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SPECIAL ISSUE

Consciousness and no self?

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Abstract

Phenomenal consciousness, what it is like for each particular subject, seems to be at the heart of subjectivity and the primary home of the self. But is there in fact a role for the self in phenomenal consciousness? According to the phenomenal no-self challenge, reflection on the character of phenomenal consciousness reveals no self and no subjectivity. I articulate an argument for this challenge based on the transparency of conscious experience. I then respond to this argument and show that there is an aspect of phenomenal consciousness that the challengers miss. This aspect is active attention. In active attention, in particular in the ability to actively resist distractions, consciousness reveals an agential self: the experiencer is phenomenally manifest as an active power. I further show that the subject's active role in experience is plausibly present in every form of experience.

KEYWORDS
attention, consciousness, distraction, no-self, self, transparency

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist tradition is famous for its denial of an agential 'self' that like a charioteer controls what is going on in the mind (cf. Ganeri, 2018). This paper does not argue against this denial. It does argue, though, that – in contrast to some recent claims – there is an essential aspect of the mind, specifically an essential aspect of *consciousness*, that *looks* a lot like such a charioteer. My discussion concerns the relationship between the notion of phenomenal consciousness and the idea that we experience *agency* over our own experience. I argue that we not only can become aware of exercising agency over our phenomenal experience, but also that this ability is essential to

consciousness. Philosophers like Buddhaghosa (cf. Ganeri, 2018) were right to argue against their opponents by developing intricate accounts of how consciousness can be explained without appeal to a separate controlling substance, since there is an aspect of how we experience the world that intuitively suggests that there is such a controlling substance.

This paper, then, is about no-self views that challenge a role for the self in phenomenal consciousness. We can distinguish two variants of such challenges. *Metaphysical challenges* argue against the existence of a certain type of 'self'. An advocate of a metaphysical challenge may accept that a self is felt to be present in consciousness, but she would argue that such a feeling is illusory. Phenomenal consciousness presents us with something that does not really exist. *Phenomenal challenges*, by contrast, argue that a self isn't even *felt* in consciousness. Reflection on the character of phenomenal consciousness reveals no self and no subjectivity. If there is an illusion, it is an illusion about how we *think* about phenomenal consciousness: if we look closely we see that no self is present in consciousness in the first place. There is nothing there that in a second step may be found metaphysically problematic.

My first goal in this paper (Section 3) is to articulate such a phenomenal no-self challenge. Some proponents of the Buddhist tradition (Chadha, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Fasching, 2008) have presented this type of challenge, and it has also arisen in the European (Moore, 1903), and contemporary discussion (Campbell, 2002; Dretske, 1997; Harman, 1990; Tye, 2000, 2002, 2009). I will articulate what I think is one of its most powerful versions: in consciousness, only the world shows up and no self that stands over and against that world and has a point of view on it. The character of consciousness, on this view, is objective, in the world and not in the mind, and it shows no presence of any experiencer. It follows from this view that any metaphysics of selves (for example, one in which the self is a causally active substance) has no basis in the character of consciousness itself. At least in phenomenal consciousness, there is no home for the self.

While I believe that this challenge is powerful, I also believe that it fails. My second goal (Section 4) is to provide an answer to this challenge. There is an aspect of phenomenal consciousness that the challengers miss. This aspect is active attention. Consciousness presents the world *through* this aspect. We attend to the world, and not ourselves. But it is in that attending that the self makes itself phenomenally manifest. Specifically, through attention we ourselves are actively shaping our own conscious point of view and we are often aware of so doing. Consciousness involves an agential self; it presents the experiencer as an active power.

In response to this argument, a defender of the phenomenal no-self challenge might claim that this does not undermine her view. Her view is that it is not *essential* to phenomenal consciousness that it manifest a self: a manifestation of self is not part of *what it is* to be phenomenally conscious. In response to this form of the challenge, it needs to be shown not only that *some* forms of consciousness manifest a self, but that *all* forms of consciousness do. After all, it would not, for example, be enough to show that some people consciously *think* that they are themselves active causal powers (a form of cognitive experience). In response to this reply I will argue that the subject's active role in experience is plausibly present in every form of experience and essential to consciousness (Section 5).

