentary perception is the nuclear phase of a continuity, a continuity of momentary gradated retentions on the one side, and a horizon of what is coming on the other side: a horizon of "protention", which is disclosed to be characterized as a constantly gradated coming. This *momentary continuity of retention and protention* belonging to every originary impression undergoes a modification difficult to describe, in the flowing off of the originary impression; in any case the multiplicity of appearances of the linear stretch of time is multi-dimensional. (Husserl 1977, 154-5; italics added)

The three-fold structure of time-consciousness enables the stream of consciousness to remain unified while allowing objects to be experienced (MacKenzie 2011, 96). In claiming that Husserl distinguished two types of experiential self-givenness, a reflective and pre-reflective one, and in linking them to two sets of temporality, Zahavi (1999, 71) diverges from the general interpretation that sees Husserl equating self-awareness with reflective (that is, introspective) self-awareness. The Heidelberg School, whose main proponents are Henrich, Frank, Pothast, and Tugendhat, argues against higher-order theories and criticizes what it sees as a fundamentally reflective structure in Husserl's account.[23]

However, the topic of the inner complexity and articulation of self-awareness, which has been seen to be problematic since Dignāga's time[24] and continues to be debated in the most recent exegesis of his work, is also a difficult point for the contemporary discourse on self-awareness. Indeed, the Heidelberg School, which could be considered as one of its most remarkable protagonists,

**23** Zahavi (1998a, 135) claims, "As Frank puts it, Husserl's entire investigation of consciousness is based on the tacit assumption that consciousness is conscious of something different from itself. Due to this fixation on intentionality Husserl never managed to escape the reflection theory of self-awareness. He persistently operated with a model of self-awareness based upon the subject-object dichotomy, with its entailed difference between the intending and the intended, and therefore never discovered the existence of a prereflective self-awareness". For a presentation and critique of the Heidelberg School, see Zahavi 1999; 2007. The Heidelberg School's contribution to the study of self-awareness has mainly consisted of a criticism of the reflectionist model. Their arguments are hardly satisfactory, however, in that they do not provide a positive description of the structure of pre-reflective self-awareness. For references on the Heidelberg School's critique of Husserl, see Zahavi 1999, 230 fn. 13.

**24** For a discussion on how Dignāga could help read Husserl's account of temporality, see Ganeri 2012, 174-5.

struggles with this point.[25] However, the valuable insights derived from Dignāga's account of *svasaṃvedana*, along with those found in Husserl's analysis, reveal different perspectives from which to articulate the inner structure of reflexivity. This is a crucial aspect that any theory of self-awareness cannot afford to overlook.

Having examined the inner temporal structure of self-awareness, this inquiry will now briefly consider its spatial boundaries. The term 'spatial boundaries' is used metaphorically to refer to two primary dimensions of self-awareness: first, its perspectival structure; second, its relation to the (Freudian) unconscious. While the latter raises important issues, it will not be addressed in this study, as it stems largely from modern theoretical concerns and finds limited resonance within the Buddhist tradition.[26]

An adequate theory of self-awareness should be able to confront the structural issue of the minimal point of view required by experience. The question here is whether self-awareness is just the anonymous acquaintance of a single experience with itself or whether it implies a broader egocentric structure, referring either to the stream of consciousness or to the self.

Looking to the Buddhist tradition, a valuable contribution can be found in the way experience is framed by the theory of self-awareness. As claimed by MacKenzie (2017), for Buddhist reflexivism, *svasaṃvedana* is the synchronic conscious point of view within which the two aspects of experience are given. It is a minimal form of subjectivity, in the sense of a 'phenomenological dative' of manifestations, that to which phenomenal experiences are presented. This 'dative' does not entail any separate or enduring subject existing over and above the stream of the individual episodes of experience: rather, each experiential episode is its own subject. Experiences are given in a phenomenal first-person perspective, and the mind's reflexivity is, therefore, the necessary condition of any phenomenal appearance, subjective or objective. In his most recent reflections,

**25** For a critical presentation of the attempts made by the Heidelberg School in order to highlight the internal complexity of self-awareness, see Zahavi 1999, 35-7.

