

Chapter 10

On the Advaitic Identification of Self and Consciousness¹

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As a soteriological tradition, Advaita Vedānta aims to realise a dimension of stillness and contentlessness beneath the constant change we normally experience as our lives. This dimension is assumed to be the core of our own being, our ‘self’ (*ātman*). However, this ‘self’ is not something over and above our conscious experiencing, as its ‘performer’, but simply our consciousness itself.

Being in itself absolutely contentless and changeless, consciousness, as Advaita understands it, is obviously not simply identical to the manifold successive conscious experiences we have. Rather, it is an abiding principle of awareness that underlies all our transitory mental acts and states. This stands in stark contrast to modern Western conceptions of the mental life. Our mental life is usually viewed as merely a series of mental events – perhaps intricately interrelated, maybe forming an integrated whole, a more or less coherent personality instead of just one experiential event after the other lashing up in isolation – but hardly anyone would assume the existence of an absolutely constant element that *underlies* them all. Anything that might be stable about our mental life is viewed as but a result of the way the mental events are interrelated, something like a stable structure into which they are organised. The being-conscious of mental states is usually understood in the sense of the latter having an experiential quality, a ‘what-it-is-like-ness’, and these experiential qualities are actually dazzlingly manifold and incessantly changing, hence it is hard to see what should be changeless about consciousness, and how it should constitute our abiding ‘self’.

In light of this contrast, it might be interesting to reflect on what the Advaitins might mean by their assumption of a contentless and unchanging awareness, and whether we can gain any insight from this idea – which is what I intend to do here. Not being a scholar of Hindu studies, I will not attempt to offer a detailed critical survey of Advaitic theories of consciousness, experience and self. Rather, I will attempt a philosophical assessment of the general Advaitic idea of consciousness as being in some sense distinct from the transitory experiences, and of the equation of the former with our self. I am convinced that this basic Advaitic intuition indeed harbours an important insight, an insight that might prove useful to us in gaining a

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better understanding of the essence of subjectivity, in particular with regard to the question of the unity of the experiencing self – that is, to what in modern Western philosophy is discussed as the problem of ‘personal identity’.

The Problem of the Identity of the Self

The problem of personal identity pertains to the question of what makes it so that I remain the same through time – that while my experiences are permanently changing, it is one and the same *me* who *has* all those changing experiences.

The classical ‘Cartesian’ view would hold that this is simply due to the fact that it is one and the same ego that has all those experiences. Yet there has always been much scepticism about the existence of such an entity that simply cannot be found in our experience (or so it seems). Consequently, today there is a wide consensus on the so-called ‘reductionist’ view of personal identity (Parit 1987: 210–14), on the thesis that the identity of a person over time consists in and is therefore reducible to more fundamental facts, in particular – if we stick to the ‘psychological’ version of reductionism – to certain relations between the experiences (relations of memory, of continuing intentions, and so on), relations by virtue of which these experiences form one integrated, coherent mental life. According to this default view, there is no such thing as a stable ‘self’ in addition to the ephemeral physical and mental events that make up the life of a person: there are only these very events and their interrelatedness, and the oneness of what we call ‘one person’ is *constituted* by these interrelations. There is just the stream of experiences, and no additional I who experiences them.

Now one could ask – however plausible the rejection of an additionally existing spiritual substance might sound – whether such an I-less account of the stream of experiences is fully convincing considering the fact that experiences only exist in being subjectively experienced (and this seems to mean: in being experienced by a respective subject) in the first place. As the phenomenologist Dan Zahavi has convincingly argued and elaborated on in many of his writings, the very being of the experience qua being subjectively experienced involves a basic and essential self- or subject-relatedness of experience (what he terms ‘mineness’) (cf., for example, Zahavi 2005: 124–32). Experiences are always experiences of a subject *for whom* ‘there is something it is like’ to undergo them, which ‘what-it-is-likeness’ – first-person givenness to the respective subject – is widely considered to be constitutive of something being an experience at all. But only rarely is the question raised as to what this subject of experience, which belongs to its very nature, *is*.

The introduction of an ‘owner’ of the experiences not only becomes pertinent with regard to the diachronic identity of the person, but relates to the very essence of subjectivity in general. My present experience has its existence in its being experienced by me, and it is experienced by me completely irrespective of the relations it might have to other experiences. Experiences are subject-related from the start, by virtue of their very essence. I do not ‘have’ my experiences like a

whole ‘has’ parts, but rather in the sense that my experiences are given to *me* in a peculiar first-person mode while I experience them (and this is precisely what my experiencing them consists in). Therefore, the ‘I’ in this basic sense cannot simply be the whole continuous stream of experiences, nor somehow constituted by them and their interrelations. Rather, it is presupposed for their very being. So long as we do not understand what the subject of an individual experience is, we cannot sensibly ask what it means that *succeeding* experiences are experienced by the *same* subject.

The Advaitic Suggestion: The Self as Consciousness

So what is this experiencing ‘I’ that constitutes the essential subjectivity of experience?