The result of my discussion is that every view of phenomenal consciousness needs to explain its agential aspect. Whether this can be done without appeal to a substantial self, as the Buddhist tradition claims, or whether we, by contrast, need such a substantial self, as their opponents contended, in my view, is still an open question. In short, given that the phenomenal no-self challenge fails, our focus should be on the metaphysical challenge (Section 6).

2 | TWO THESES IN THE SELF-INVOLVING PICTURE OF PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Phenomenal consciousness concerns the subject's own point of view. Phenomenal properties specify the specific character of a phenomenally conscious experience: what it is like for the subject of the experience. In this section,

I articulate what I call a *self-involving picture* of phenomenal consciousness in terms of two theses. These are a minimal core that any self-involving picture deserving this name must, in my view, accept. It is those two theses that the phenomenal no-self challenge attacks, and that I will later defend against this challenge.

First, phenomenal properties depend for their instantiation on being experienced. If I go out of existence or lose consciousness, then so disappears the character of my experience. And if there were no sentient beings, then nothing would have phenomenal properties. The first thesis of the self-involving picture thus is the following:

> *Self-dependence*. Part of what it is for a phenomenal property to be instantiated is for a subject to have an experience that is characterized by that phenomenal property.

The self-dependence claim may look like a truism: true by the definition of what counts as a phenomenal property. Nevertheless, as we will see in the next section, there is a powerful argument for a view that denies self-dependence; the result is a view on which phenomenal properties are independent of experience and objective, and where sentience does not bring the character of consciousness into existence.

Second, phenomenal properties are revealed to the subject of that very experience. Conscious experiences are not hidden. Unlike my unconscious mental life (like my hidden desires and biases) my conscious mental life *is revealed to me as mine*. Phenomenal properties do not just in fact depend on my experience; I also have reason to think that they do, simply in virtue of enjoying that experience. Conscious experience offers a rational ground for its self-ascription.[1] We thus have the following:

> *Self-Revelation*. Part of what it is for a phenomenal property to be instantiated is for the subject who has an experience that is characterized by that phenomenal property to have reason to believe that she herself has an experience that is characterized by that phenomenal property.

The self-revelation thesis allows that subjects are confused about the character of their own experience. In the heat of the moment, or because I lack certain conceptual categories, I may not know whether what I experience is anger or resentment. I might only be able to think of my current experience, as *this* experience, which I am currently undergoing. The self-revelation thesis only requires that there must be some way of thinking such that having an experience gives the subject reason to believe in that way that she has an experience. The self-revelation thesis also allows that some sentient creatures do not have the capacity to form beliefs about their own experiences: the reason to form such a belief is there, even if the relevant creature cannot form the belief. What the self-revelation thesis rules out is that a subject has an experience and yet has no reason whatsoever to think that she has that experience.

3 | HOW TRANSPARENCY THREATENS THE SELF-INVOLVING PICTURE OF PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS

I now look at an argument that challenges both aspects of the self-involving picture of consciousness. Against the self-involving picture, the challenger puts a no-self picture of phenomenal consciousness: phenomenal properties are objective and not dependent on experience. If they are instantiated, they are instantiated by objects like rocks, stones and trees: the 'phenomenal character of the experience is constituted by the layout and characteristics of … external objects', as John Campbell (2002, p. 116) puts the view. Further, an experience that is characterized by those phenomenal properties may give no subject any reason to believe that she has any experiences.

[1]Some philosophers have held that every conscious state includes within itself a form of reflexive awareness or self-directedness (MacKenzie (2008) finds it in Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, Caston (2002) in Aristotle; Gallagher and Zahavi (2016) in Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty). Those seem to me somewhat controversial theses based on the more fundamental self-revelation thesis. For an explicit statement of something close to self-revelation see Smithies (2012).

The argument starts from what has come to be called *the transparency claim* about phenomenal consciousness (cf. Harman, 1990). Here is a contemporary statement of the claim:

> Suppose you are standing before a tapestry in an art gallery. As you take in the rich and varied colors of the cloth, you are told to pay close attention to your visual experience and its phenomenology. What do you do? Those who accept the transparency thesis say that you attend closely to the tapestry and details in it. You are aware of something outside you – the tapestry – and of various qualities that you experience as being qualities of parts of the tapestry. (Tye, 2009, p. 117)

Those who believe in the transparency claim generalize this observation. They believe in the following thesis:

> *Transparency*. In experience, we are only aware of objects our experience presents as external, and we are only aware of properties our experience presents external things as having.