**26** Concerning this second level, that is, the problem of the unconscious, the central question is whether all experiences are necessarily characterized by a primitive, pre-reflective self-awareness (thus ruling out the existence of the unconscious), or whether the unconscious can be accommodated within a framework that maintains a basic reflexivity of consciousness. See Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991, 48-50; Zahavi 1999, 203-20; Gennaro 2004. It has been argued (Zahavi 1999; 2006; MacKenzie 2007) that a contemporary theory of self-awareness must also engage with other complex issues such as embodiment and the socially and linguistically mediated interactions with other embodied subjectivities. These concerns, however, pertain to a broader conception of self-awareness, one that goes beyond the reflexivity inherent in each experiential moment and involves questions of personal identity (as an embodied self-engaged in relational contexts). Since such topics fall outside the scope of the present inquiry, they will not be addressed further here.

MacKenzie (2024) draws inspiration from the tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti to identify a model he calls "dual-aspect reflexivism". He finds this perspective particularly useful for guiding a discussion on the relationships between self-experience, subjectivity, and consciousness. Within this framework, the phenomenal characteristic unfolds in both modes of presentation: the object-aspect presents the object, while the subject-aspect presents the experience itself. Self-awareness is thus understood as the simplest awareness of these two facets of a cognitive event, where the three – self-awareness, the object-aspect, and the subject-aspect – are not separate entities but features of a single event. Across Buddhist traditions, the various levels and forms through which a self-referential structure emerges are both extensive and intricately articulated.[27] The Buddhist reflexivist proponents concede a subjective character of experience but, for them, this does not at all necessitate positing an additionally existing subject. Rather, the subject being sought – the 'experiencer' – is nothing other than the experience itself, not an independently existing self-standing behind it. This is indeed the position advanced by Dignāga's school: the subjectivity (the being-subjectively-experienced) of experience is asserted, but a subject beyond *svasaṃvedana* is rejected. Self-awareness provides a continuous, immediate, and internal perspective on one's own stream of experience that is given to 'itself' and not to 'a self'.[28]

However, based on the considerations discussed thus far, one fundamental point emerges – clearly articulated by Zahavi (2005): consciousness entails a pre-reflective dimension of subjectivity, namely, first-person self-givenness. This means that when a subject undergoes an experience, there is no ambiguity as to who is undergoing it (Zahavi 2005, 124). However, for Zahavi, this would not be sufficient for establishing subjective experience, something

**27** For further discussion, see Albahari 2006, where the Pāli Canon is interpreted as implicitly, but centrally, assuming the existence of a witness-consciousness – "a reading", as she admits, "that aligns Buddhism more closely to Advaita Vedānta than is usually acknowledged" (Albahari 2006, 2). See also Siderits, Thompson, Zahavi 2011, and, in particular, Fasching 2011; Thompson 2011; Dreyfus 2011. On the topic, see also Dreyfus, Thompson 2007.

**28** In considering the Buddhist contributions to the concept of self-reference, Mackenzie (2011) describes various accounts of the tradition and particularly examines Tsong-kha-pa's suggestion of a 'minimal self' (TIB *nga tsam*). For Tsong-kha-pa, the sense of self is natural and pre-linguistic, but it is not true that each moment of consciousness is self-aware: it's a process of I-making (SKT *ahaṃkāra*) without any *svasaṃvedana* involved. Here, MacKenzie argues: "Unlike Tsong-kha-pa, I do accept the notion of *svasaṃvedana*. On my view, the minimal self (*ahaṃkāra*) emerges from the more basic inherent reflexivity of consciousness. Thus my view is closer to the Mādhyamika of Śāntarākṣita (in India) or the bKa'-brgyud and rNying-ma traditions (in Tibet)" (MacKenzie 2011, 93 fn. 21; Author's adjustments for the transliterations from Tibetan).