I conceded above that there is some plausibility in rejecting a metaphysical ego-substance beyond or behind the experiential realm: such an entity would have to remain a purely metaphysical conjecture, unsupported by what is given in our experience. Yet on the other hand it seems that we cannot do *without* an ‘I’ that experiences its experiences, since mineness belongs to the very essence of experience itself.

At this point it might be worthwhile to consider the Advaitic view: the Advaitins, too, reject the idea of an additionally existing self-substance whose *property* consciousness would be (as is, for example, the view of Nyāya). Yet they insist that we also cannot coherently give a *selfless* account of our experiential life (for experience essentially requires a subject who experiences it, as they stress in opposition to the Buddhists: cf., for example, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (1896; 1962) 2.2.28 [vol. 1, p. 424]). What the Advaitins suggest is that the self is simply consciousness itself. It *is*, in their view, nothing but the conscious experiencing, and not something that *performs* it.

What is meant by ‘consciousness’ here? Consciousness is, for the Advaitins, the principle of manifestation (*prakāśa* = ‘illumination’): ‘consciousness manifests all things. Just as without the sunlight, the universe would be shrouded in darkness, similarly without consciousness nothing would be known or manifested’ (Gupta 2003: 31–2; cf. 106). Actually, consciousness is nothing but this taking place of manifestation itself, and ‘not a thing or substance which manifests’ (Gupta 2003: 103):

consciousness has no form, no content; its only function, like that of light, is to show the object on which it is focused. ... The Advaitins argue that, that which manifests everything cannot have the form of any particular thing; manifestation is its only function. (Gupta 2003: 119–20)

This means I do not find my consciousness as one of the objects that appear to me, rather it is simply the very coming-to-appearance (being-present-to-me) itself of

whatever is present to me (although it is, as Advaita stresses, non-objectively self-revealed, having its very being in its self-luminosity²).

The Advaitic thesis is that this consciousness is what I *am* at the most fundamental level, my ‘self’ (the *ātman*). I qua subjectivity *exist* as this event of manifestation. So the self in the Advaitic sense is not a particular entity I could ind – as a realm of ‘inwardness’ – in addition to the things in the world which I experience as being external to me; it is rather the world-experiencing (world-manifestation) itself. Of course I do ind – as one of the things that are present to me – the empirical person who I apprehend as being ‘me’: I am aware of myself as a person among persons, a particular psychophysical entity. But the point is: my experiences are not mine (in the sense relevant here) because they are associated with this particular objectively existing person; rather, vice versa, this person is (apprehended as) ‘me’ in so far as it is given *to me* (*in my experiencing*) in a very special way (‘from the inside’, so to speak). Experiencing itself (consciousness) is me-ness. Hence, the fact that subjective experience is apprehended as ‘belonging’ to a particular empirical person is secondary and by no means what *constitutes* the subject-relatedness of experience (it is what Advaita Vedānta calls *adhyāsa*: ‘superimposition’, namely of self and non-self). So when Advaita investigates the nature of what it calls the ‘self’, it is not interested in the empirical I given as a particular entity in the world and standing in manifold relations to other entities, but exclusively in the nature of presence as such in which the world and the empirical I (and all their interrelations) gain their disclosedness.³

Consciousness and Experience

But if consciousness is the taking place of manifestation, it is unclear how it can be an abiding, changeless self. Manifestation is a permanent process, there are constantly changing manifestations (appearances), in a ceaseless Heraclitean lux. Consequently, it appears that to say the self is nothing but consciousness amounts to collapsing the experiencing subject into the experiences (qua manifestation-events) themselves, so that it is some *agglomeration* of the manifold changing experiences – which would amount to a reductionist view of the self after all.

Therefore, further differentiation is obviously necessary *within* this taking place of manifestation. Actually, the Advaitins do not equate consciousness with

² To keep to the Advaitic metaphor of light: in illuminating the objects, the light itself is also present – but not as one of the illuminated objects; rather, the luminosity of light is the very medium of the manifestation of the objects. In the case of consciousness, however, the shining and the seeing coincide – it is a pure event of thereness, without any distinction between seer and seen; cf. on this topic Ram-Prasad (2007: 74–83).

³ The *ātman* is ‘the witness of both the seer and the seen’ (Śaṅkara, *Ātmajñopadeśavidhi* 3.7, quoted in Gupta 1998: 38). It ‘is simply the consciousness itself that does the taking ... of itself as an individual’ (Ram-Prasad 2011: 230).

the individual experiences (what I called ‘manifestation-events’), but rather understand it as the witness (*sākṣin*) of the experiences, and thereby also as the witnessing that takes place *in* the experiences. What could this mean?