The transparency claim says that what we are aware of in having a phenomenally conscious experience is all on the experienced side: we are never aware of any self or the experience.

Tye (2009) puts forward an argument that moves from the awareness transparency claim to the rejection of self-dependence. The conclusion is that, for example, 'the phenomenal character of the experience of red just is red' (Tye, 2009, p. 119. Generally, the view is that phenomenal properties are experience independent, 'out there in the world' (ibid.).[2] We can reconstruct Tye's argument against self-dependence as follows (cf. Speaks, 2015).

The Transparency Argument Against Self-Dependence

1. In experience, we are only aware of properties our experience presents external things as having. (from the Transparency claim)
2. Phenomenal properties are such that we can, in experience, become aware of them. So,
3. Phenomenal properties are properties our experience presents external things as having. (from 1 and 2).
4. If our experience presents a property as being had by external things, then that property does not for its instantiation depend on the occurrence of any experience.
5. If the instantiation of a property does not depend on the occurrence of any experience, then it is not the case that part of what it is for that property to be instantiated is for a subject to have an experience that is characterized by that property. So,
6. It is not the case that part of what it is for a phenomenal property to be instantiated is for a subject to have an experience that is characterized by that property. (from 3, 4 and 5).

Claim 6 is the direct denial of the self-dependence thesis. If the transparency claim is true, then this is a powerful argument. Premise 5 appears to be unproblematic. Let us consider the other two premises.

First, consider premise 4. Someone might object that experience could present a property as instantiated by external things, and yet the instantiation of that property depends on the occurrence of the experience. The relevant property might be experience-dependent: just consider the property of being experienced by me, or the property of being experienced by me as being red.

The idea that external things might instantiate experience-dependent properties is not inconsistent. But given a plausible view of property awareness, appeal to experience-dependent properties of external things is in tension with the transparency claim: if a property were experience-dependent and yet that property is presented in experience as a property of external things, then the property would be presented in experience as a property that is

[2]See also Dretske (1997), Campbell (2002), and Johnston (2007).

different from the property it actually is: it would be presented as an experience-independent property while it is in fact an experience-dependent property. But while it makes sense to say that an *object* can look to be different from the way it actually is, it is not clear that a *property* can (at least: can always) look to be different from the way it actually is (cf. Tye, 2000, p. 103).[3] For present purposes, I will thus accept premise 4.

Second, consider premise 2. It seems hard to deny that phenomenal properties are such that in having experiences we can become aware of them. The premise can be motivated by a weakened version of the self-revelation claim. This is the following:

> *Revelation*. Part of what it is for a phenomenal property to be instantiated is for the subject who has an experience that is characterized by that phenomenal property to have reason to believe that this phenomenal property is instantiated.

If we could not become aware of phenomenal properties, then how could we simply in virtue having the experience have any reason to think that such a property is instantiated? A property we cannot become aware of seems to be a hidden property. A defender of the self-involving picture of phenomenal consciousness, as she accepts the self-revelation thesis, thus cannot plausibly reject the revelation thesis. And premise 2 seems to be the best explanation for why revelation is true.

Someone might object to this last claim: maybe we are not *aware* of phenomenal properties, but we are in some other way *acquainted* with phenomenal properties. But this response does not help. The proponent of transparency will also claim that we are in experience only *acquainted* with properties our experience presents external things as having. After all, we cannot, she would claim, discriminate between variations in experience if they are not variations in external properties like colours and shapes. But if we cannot discriminate between different phenomenal properties, then it is implausible to say that we are acquainted with them.

According to the conclusion of the argument against self-dependence, phenomenal properties are experience-independent properties. If they are instantiated at all, they are instantiated by objects in our environment. If I see a grey stone, then the stone instantiates a phenomenal property, roughly the property of being grey. Someone might object that this conclusion is absurd. Phenomenal properties, after all, are the properties that specify what it is like to have an experience. So, if something instantiates a phenomenal property, then there is something it is like to be that thing. Thus, if stones instantiate phenomenal properties, it follows that there is something it is like to be the stone. But that is clearly wrong.

But this objection is not successful (cf. Tye, 2009). It does not follow that if something has a phenomenal property, then there is something it is like to be that thing. Having an experience that is characterized by a phenomenal property is not identical to having a phenomenal property (similarly: there is nothing it is like *to be* an experience). Having an experience, on the no-self view, consists in being presented with a phenomenal property. There is something it is like to be presented with a phenomenal property. The stone is not presented with a phenomenal property, and so there is not anything it is like for the stone.