which requires a pole of invariance in relation to which one can determine that experiences are one's own. Dreyfus argues for a Buddhist response to Zahavi's challenge:

> This response rests on the distinction between two senses of who we are: the subject, or, rather subjectivity, that is, the continuum of momentary mental states with their first-personal self-givenness, which are central to being a person (more on this shortly), and the self, which is an illusory reification of subjectivity as being a bounded agent enduring through time, rather than a complex flow of fleeting self-specified experiences. [...] But this does not entail that there is an act-transcendent pole of identity, an entity that endures before and after the moment of experience. (Dreyfus 2011, 142)

The view Dreyfus is arguing for agrees that the person is a conceptual fiction but asserts a minimal phenomenological self-awareness in any experience, which is necessary for the attribution of such concept. One attributes personhood to oneself not only on the basis of the psycho-physical complex – as emphasized in the Abhidharma tradition – but also through the self-givenness of one's experiences, in line with the Yogācāra view, where such experiences arise as pertaining to a minimal I. Here the minimal I would be the constantly changing stream of pre-reflectively self-aware experiences.

> Hence, the experiences on the basis of which we understand ourselves as persons are not impersonal but intrinsically self-specified, and this is why they are immune to any possible doubt as to whom the subject of the experience is. (145)

In proposing a theoretical framework for the "minimal phenomenal experience" (MPE), Metzinger (2020) uses the phenomenology of "pure consciousness" in meditation as a new entry point. He investigates whether a conscious system can be aware solely of awareness itself, what kind of phenomenal character such a state might involve, and what minimal conditions would be necessary for this experience to occur, both in neurotypical humans and in any potentially conscious system. The hypothesis is that MPE is marked by the absence of self-consciousness, temporal representation, and any spatial frame of reference, and the rationale is that, in order to develop a minimal-model explanation of phenomenal consciousness, a theoretically coherent point of departure lies in those experiential states in which practitioners explicitly report an immediate apprehension of consciousness as such.

Thus, stressing the difference between the self-giveness of consciousness and the self seems to be one pivotal contribution that Buddhist philosophy can make to the contemporary discussion about

the self-identity, immediacy and privileged access to self-awareness. However, the whole issue of subjectivity and self is made ever so much more complicated in terms of the soteriological Buddhist path. For instance, the doctrine of the basic- or store-consciousness (SKT *ālaya-vijñāna*; TIB *kun gzhi rnam shes*) is formulated by the tradition in order to answer the main objection that, without a self beyond fleeting mental states, karmic latencies could not be transmitted. However, the assertion of such basic consciousness raises difficult philosophical questions, and their examination would certainly exceed the scope of the present inquiry.[29] This being said, a modern theory of self-awareness aiming at tackling the topic of subjectivity can find invaluable help in the various strands of the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, nowadays, the possibility of a convergence between the rich and complex Buddhist contribution and the European phenomenological approach is particularly promising. With respect to this, it is worth mentioning Thompson's perceptive attempt at a reconciliation of phenomenology and the Buddhist view of no-self, where the subjectivity of experience is precisely the selfhood, that is, the ipseity, of time-consciousness in the Sartrian and Husserlian phenomenological accounts:

> Here it may be possible to reconcile phenomenology and the Buddhist no-self paradigm. From a phenomenological perspective, there is no need to suppose that 'I' or 'me' corresponds to an enduring entity with an existence separate or somehow distinct from the stream of mind-body events. Rather, the 'I' picks out the stream from its own self-individuating phenomenal perspective. To use an Indian turn of phrase, we could say that the stream is fundamentally I-making (*ahaṃkāra*). (Thompson 2011, 185)

Moreover, Zahavi (2020) examines the what-it-is-like-ness of phenomenal states in terms of a what-it-is-like-for-me-ness. According to this perspective, experiential processes possess an intrinsic reflexive quality in the minimal sense that they are experienced as something for the subject. This for-me-ness implies a form of self-awareness at the level of the mental state itself rather than at the level of the subject as an enduring entity. Thus, it is clear that this matter intersects with and also questions many categories that have been adopted in the recent studies of consciousness and its reflexivity. Further research is desirable.