This might sound as if my definition of consciousness as the taking place of manifestation was premature, consciousness for the Advaitins rather being something that stands apart from the manifestations (appearances), observing them. But this would be a far too reifying reconstruction of what is meant in Advaita Vedānta by ‘witness’ and its distinctness from the ‘witnessed’. The Advaitins indeed claim that the experience of a world of objects comes about by an association of pure consciousness, which is in itself non-intentional, and of the mental states (*vr̥ttis*), which are ‘not intrinsically cognitive – that is, luminous – at all’ (Ram-Prasad 2007: 81), and this (in my view infelicitous) way of putting it indeed suggests the idea of two independently existing types of entities that are somehow compounded, together constituting what we know as ‘experience of something’. But as a matter of fact, this way of construing it is incompatible with another Advaitin claim, namely that the *vr̥ttis* do not possess any ‘unknown existence’ (*ajñātasattā*) (Gupta 2003: 110–13; Gupta 1998: 69–70; Chatterjee 1982: 342–4): for the Advaitins, mental states (experiences) only *exist* in being ‘witnessed’ by consciousness, so it is not at all the case that they primarily exist outside and independently of consciousness and *additionally* enter the scope of it. Their being manifested in consciousness is intrinsic to their very being. And while the term ‘to witness’ might suggest the idea of someone looking at something, in Advaita Vedānta there is no witness as distinguished from the witnessing, there is only the mere witnessing itself. And mere witnessing consists in nothing but the manifestation of the witnessed. There is no independently existing ‘act’ of witnessing that is *directed* at what is present; rather, the presence of the witnessed and the witnessing are one and the same happening. Therefore, I would suggest understanding the Advaitic characterisation of consciousness as ‘witness’ in the sense of its definition as *taking place of presence*.

We are then no longer left with the idea of two separately existing types of entities – consciousness and the mental states – which are somehow ‘compounded’ without being intrinsically related to each other. Rather, what Advaita tries to point out is the (conceptual) distinction between what has its existence in being present and this very presence itself. And the Advaitic claim is that this presence as such abides through the permanent change of what is present. How is this to be understood?

What do we mean when we speak of the many transient experiences we have? For example: I have a visual experience of the desk in front of me. This means that the presence of a particular content takes place: of the content desk-as-seen-from-there-and-there. Now when one experience is succeeded by another experience – when I turn my gaze and see this chair instead of that desk – this means that presence-of-this-content is succeeded by presence-of-that-content. (Or when I walk around the desk, givenness-of-desk-seen-from-there-and-there is continuously succeeded by givenness-from-there-and-there, and so on; and even

if I have an unchanging experience of an unchanging object, presence-of-this-temporal-object-stage is succeeded by presence-of-that-temporal-object-stage.) So when we speak of the many different experiences, these experiences are individuated *by their content*. And while the contents that are respectively present are permanently changing, presence itself is precisely the element that does *not* change (cf. Klawonn 1998: 59)⁴ – it is, as Zahavi calls it, an ‘abiding dimension of experiencing’ (which Erich Klawonn calls the ‘I-dimension’: cf. Klawonn 1987):

whereas the act can become past and absent, the dimension of experiencing that allows for presence and absence cannot itself become past and absent (for me). Whereas we live through a number of different experiences, the first-personal experiencing itself remains as an unchanging dimension. (Zahavi 2000: 67; cf. Zahavi 1999: 80)

It is precisely this abiding presence that Advaita calls ‘consciousness’.

So, again, when we speak of the manifold experiences we have, the manifoldness lies on the side of the experiential contents. The realm of the experiences is the realm of the experientially given as such, the realm of what has its being in being subjectively given. Pain, for example – frequently used as the paradigm case of an experience – *exists* in feeling painful (that is, in being subjectively present as pain). A pain that is not felt is no pain, and when I *feel* pain, I ipso facto *am* in pain. Something analogous to this can be found in intentional experiences, for example in perception. To say that I have a visual experience of the desk means that a visual appearing of the desk takes place; and this appearing as such (the desk’s givenness-from-there-and-there) exists by virtue of its being experienced, its being experientially present to me (and it presents itself *as* appearance of a desk, and hence the presence of the appearance is ipso facto the presence of the desk). When I *experience* the appearing of the desk, the appearing of the desk *takes place*, and when I do *not* experience the appearing of the desk, no desk appears to me (no appearing exists). The desk-appearance (just like my pain) has its existence in its being subjectively experienced.

And this is precisely what the Advaitins mean when they assert that mental states do not possess any unknown existence. An external object I experience could as well exist without being experienced (and it actually always *has* aspects that are not experienced), and it could as well be experienced in a different way than it actually is without being itself different for that reason. In contrast, my experience itself of this object (its experiential appearance) has its *being* in its being experienced – it exists in so far as and precisely in the form it is subjectively

⁴ Just as S.K. Saksena characterises the Advaitic position (quoting and paraphrasing Vidyāranya): “[T]he different states of cognition [= consciousness] do not differ qua cognition”. The form of cognition is always the same, only the content varies. Whenever we talk of the origination and passing away of the cognition, we forget that we mean only the content of cognition and not cognition itself ...’; Saksena (1971: 56–7).

present to me. That is to say: while an external thing finds its disclosure in being the object of an experience which is distinct from this object, the experience itself does not first become manifest by becoming the object of a further experience: its being-experientially-present belongs to the very being of the experience. This is expressed in Advaita Vedānta by the idea that a mental state is immediately – without the mediation of a further mental state – manifested by the witness-consciousness: ‘by their very existence they [the *vṛttis* (mental states)] stand unconcealed before the witness-consciousness’ (Gupta 2003: 113; cf. Gupta 2003: 52, 109; Gupta 1998: 69–70; Ram-Prasad 2007: 82, 94).