The transparency argument against self-dependence also directly challenges the self-revelation thesis about phenomenal properties. If phenomenal properties are objective properties of rocks and stones, then they can be instantiated without any experience, let alone without anyone having a reason to believe that she has such an experience.

Note that this creates no tension with the revelation thesis, as opposed to the self-revelation thesis. If I have a phenomenal experience of the canvas, then I have reason to believe that various phenomenal properties are instantiated: I have reason to believe that the canvas instantiates certain shapes and colours! Nothing about

[3]Denying premise 4 requires accepting *property illusions*. One might here rely on Macpherson and Batty (2007) and Kristoffer Sundberg (in communication). But note that in the present context we only need the rather weak claim that no property is *always* presented in experience as different from the way it actually is.

ourselves or about experiences is revealed in experience. What is revealed in experience is the world, and the world only.

Could it still be true that having an experience that is characterized by certain phenomenal properties gives the subject reason to believe that she has an experience that is so characterized? Arguably even this new thesis is challenged: if, in experience, we are only ever aware of external objects and properties and not of our own experience, then there seems to be no basis, simply in virtue of having a conscious experience, for the belief that we indeed enjoy such a conscious experience (cf. Dretske, 2003). The surprising result is that if I know that I am not an unconscious zombie, this is not knowledge I have on the basis of what experience is like for me!

The transparency considerations that formed the basis of the argument against self-revelation and against self-dependence are powerful. The phenomenal qualities that characterize what it is like, say, to see red, manifest in consciousness as qualities in the world and not as qualities of our point of view on the world. If the character of consciousness were fully characterized by qualities like red, then there would be no subjectivity in the character of consciousness. One might indeed argue from this that any 'mind-body' problem would be a problem at the surfaces of objects like stones, trees and canvases: it would be about how to connect phenomenal properties like colours with the scientific properties (cf. Johnston, 2007). Since we do not show up in phenomenal consciousness, the metaphysics of consciousness would thus not be about us. The result of the powerful transparency considerations thus is a radical no-self view of phenomenal consciousness.

4 | THE ARGUMENT FROM RESISTING DISTRACTIONS: EXPERIENCING MENTAL AGENCY

The transparency considerations are based on an observation about what we can *attend* to in experience. Tye, like others, claims that when we aim to turn our attention to the phenomenal character of our experience, we end up attending to external properties. What we *can* attend to in experience are properties in the world: colors, shapes, textures, locations, bounded objects, sounds, etc. What we *cannot* attend to in experience is our experience of those qualities or ourselves as experiencer of them. The transparency claim thus is based on the following claim:

> *Attention Transparency.* In experience, we can only ever attend to objects our experience presents as external, and we can only ever attend to properties our experience presents external things as having.

But the awareness transparency claim follows from attention transparency only if the following link between what we can attend to in experience and what we are aware of in experience is accepted:

> *Attention-Awareness Link*. For all *x*, if, in experience, we cannot attend to *x*, then we are not aware of *x* in experience.

It is only with the help of the attention-awareness link that the attention transparency claim entails the transparency claim that formed the basis of the argument against self-dependence and self-revelation. Without that link, the transparency observations amount to no more than observations about the capacity of attention: we may be *aware* of properties of our experience that we cannot attend to.[4]

[4]Note also that premise 2 of the transparency argument against self-dependence would have no plausibility if it were replaced by: (2*) Phenomenal properties are such that we can, in experience, attend to them. The original premise 2 was plausible because it best explains the revelation claim, which a defender of self-revelation claim cannot reject. But this consideration does not apply to 2*: I see is no reason to accept such a new premise.

I argue that the attention-awareness link is false for principled reasons.[5]

One argument against the attention-awareness link might be constructed as follows. Consider that we might be aware of an aspect of experience, and yet when we attempt to focus our attention on it that aspect disappears. Consider an evil demon who scans our brains and whenever she detects an attempt to shift attention towards something in our peripheral awareness she quickly erases that aspect of our experience so that it is gone before we succeed in focusing our attention on it. Here we would be aware of something in experience that we cannot attend to, and the attention-awareness link would fail.