In conclusion, within the complexity of the topic of perspectival experience and self-reference, many possibilities of egological and non-egological structures of consciousness can indeed be conceived

**29** For a philosophical interpretation of this doctrine, see Dreyfus 2011.

of and examined. The self-awareness's inner time and its spatial or perspectival boundaries, together with the possibility for reflectivity and intentionality, are all widely debated topics and no conclusive statement can be uttered. On the contrary, as Flanagan (1992, 195) aptly summarizes, current research explores a wide array of topics: self-awareness spans a *continuum* that ranges from the awareness intrinsic to subjective experience to the reflective cognition concerning the model of the self.

### 7.2.2 Contemporary Philosophical and Scientific Challenges: Toward a Common Ground

From the philosophical point of view, the most recent and hegemonic framework is that of naturalism; it therefore seems reasonable that, today, a theory of self-awareness must be compatible with at least some form of it. Moreover, such theories must also be capable of entering into meaningful dialogue with the latest empirical findings in the cognitive sciences. Those two sides, one philosophical and the other scientific, represent two major elements which the ongoing debate on self-awareness must deal with. With respect to that, one important (and maybe ambitious) direction for developing and deepening a discourse on self-awareness emerges from the convergence of naturalism, phenomenology, and contemplative traditions, on the one side, and neuroscience, on the other, the goal being a synthesis of phenomenology in light of cognitive science and other philosophical and contemplative traditions that focus on experience.

There have been some attempts to proceed in this direction. Coseru (2012), for instance, sees Indian Buddhist epistemology as being in continuity with the naturalistic approaches of contemporary epistemology and philosophy of mind as well as with some of the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Coseru, in fact, endorses a phenomenological naturalistic position to highlight "the pragmatic character of epistemic inquiry in the Buddhist tradition" (Coseru 2012, 54). Coseru considers Buddhist epistemology as an intellectual project that has been built on naturalist grounds and would benefit from further naturalization. On the other hand, however, the convergence between phenomenology and naturalism, as well as the general perspective of philosophy of mind, is not at all easy. Varela clearly states:

> The phenomenological approach starts from the irreducible nature of conscious experience. Lived experience is where we start from and where all must link back to, like a guiding thread. Most modern authors are disinclined to focus on the distinction between mental life in some general sense and experience, or

> manifest some suspicion about its status. From a phenomenological standpoint conscious experience is quite at variance with that of mental content as it figures in the Anglo-american philosophy of mind. (Varela 1996, 334)

Ganeri (2012, 218) also highlights the divergence between naturalism and phenomenology. While much of contemporary research into Buddhist philosophy of mind has been conducted within a framework of naturalization, aiming for a strict naturalist alignment with modern science, the Buddhist no-self theory is better understood as a compositional phenomenological psychology. A phenomenological standpoint is also vividly and lucidly endorsed by the uncompromising neurophenomenological attitude defended by Bitbol (2015). He stands against those strands that, although neurophenomenological, ultimately subordinate experiences to their neural correlates and formulate a physicalist hierarchy according to which neurobiological processes are more fundamental than phenomenal consciousness.

Thus, Bitbol (2015) helpfully details three main versions of the neurophenomenological approach. According to a minimal or naturalistic version of it, its role is only to contribute to the findings of a hegemonic objective neuroscience. The mild or neutral version of neurophenomenology consists of adopting a sort of uncommitted standpoint, thus placing the phenomenological description and the neurobiological processes on an equal footing. However, according to Bitbol (2008, 71), it is the fully-fledged or radical phenomenological approach of neurophenomenology to which Varela is truly committed. Varela's (1996, 344) notion of "mutual constraints" between the study of experience and its correlates entails a reciprocal transformation and enrichment. If phenomenological reports can help identify unnoticed neural patterns, then neurological findings can aid phenomenological research. Indeed, the dimension of experience and its scientific understanding "are like two legs without which we cannot walk" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991, 14).