What we call ‘experiences’ is usually equated with the experiential phenomena – with the experiential contents as such – again, with what exists in being subjectively experienced. Now the point is: *consciousness* (in the Advaitic sense) is the very *subjective experiencing itself*. It is, as the Advaitins formulate, the witnessing of the experiences. Hence, when they tell us that the self is identical to consciousness, this is not supposed to mean that the subject consists of the contents of consciousness, that it is composed of the ‘experiences’ in *this* sense (that is, of the experientially given as such); rather, it is precisely *consciousness* of these contents: their ‘primary presence’ (or ‘givenness-to-me’), as Klawonn calls it (1991: 5 *et passim*).

Hence, what I wish to suggest is that the Advaitic distinction between consciousness and the mental states should not be read as the distinction between two separate existences, but as one between two aspects of one and the same happening in order to abstractly isolate the presence-aspect as such, which we normally (being totally absorbed by the contents present to us) do not attend to. That the *vṛttis* are not intrinsically luminous means that the experiential contents, as such, are not conscious of anything. That the appearing-of-something takes place in them is due to the fact that they are *experiential* contents – that they are manifested in the medium of consciousness. So the ‘power of manifestation’ lies in the luminosity of presence (which, in contrast to the experiential contents, never enters the scope of introspection).

To this aspect of presence as such, Western philosophy of mind is strangely blind. It tends to understand conscious experience as something that is only subjectively (privately) present (as an ‘object’ to which we have a highly ‘idiosyncratic’ access) (cf. Rowlands 2008). When philosophers today speak of consciousness, they are mainly thinking of mental states which have a certain ‘phenomenal’ or ‘experiential’ quality (a certain ‘what-it-is-like-ness’) – what I called ‘experiences’ – and the term ‘consciousness’ is used either as a generic term for the specific phenomenal qualities (the ‘qualia’), or (when we speak of ‘our consciousness’ in the sense of ‘our conscious life’) as referring to the stream of our conscious states as a whole. But to have an ‘experiential quality’ means to be *experientially present* to the respective *subject* of the state; so there is much talk about that which has its being in being experientially given (the subjective experiences) and about its reducibility or irreducibility to what exists independently of its respective subjective givenness (the realm of the physical) –

but surprisingly little is said about the nature of *givenness itself* and of the *subject* to whom what is given is given (cf. Klawonn 1998: 56). And this is precisely what Advaita Vedānta is concerned with when it speaks of consciousness. When Advaita speaks of consciousness, it refers not to some experiential qualities, but to the experiencing itself in which any qualities come to givenness.

This presence-blindness is strikingly evident, to take an example, in David Chalmers's description of his 'fading qualia' thought experiment which he uses as an argument for his non-reductive functionalism: this imaginary case is about my brain cells being one by one replaced by functionally identical silicon chips, and the question is whether the resulting silicon-based functional isomorph of mine would be conscious or not; in the latter case, the replacement of my brain cells would amount to a gradual loss of consciousness. This is how Chalmers describes the experiences of 'a system halfway down the spectrum':

Joe is not having bright and yellow experiences [as the original, purely biological system would have] at all. Instead, perhaps he is experiencing tepid pink and murky brown. Perhaps he is having the faintest of red and yellow experiences. Perhaps experiences have darkened almost to black. (Chalmers 1996: 256)

It is quite obvious that there is something deeply inadequate about this description. Note that the thought experiment is supposed to be about a gradual loss of consciousness. Yet a tepid pink is just as present as a bright red, it does not amount to a less of *consciousness*; and even the experience of complete darkness does not mean being unconscious! Actually, consciousness as such is not a matter of degrees at all: either experiential presence takes place or it does not, with no possible in-between (cf. Klawonn 1998: 58). The experiential contents that are present can be more or less differentiated, and this of course affects how distinctly a world of objects presents itself to us; but this does not affect consciousness as such, for all of these differentiations and de-differentiations take place *within* the medium of consciousness.

The Western forgetfulness of presence is highly relevant to our leading question of the nature of the self (the experiencing subject) and its identity across the manifoldness of its experiences. Advaita suggests, as we have seen, equating the self with consciousness. Yet if one conceives of consciousness as somehow consisting of the manifold subjective phenomena (the 'phenomenal' or 'experiential' contents), the *unity* of consciousness can obviously only consist in the relations between these experiential contents. Advaita, in contrast, calls our attention to the *presence*-element in the full phenomenon presence-of-content (which, due to its elusiveness, usually goes unnoticed): this presence is what Advaita understands by 'consciousness', and accordingly the unity of consciousness (the oneness of the self) is not to be sought on the side of the contents and their interrelations, but on the presence-side.