In fact, we do not have to conceive of such a fanciful scenario. Consider the study of motion-induced blindness (Bonneh, Cooperman, & Sagi, 2001). Here the subject looks at a screen where some target items, typically several yellow dots, are presented against a circularly moving background array, typically composed of blue crosses. The central finding is that the target items regularly (and illusorily) disappear from view. The motion of the background array induces a sort of temporary blindness for the yellow targets (the relevant percept is bi-stable: the yellow dots will go in and out of awareness in a fairly regular pattern). The relevance of motion-induced blindness in the present context is that it turns out that shifting attention to a target makes it *more likely* that it disappears from view (Schölvinck and Rees, 2009).[6] These results entail that there will be cases where the subject is aware of a yellow target, and yet she cannot focus her attention on it because whenever she tries it visually disappears, 'as if erased in front of the observer's eyes' (Bonneh, Cooperman, & Sagi, 2001, p. 798). If attention to an item is blocked in this way, then we cannot attend to that item, even though we are aware of it. This, one might suggest, shows that the attention-awareness link is false. It does not follow from the fact that we cannot attend to an aspect of our experience that we are not aware of that aspect. Like the yellow dots in the motion-induced blindness experiment, the self-dependent character of consciousness might disappear as soon as we try to attend to it.

While interesting, I do not think that this argument is fully successful. A defender of the attention-awareness link might, for example, say that we can still pay some degree of attention to the yellow dots. Or she might say that the example does not show that we can *never* attend to the yellow dots. There may be some specific yellow dot such that at some specific time a specific subject at that time cannot attend to that specific yellow dot. But this does not show that, generically speaking, we cannot attend to the yellow dots in the motion-induced blindness experiments: we can, sometimes, attend to them.

The motion-induced blindness case illustrates that for the attention-awareness link to be shown false, the way we are aware of something in experience would need to exclude our attending to it in a more principled fashion. The rest of this section develops an argument that draws on such a principled way attention to something is excluded, namely attention to our own attending.

Suppose that you are in the art museum and look at the canvas. Suddenly, you hear the beeping of a phone. Now let us distinguish three scenarios.

> *Scenario 1: Mental Resistance.* You feel the distraction, and your attention is drawn away from the canvas. But you resist the distraction and with mental effort bring your attention back to the canvas.

> *Scenario 2: No Distraction.* You hear the beeping of the phone, but do not feel any distraction. Your attention remains focused on the canvas, while you keep hearing the phone in the background.

[5]Others have claimed that the attention transparency claim itself is problematic (e.g. Kind (2003) thinks it is difficult but not impossible to attend to intrinsic properties of the experience. See also Chalmers (2003)). I think that appropriately qualified the attention transparency claim is in fact very plausible, and I will not dispute it here. I will argue that we should reject the transparency claim, even if we accept attention transparency.

[6]Note that this observed effect is rather large: the probability of target disappearance increases from around 20–30% without attention to about 70–80% with attention (a difference that is significant at very low p values of under 0.0001). Note also that these results cannot be accounted for by the view that without attention subjects simply fail to notice disappearances: reaction times to physically (actually) disappearing items were found to be indeed shorter without attention than with attention (Schölvinck & Rees, 2009, p. 5).

Scenario 3: Giving in to Distraction. You hear the beeping of the phone, feel the distraction and are taken in by it. Your attention has shifted from the canvas to the sound of the phone, while you remain aware of the canvas and its various properties.

Cases like mental resistance show that subjects can exercise a form of agency in perceptual experience. In a case like this, the subject feels a pull on her attention, but it is in her power to bring back the focus of attention. Further, there is a clear phenomenal contrast, a difference in the phenomenal properties of the subject's experience, between the mental resistance case and the other two cases.

But now we can construct the following argument against the transparency claim.

The Argument from Resisting Distraction.

A In experience, we can be aware of resisting distractions with mental effort.

B What we are aware of when we are aware of resisting distractions with mental effort is not a property we experience external things as having. So,

C It is not the case that, in experience, we are only ever aware of properties we experience external things as having.

Let me now defend the two premises in turn:

Consider premise B. Resisting distractions with mental effort is a mental action and it is not a property of external objects.