What, then, constitutes the concrete and methodological common ground shared by phenomenology, contemplative practices and traditions, naturalism and the cognitive sciences? Neurophenomenology is the field in which this convergence can take place meaningfully. Representative of this new frontier is Thompson's work *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (2014), in which he draws upon his distinctive position as both a philosopher of mind and an active participant in the ongoing dialogue between neuroscience and contemplative traditions.[30] Despite the legitimate criticism Bitbol (2015) raises regarding Thompson's tendency to

**30** See also Lutz, Dunne, Davidson 2007.

regard neurobiological processes ultimately as more fundamental than phenomenal consciousness, Thompson's work is particularly effective in integrating cognitive science with Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions to explore consciousness and the sense of self. By mapping the main states of consciousness in which the self dwells, neurophenomenology addresses various issues raised by the encounter of neuroscience and the contemplative traditions. In engaging with this multidisciplinary and innovative field – whose foundational principles are significantly informed by Indian yogic traditions, including Buddhism – Thompson investigates the nature of consciousness through a three-fold framework: awareness itself, the contents of awareness and self-experience, as approached within cognitive science (Thompson 2014, xxxiii). The sense of self in the I-making process and the consciousness thus identified are then explored by Thompson across a structure that, again coming from the Indian tradition, encompasses four different states: waking, dreaming, deep sleep and pure awareness. The central idea of this line of research is investigating the view of the self as an experiential process undergoing constant change. The author criticizes the position that he labels "neuro-nihilism", that is, the neuroscientific view of the self as just an illusion created by the brain. He suggests instead an "enactive understanding of the self" (Thompson 2014, 324) in which the self is nothing but the I-making process. The self, a dependently-arisen series of events, is thus not an entity but "a process of I-ing – an ongoing process that enacts an 'I'" (Thompson 2014, 326). This view aligns with enactivism, a contemporary approach in philosophy of mind and cognitive science that emphasizes the embodied, embedded, and interactive nature of cognition.[31] Rather than viewing the mind as processing internal representations of an external world, enactivism holds that cognition arises through dynamic interactions between an organism and its environment. It stresses the role of lived experience, sensorimotor activity, and the situated body in the generation of meaning and knowledge. In this framework, perception and consciousness are not passive receptions of data but active, participatory engagements with the world. Enactivism thus offers an alternative to both representational and strictly computational models of the mind, aligning well with phenomenological and contemplative perspectives.[32]

This framework also provides an inspiring definition of consciousness: Thompson refers to it as experience manifesting itself

**31** See Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991; Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher 2010; Thompson, Stapleton 2009.

**32** For recent studies proposing a theoretical model for the cognitive investigation of non-dual meditative practices, experiences, and reflexive knowing from an enactivist perspective, see Meling 2021; 2022.

across the four above-mentioned states and describes it using the three-fold framework cited. Another fundamental issue addressed extensively by Thompson concerns the essential differences between the Indian and European traditions' respective mappings of consciousness. The latter tend to focus on the presence or absence of consciousness and consider waking sensory experience as the basis for all consciousness. The former, on the other hand, consider varying levels of consciousness, ranging from the grossest to the subtlest, and regard sensory experiences as being gross and dependent on subtler ones. Despite this difference, Thompson shows a significant correspondence between the Indo-Tibetan and the scientific accounts of consciousness. In fact, there is detailed neuroscientific evidence that consciousness is made up of discrete cognitive events, as is asserted in Buddhist Abhidharma philosophy. Thus, Thompson draws attention to neuroscientific research, indicating that practices such as open awareness meditation and focused attention cultivate the brain's skill in segmenting the ongoing sensory stream into discrete instances of conscious experience. Another crucial point addressed by this field of research is the relationship between consciousness and the brain as well as issues regarding the primacy of consciousness. "Consciousness is our way of being", and it cannot be objectified as "it is that by which any object shows up for us at all" (Thompson 2014, 100).[33] Thompson refutes all the traditional positions about the mind-brain problem in favor of forging a new understanding of what 'physical' means, pointing beyond the dualistic conception of consciousness *versus* physical being.