The Unity of Consciousness

Now one could ask whether this talk of one consciousness as one abiding experiential presence in which the many experiences have their manifestation means to unduly hypostasise consciousness. To say that presence is the one thing the manifold experiences have in common simply means that they all have the same *property* of being experientially present (of having an ‘experiential quality’). That several succeeding items have the same property does not imply that there is something like an abiding *entity*: there is about as much one ‘consciousness’ in which the manifold experiences have their being as there is one ‘redness’ as the common abode of the many red things. Each red thing has its own redness(-trope), and each experience has its own presence.

But is it true that each experience has its own presence? Let us more closely consider the nature of the unity of consciousness (first in a synchronic respect). I have *many* experiences each moment: the presence of this desk I see, the presence of the traffic I hear, and so on – all of this forms *one ield of presence*, one presence of many contents. Now, the question is: what is the nature of this oneness of presence across the manifoldness of experiences? If we say that each experience has its own presence – this being a quality each experience as an experience has – then there must be some relations between the experiences that somehow bind them together into one experiential ield. But what kind of relation could this possibly be, a relation that is supposed to yield the being-present-together of the experiences?

Physical items form unities, for example, by being close to each other and forming a causally integrated whole. Yet it is obvious that causal relations between experiences do not ipso facto make them present in one consciousness. And when it comes to nearness, it is actually totally unclear what this could mean at all in the case of experiences – except *experiential* nearness, which already *means* that they are co-present (only what is present in one presence can be experienced as being ‘close’). Generally speaking, no non-experiential relations can ever, as such, constitute experiential togetherness (co-presence). Now, experiential contents can form *experiential* unities in being associated into unified ields against a background, or in being organised into one coherent phenomenal space, and the like. But quite obviously, all of this already presupposes that the experiential contents are co-present (cf. Dainton 2006: 240–44; Dainton 2007); it pertains to structures that co-present items can assume. It is incomprehensible how phenomenal contents that are not already co-present could enter into phenomenal relations – the oneness of consciousness is the *medium* of any relations between experiences, and not the *result* of them.

Hence: either relations between experiences are not in themselves experiential (are external to experience, only objectively existing without being themselves experienced) – in which case it is hard to see how they could ever, per se, amount to the co-presence of experiences – or they are experiential relations; but to experience experiences as standing in certain relations to each other naturally

presupposes their being-experienced-together, their being present in one presence – and therefore cannot *explain* it.

It might suggest itself to say that the many experiences are united by being the common object of a single higher-order experience (that is, that the unity of the experiences consists in the relation between one encompassing act of introspective awareness and the many experiences it encompasses) (cf., for example, Parit 1987: 250). But this actually presupposes that many contents can be present in one awareness, which was the explanandum in the first place. Either this higher-order experience is just another experiential content – in which case it is completely unintelligible how it should constitute the experiential togetherness of the other contents – or it is in no way one of the contents, but rather the common experiential presence of the many experiential contents, in which case we are no longer explaining the unity between the experiential contents by their interrelations, but have introduced a distinction between the many experiential contents and their common presence, which is not a further experiential content or the sum of the contents, but their common medium of manifestation. The point is precisely that nothing on the content-side can account for the unity of the contents: the unity consists simply in consciousness as such – as distinguished from the contents of consciousness – in which these contents have their presence. And this presence is nothing other than the being-experienced of the experiences in which the experiences have their very being. Therefore, they do not exist and additionally become somehow united (by an additional ‘higher-order’ experience, for example). Rather, it is their original being (namely their being experienced) itself wherein they have their unity.

The consideration of the nature of the unity of consciousness across the manifold simultaneous experiences therefore prompts us to distinguish between the experiences (qua experiential contents) on the one hand, and the consciousness in which they have their (co-)manifestation on the other – which is precisely the distinction drawn by Advaita Vedānta (along with many other Brahmanical schools). The one consciousness in which the many co-conscious experiences have their thereness is not itself an experiential content, or the sum of the experiential contents, or constituted by the relations between them. It is, in itself, an absolute contentlessness (or non-content), which is the abode of all contents; and in this contentlessness, Advaita sees our true self.

It might seem that I have used the term ‘presence’ in two different senses (and quietly shifted my emphasis – led by the consideration of the unity of consciousness – from the one to the other): on the one hand, in the sense of the presentness of what is respectively present; on the other, in the sense of the dimension *in which* what is present has its being-present. Yet there is no real discrepancy here. Comparably, one could speak of the spatiality of spatial objects and of space itself. These are not really two different things: the spatiality of an object *is* its being-in-space, and space has its existence in the spatiality of the objects (it is not to be found anywhere *distinct* from this spatiality). Similarly, the presentness of an experiential content *is* its existing in the presence-ield, and the presence-ield has

its existence in the presentness of what is respectively manifested in it. The point is simply that we have to start from the oneness of presence, instead of from the manifoldness of the contents, which are modifications of the one presence-field rather than independent existences that are subsequently somehow glued together (cf. Searle 2000). If we do not start from the oneness of presence, we will never get there: it is prior to any synthesis (for only co-present items can undergo a synthesis), and is therefore non-constituted.

Is Consciousness a Perdurant?

The question remains as to whether consciousness is really an *abiding* dimension of manifestation. It might be conceded that consciousness is the irreducible being-present-together of many contents at a particular moment – but still it seems that when *other* contents are present at the next moment, a *new* presence-of-contents takes place, so that the succession of contents amounts to a succession of presences – and the diachronic identity of the subject has to be explained reductively (through ‘unity relations’ between the individual presence-events) after all.

In Chapter 11 of this volume, MacKenzie presents Buddhist views that are quite akin to the Advaitic one I am discussing here, namely a conception of consciousness as ‘a constant luminous background or space within which phenomena ... appear and disappear like clouds in the sky’; yet he argues that this does not amount to an implicit acceptance of the Advaitic assumption of an enduring witness-consciousness: for the persistence of consciousness could also be understood as perdurance rather than endurance. This would mean that the persisting consciousness is actually an ongoing process, a continuous succession of consciousness-moments which form the temporal parts – each distinguished from the other – of the stream of consciousness as a whole, and not something that is *wholly* present at each moment. That which changelessly abides, according to MacKenzie, is only the *form* or *structure* of presence.

Is consciousness a perdurant? This is a tricky question indeed, and I do not claim to have a definitive answer to it. Yet I do not think that the perdurance view fully accounts for the phenomenology of presence. I do not experience my experiential life as a succession of structurally isomorphic presences. Rather, I experience the succession of experiential contents – the contents as coming and going, and hence as gaining and losing presence, as ‘entering’ and ‘leaving’ the presence-field which is my very being qua abiding subjectivity. I permanently experience the transition of each experiential phase into its having-elapsing – the transition of, in Husserlian terms, being-present in primal impression into being-retained in retention – and it gets retained as just-having-been-present, namely as having-been-present in *the very same presence* out of which it is continuously gliding and in which it becomes present as no longer present (as elapsed). Therefore, the givenness of my experiences as streaming is equi-primordially the givenness of

presence as standing.⁵ This is not properly described as merely the abidance of a form; it does not mean that the succeeding experiences have some structure in common. Presence is not a form that experiential contents assume – it is precisely the *presentness* of contents together with all their structures. Presence is a ‘form’ only in the sense that it is not one of the contents.

True, when an experience sinks into the past, one could say that its being-present becomes past. But this does not mean that *presence itself* sinks into the past: it is precisely the being-present – the being-*in-the-presence* – of this content that becomes past. It is then no longer present. It is not experiential presence that has elapsed, but the being-manifest-in-the-presence of this particular experiential content.

If it were the case that one presence succeeded the other (that is, if the succession of contents were a succession of presences), one could raise the question as to what makes it so that one particular presence is present right now, and not another. One presence after another would become ‘actual’, would enter the actuality of experiencing. We would need a ‘point of actuality’ that ‘wanders’ or ‘glides’ from presence to presence (makes one presence after the other present). But this quite obviously gets things the wrong way around: presence is the very ‘point of actuality’ itself; it is the presentness of what is currently present. It is the contents we experience that are successively present, which become present and sink out of presence. Presence itself does not sink into the past together with the content (otherwise the respective content would *remain* present; yet it sinks into the past precisely by sinking *out* of presence). The contents become actual successively, whereas the actuality of experiencing is an abiding manifestation-dimension, and not something that comes and goes, with one actuality succeeding the previous one (one actuality after another becoming actual). And this abiding actuality of experiencing is the essence of the I in a fundamental sense (the sense that is relevant with regard to the question of what my continued existence consists in) (cf. Fasching forthcoming).

It is along these lines that I would interpret Śaṅkara’s dictum, ‘the object of knowledge changes ...; but the knowing agent does not change, since his nature is eternal presence’ (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (1896; 1962) 2.3.7 [vol. 2, p. 15]). I read this ‘eternal presence’ as the I’s being the standing present itself. Consequently, the self does not move through time (consisting of ‘temporal phases’ that become present and absent). Time moves through the self. ‘Just as to a man in the boat’, Śaṅkara says, ‘the trees [appear to] move in a direction opposite [to his movement], so does *Ātman* [appear to] transmigrate’ (*Upadeśasāhasrī* (1992) 1.5.3).⁶

⁵ ‘Just as a person in a boat does not perceive the motion of the boat as a person on the shore does, so a self who is nondifferent from the intellect could not be the witness of the modifications of intellect’; Vidyāraṇyasvāmī, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣyavārtikasāra* 115, quoted in Gupta (1998: 126); cf. also Saksena (1971: 157).

⁶ Cf. the ‘essential nowness/presentness’ Klawonn lists as one of the basic characteristics of the I-dimension; Klawonn (1991: 258).