Thompson begins to investigate various states of consciousness by presenting the hypnagogic state, the one leading up to sleep, and compares it to the dreaming state. The former is characterized as "a slackening of the sense of self", and consciousness tends to identify with what it spontaneously imagines (Thompson 2014, 122). Since the boundaries between oneself and the world are blurred in the hypnagogic state, one is not constrained within the waking ego structure. This means that one can tap into different sources of creativity and rest by becoming absorbed in the images one is examining. When one enters the dreaming state, however, the sense of self is restored and one experiences oneself as the subject of the dream world. The studies Thompson reports show how the difference between the two states is reflected in a shift in the type of waves emitted by the brain.

What happens when one is able to focus one's attention on a dream while knowing one is dreaming? This question leads to the state of

**33** One of the most recent contributions emphasizing the need to consider human experience as an integral part of scientific inquiry is Frank, Gleiser, Thompson 2024.

consciousness referred to as lucid dreaming, one that neuroscientists have just begun to explore but is well-known and widely utilized, for instance, in Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices. The study of lucid dreaming and its implications represents one of the most promising points of intersection between science and the contemplative traditions. Its link to the issue of self-awareness is significant, as it may be regarded as a specific instance of the recognition of one's own state. Therefore, studying this state of consciousness might enhance the actual knowledge of this specific and fundamental feature of consciousness. It is worth noting the methodological approach underlying the research developments Thompson discusses. It is paradigmatic of the general methodology adopted by neurophenomenology, and reveals the precious and unique contribution of the Buddhist contemplative traditions. The subjects of the experiments are meditators trained in the traditional contemplative techniques of lucid dreaming. While their physiology and brain activity are being measured in the sleep lab, they can communicate with the outside world (the lab) through prearranged eye movements. They use an 'eye-language' that allows them to communicate when their lucid dream begins and to report about specific features of the experience. Being trained, they are able to move flexibly and reliably between different states of awareness and can describe their experience vividly from moment to moment. Thanks to their training they are able to enhance the link between first- and third-person perspective and lead contemporary philosophers of mind to examine states of consciousness that have thus far been either neglected or dismissed. The studies proposed by Thompson (2014) are presented here as a suggestive and emblematic example of how different disciplines and approaches, and their respective epistemologies, can communicate and are already interacting, contributing to some of the most innovative developments in the field. Bitbol's phenomenological curiosity also goes along these lines, tapping into contemplative traditions where investigation stems from a mindful survey of the flux of lived experience, finding that each alternative state of consciousness might help tackle the problem of consciousness (2015, 108). Bitbol (2008, 71), therefore, identifies significant potential in systematically training and educating experience through a combination of first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. Thus, a fundamental way to bridge neurocognitive and Asian contemplative approaches seems to be that of promoting first-person experience transformation by training in meditative or yogic states.

The scientific and philosophical consequences of this encounter between such technological tools, on the one hand, and knowledge held by contemplative traditions, on the other, may soon prove to be remarkable. The potential of lucid dreaming is mainly discussed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of dream yoga. Here the highest abilities one can acquire by training – by transforming one's own

dreams and thus working with one's emotions and inner states – are said to disclose the lucid experience of seeing through the dream by dissolving it completely, releasing all imagery and merely being aware of being aware. The factor of lucidity and reflexivity involved in lucid dreaming seems thus to be trainable and have many applications. As Thompson suggests, therefore, the most common neuroscientific models of dream interpretation should be corrected since they cannot adequately explain the dream state in light of what lucid dreaming reveals. Dreaming can no longer be seen as a passive epiphenomenon of the sleep state but rather as an intentional process of the imagination. Thus, a new dream science could fruitfully combine dream yoga with psychology and neuroscience.[34]