So the I qua the standing present is not a temporally extended object with corresponding object-stages. This is why it is so counter-intuitive to conceive of oneself as a perdurer. Each moment I experience something, *I*, qua experiencer, fully exist, and not just a *part* of me. Of course, only a part of my experiential life takes place right now: my experiential life is the succession of the experiences that are present to me one after another, and therefore a process. But this ‘I’ to whom they are present is not itself a process. When one experience succeeds the other – when a new ‘temporal part’ of my experiential life becomes present – it is not the case that another part of *me* comes into existence: for these new experiences are – vice versa – part of ‘my experiential life’ only because they are present to *me*. And this ‘me’ that makes my experiences mine is absolutely singular and does not itself consist of parts.

Mineness and *Ātman*

My emphasis on the ‘I’ to whom the experiences are present makes it pertinent to address an apparent fundamental inadequacy of my interpretation of the Advaitic notion of the *ātman*: my leading question was what it is that makes my experiences mine, and in my reflections I chiefly drew on Zahavi’s discussion of the essential ‘mineness’ of experience and Klawonn’s theory of the ‘I-dimension’. Yet in the view of Advaita Vedānta, the appearance that experiences are mine, experienced by an I (*aham*), is an illusion, the result of *adhyāsa* (‘superimposition’, the erroneous identification of the self with what is not the self, namely with *objects* of the self).⁷ The Advaitins reject the idea that presence means presence-to-someone – the *ātman* is simply this very taking place of presence itself, without needing any further experiencer. What we normally take to be the ‘I’ to whom things are given is really something that has its appearance *within* the field of what is present and is therefore not the bearer or owner of this presence itself (consciousness is *nirāśraya*, ‘without locus’). Consequently, the subject–object structure in the usual sense (the encounter of a subject-entity with an object-entity) is not what constitutes presence, but, vice versa, is constituted within presence (it pertains to relations between appearing objects, and not to the relation between the *revelation* of objects and these very objects⁸). So it could be asked whether it might not be more appropriate to just speak anonymously of ‘subjectivity’ when characterising the *ātman*, instead of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

⁷ Cf. Ram-Prasad’s dissociation of Advaita’s *ātman* from Zahavi’s ‘mineness’ in Ram-Prasad (2011).

⁸ ‘The seer, the seeing, and the object seen do not cognise their own being. Nor are they known by one another. Therefore, whether they become objects depends on something that transcends them’; Sureśvara, *Naṣkarmyasiddhi* 2.106, quoted in Gupta (1998: 128); cf. also *Upadeśasāhasrī* (1992) 1.14.42.

However, I would still insist that the *ātman* is about the innermost nature of the I – about the true nature of the subject qua experiencer of the experiences. When the Advaitins deny that the term ‘I’ stands for the *ātman* (cf. Ram-Prasad 2011), what they are rejecting is the attribution of consciousness to an inner-worldly entity. This does not exclude that the *ātman* is *me* (what *I* really am) in a more fundamental sense, which, on the contrary, is precisely what the Advaitins are trying to say. It is only that a radical relection reveals that anything I normally take to be ‘myself’ offers no answer to the question of what constitutes the mineness of experiences, and hence I come to see that what I really am is the pure dimension of manifestation: ‘But the real “I” is what witnesses the ego and the rest’ (*Vivekacūḍamaṇi* (1982) 294 [p. 112]).

It must be conceded that the terms ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are – to say the least – ambiguous here (and Advaita’s caution is completely legitimate): of course the normal function of the word ‘I’ is to refer to oneself as distinct from others – as a person among persons – and it is hard to see what meaning it should have without this distinction. Yet one could reply that my present experience is mine (the experience *I* am experiencing) totally independent of any distinction I draw to what is *not* me (that is, of my having an I-concept).

Zahavi uses terms like ‘mineness’, ‘irst-personal givenness’, and ‘minimal self’ to indicate the way our own experiential life is given to ourselves prior to any relective and self-identifying acts. Pre-relective self-awareness as a whole is itself a multi-layered phenomenon and includes, for example, the implicit distinction between oneself and one’s surroundings, which even newborn babies draw (that is, a pre-relective identification of certain constellations of experience-contents ‘as oneself’ – which in Advaita is precisely ‘superimposition’). But the term ‘mineness’ refers to something more fundamental, namely the mere immediate givenness of experience which constitutes its very being (and thereby its being mine) – and this, as such, does *not* involve any differentiation between ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’, which rather *presupposes* the existence of experience and its givenness. As Zahavi stresses, irst-personal givenness ‘is not a contrastive phenomenon’, it ‘does not arise thanks to any discrimination between self and the world, but is the condition of possibility of any such discrimination’ (Zahavi 1999: 180). Hence ‘mineness’ in this sense – the sense I have been using in this chapter – refers simply to subjectivity as the mode of existence of experience. Admittedly, Zahavi speaks of the experience’s (implicit) givenness ‘as mine’ (see, for example, Zahavi 2005: 124); yet – although he is not fully clear on that point – I would suggest that this should be read in the sense that experiences are *always* (whether we ascribe them ‘to ourselves’ or not) given in a way that the subject, *if* she is in possession of the necessary cognitive capacities, cannot be in doubt about *whose* experiences they are (namely *hers*).