According to this innovative approach, another state through which consciousness and its reflexivity can be investigated is deep and dreamless sleep. While most neuroscientists today think of this as a state during which consciousness fades away and vanishes, Indian and Tibetan traditions see it as possessing a subtle form of awareness and consider this state of consciousness from a completely different perspective. According to these contemplative traditions, one can actually access these deep levels of awareness through meditative training. In these states the consciousness is said to be so subtle that it becomes just a "witness consciousness", an awareness that "watches the carousel of sleeping, dreaming and waking" without participating in that spinning (Thompson 2014, 248) and without any sense of ego. Thus, moving from deep sleep to dreaming to waking is a movement "from subtler to grosser levels of consciousness and embodiment" (260). The interesting question here (232-3) is whether it makes sense to presuppose the presence of a minimal pre-reflective self-awareness during sleep and dreamless sleep. It would be a reflexivity of mind that manifests and unfolds as flowing retentions and protentions (recalling Husserls's terms). Thompson comments on "contemplative sleep science" (2014, 268) as follows: if highly experienced meditation practitioners could provide reports upon awakening from deep sleep, and their physiology and brain activity could be measured, then the neural and physical data could be combined with first-person reports, thus having new evidence that this is indeed a state of consciousness

**34** Closely related to lucid dreaming are out-of-body experiences, in which one sees oneself from outside one's body while nevertheless experiencing it as one's own. These states are investigated in a similar way. Thompson presents these states as revelatory about the sense of self: in the dissociation between the body-as-object and the body-as-subject, the sense of self and self-location follows the body-as-subject, that is, the one that holds one's spatial perspective. It is true that much is still unclear about these experiences: why can they represent only some things in the environment correctly and not others? Are there specific kinds of lucid dreams? Are these experiences repeatable in a rigorously controlled experimental setting? These and many other questions are still awaiting answers.

and that it is accessible. Indeed, while deeper levels of phenomenal consciousness are typically beyond the reach of ordinary cognitive access, contemplative traditions maintain that the mind can be trained effectively to engage with these subtler layers of awareness. Thus, many aspects that cognitive science and philosophy categorize as unconscious involve subtle levels of phenomenal awareness that can be accessed potentially through meditative training.

As Bitbol suggests, "the new science should include a 'dance' of mutual definition" (2014, 267) between first-person and third-person accounts, mediated by the second-person social exchange. In conclusion, therefore, while contemplative accounts are able to cast new light on the scientific approach for studying states of consciousness, findings from neuroscientific experimental research can bring scientific accuracy and evidence to contemplative traditions. Contemplative neuroscience and neurophenomenology turn out to be innovative projects that may dramatically enrich and problematize the understanding of consciousness together with its specific features as well as that of the self. As discussed, the key challenges in the current discourse on consciousness and its reflexivity can actually be viewed as opportunities to shape the most compelling directions for future research. These challenges gain particular relevance within the broader, interdisciplinary, and cutting-edge emergent field of Contemplative Studies, which is dedicated to the exploration of contemplative practices by drawing together perspectives from the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. Its methodology integrates first-person experience with third-person analysis, while also recognizing the importance of second-person perspectives, that is, the intersubjective and dialogical dimension through which individuals articulate and communicate their own contemplative experience. Rather than separating the experiential dimension from scholarly inquiry, the proposed model includes the direct practice of contemplative techniques as a legitimate source of insight, alongside historical, philosophical, and scientific approaches.[35]

To conclude, although the deeper strata of phenomenal consciousness often elude ordinary cognitive access, contemplative traditions affirm that the mind can be diligently and skillfully trained to awaken to these more refined dimensions of experience. This possibility embodies not only a philosophical insight but a lived potential. It invites a reassessment of the scope of consciousness, bridging ancient introspective wisdom with contemporary philosophical and scientific inquiry, and offering a profound vision of self-awareness as both a path and a practice.

**35** For an overview of the field, see Komjathy 2017. For a detailed discussion of the field's epistemology, see Roth 2006; 2008. For an interdisciplinary publication that reflects the breadth and depth of the field, see, among others, Flanagan, Clough 2024.