Then why speak of ‘mineness’ and ‘I’, if the issue is precisely not the experiences’ givenness-*as-mine*? Well, simply because they nevertheless *are* mine, by virtue of their very givenness. Zahavi’s notion of ‘mineness’ closely corresponds to what Klawonn calls ‘primary presence’. Klawonn introduces his

idea of the I-dimension by asking what the difference is between a person being me and her just being herself ('an I', but not me). He argues that her being me is not constituted by any objective properties of the person (be they physical or mental), for any properties of a person are logically compatible with both her being me and her not being me (that is, it seems to be perfectly conceivable that the person I actually am could have existed, with all his properties and all his experiences, without being *me*; this – puzzlingly – seems to be a contingent fact) (Klawonn 1987: 50, 59). That which constitutes a person's being me lies exclusively in his experiences' 'primary presence', that is, in that they are, '*seen from my own point of view ... in an absolute or primary sense present*' (whereby this 'my point of view' is *identical* to 'primary presence' itself) (Klawonn 1987: 63) – which is precisely what Zahavi calls 'mineness'. This primary presence (which Klawonn equates with '*my consciousness in a philosophical sense*': Klawonn 1987: 63–4; cf. also Klawonn 1998) has the character of a *dimension* in so far as it is not one of the experiences, but the level of existence of my experiences as mine, and 'just as the contents of the objective dimension may vary without ceasing to be objective, the subjective experiences may vary without ceasing to be *mine*' (Klawonn 1987: 62). This I-dimension is in itself 'completely devoid of properties', for 'a pain being *my* pain does not add any extra property to the pain' (Klawonn 1987: 53; cf. Klawonn 1987: 59) – it simply constitutes the being-experienced-by-me of the pain with all its qualities. This notion of consciousness qua qualityless givenness-dimension shares, I think, quite a remarkable kinship with Advaita's *ātman*. Now, what I am driving at is that this being-exposed in the 'I-dimension' (that is, possessing 'primary presence') of an experience is completely independent of any conception I have of myself as a distinct entity – and consequently Klawonn emphasises that it is this I-dimension as such, rather than the 'ego' ('the self-objectification, whereby I conceive of myself as a definite person in a definite situation': Klawonn 1987: 65), which constitutes 'the principle of my being' (Klawonn 1987: 67). For example, it is perfectly conceivable that I could undergo a radical loss of cognitive capacities, rendering me unable to form any conception of myself as distinct from others, without my experiences therefore ceasing to be mine (experienced by me) (Klawonn 1998: 60–1). Whether experiences are mine does not depend on my having any ego-conception, but exclusively on their having their being in being manifested in the I-dimension as which I exist.

Of course, Advaita Vedānta, due to its monistic metaphysics, denies that a plurality of presence-dimensions exists at all, and therefore holds that, ultimately, there *are* no experiences that are not 'mine' in the sense outlined above. But this is a *further* question. First one must realise, by reflecting on one's own being-a-subject, the nature of the I-dimension as pure first-personality (as *me*, and not just as 'a subjectivity', which would ultimately amount to conceiving of subjectivity in a third-person way, after all),⁹ before one can ask whether seemingly *alien*

⁹ Just as Śaṅkara's introduction to his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* famously begins with the radical distinction between 'I' and 'thou' (anything I could ever encounter as an object).

subjectivity-events ultimately exist in the *same* subjectivity-dimension (on this question, cf. Fasching 2010). The fact that *I* experience my experiences is independent of the existence or non-existence of other I's, and Advaita's qualityless consciousness-dimension is precisely what I, qua this experiencer, *am*. This, by the way, is the reason why it is perfectly appropriate for Advaita Vedānta to speak of 'the self' (that is, the *subject*) instead of just an anonymous taking place of *subjectivity*: My consciousness is not just 'a subjectivity'. It is *me*.

Conclusion

From a Western perspective, the idea of consciousness as strictly distinguished from all contents of consciousness and therefore in itself completely contentless and qualityless, and unaffected by the change of contents, is one of the most remarkable features of Hindu accounts of subjectivity. (I have focused on Advaita Vedānta in particular, because – in contrast to Nyāya, for example – it gets along without any additional assumptions about a substance *behind* the experiential realm.) In this chapter, I have attempted to argue that this idea indeed makes sense and is actually a prerequisite for an adequate understanding of the synchronic and diachronic unity of subjectivity. Due to its blindness to consciousness as such – which, admittedly, is nothing we could introspectively observe, and in this sense 'is not to be found' – present-day Western philosophy of mind conceives of subjectivity primarily in terms of *conscious states*, that is, the mental phenomena that are subjectively present to us (instead of in terms of this subjective presence itself). It therefore has no alternative to understanding the unity of subjectivity across the experiences other than reductively in terms of unifying relations between these experiences. Yet as soon as one learns to see consciousness as such, the abundance of subjectivity no longer appears to necessarily consist in inter-experiential relations, but rather presents itself as the dimension in which experiences and their interrelations unfold in the first place. And this dimension is the I in a fundamental sense, or, as Advaita puts it, 'the self'.

Hindu and Buddhist Ideas in Dialogue

Self and No-Self

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