The subject performed a mental action in scenario 1 that she did not perform in the other two scenarios: first, what the subject did is subject to reactive attitudes that are out of place for purely passive mental occurrences. We may praise and admire subjects for what she was able to do in this scenario, and she herself might feel pride for what she was able to do. Second, what the subject did has the typical effects of effortful action: if the phone keeps on beeping, and the subject keeps resisting the distraction, she will feel fatigued, and, at some point, her capacity for mental resistance will be worn out. Third, the capacity for resisting distractions is subject to training and we can develop expertise in it. It is part of the ability for self-control that young children have not yet fully developed, that is impaired in disorders such as ADHD, and that many meditation techniques are designed to improve.[7] While one may doubt the existence of other forms of mental action, the fact that the effortful control of attention is a mental action cannot (and has not been) seriously doubted. So, if we are aware of resisting distractions in experience, then we are in experience aware of a mental action in addition to being aware of external properties.

Now consider premise A. This premise is supported as the best explanation of the phenomenal difference between the three scenarios. We need to explain why what it is like for the subject in the first scenario is different from a scenario where she feels no distraction or where she is taken in by the distraction. Given that the most salient difference between the mental resistance scenario and the other two scenarios is that the subject performs a mental action which she does not perform in the other two scenarios, appeal to awareness of performing that action is the most direct explanation of why being in that scenario is phenomenally different from the other two scenarios.

Note that I am not claiming that premise A is the only *possible* explanation of the phenomenal contrast. If differences in attention make a difference to which external properties the subject is aware of, then our three scenarios, since they differ in the overall focus of attention, will differ in which external properties the subject is aware of. In other work (Watzl, 2017), I have criticized the view that the phenomenal difference made by attention can be fully explained by such differences in which external properties the subject is aware of. Here I am making a different point: appeal to such differences amounts to an inferior and ad-hoc explanation of the relevant phenomenal difference. If there are such differences in which external properties the subject

[7]On how the ability of maintaining focus in light of distractors is improved through meditation and mindfulness training see Tang et al. (2007) and Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson (2008) for recent reviews.

experiences they are subtle, and untrained subjects have no capacity to spontaneously report on them. But subjects have no difficulties in recognizing a salient difference between the scenarios, which they often remember and report: they will say and remember that there was a beep but that they made an effort to resist the distraction.[8] Premise A takes such subjective reports at face value and ascribes to subjects no error when describing their own experience. Someone who rejects premise A needs to come up with a better explanation of the salient phenomenal difference between the scenarios and not just a *possible* explanation. This is what I believe cannot be done.

For further argument, let us return to the motion-induced blindness case. In this case, as we have seen, the subject is aware of an item like a yellow dot, but when she tries to focus her attention on the item it disappears from view. The motion-induced blindness case illustrates that an intentional shift of attention to a visually presented item may, in some circumstances, have unusual effects: in this case, attention does not make the item look brighter, closer or more determinate, but makes it disappear from visual consciousness. Consider a subject who, instead of the canvas, looks at a motion-induced blindness display. The phone starts beeping. She resists the distraction and with mental effort brings her attention back to the left side of the display. Sometimes this will cause the dot to visually disappear. And sometimes it will not. Those cases differ radically in the effect of attention on which external properties the subject is aware of. But there is also a clear phenomenal similarity. An explanation of the phenomenal contrast between cases of resisting distraction and no resistance in terms of which external properties the subject is aware of, has no account of the phenomenal similarity between different instances of cases of resisting distraction. Such an explanation thus is inferior since it misclassifies cases as phenomenally very different, while the cases clearly share a phenomenal similarity.

At this point one might ask: what exactly are we aware of, when we are aware of resisting distractions with mental effort? What we are aware of, it seems, is intentionally, deliberately and effortfully changing the focus of our perceptual attention. A subject in the mental resistance scenario does not just aim to again *think* about the canvas. She aims to again focus her *visual* attention on the canvas. Similarly, when the beep distracts a classical concert, the listener will aim to restore the focus of her *auditory* attention to the piece of music. What subjects are aware of thus are perceptual mental actions not cognitive acts of thought.

How should we think of the relevant type of awareness? What is it to be aware of resisting distractions? The right way to think about it, it seems to me, is as a type of agential awareness (Watzl, 2017). There are many different views about such agential awareness (Bayne, 2008). What I say here is compatible with all of them.[9]

Note that the subject in the mental resistance scenario never focuses her attention on anything else than external items, the beep of the phone or the canvas. She is in no way attending to her own experience. The attention transparency claim remains intact. When she is aware of restoring the focus of attention she is not in turn presented in experience with an item, her mental act, as an object for the focus of attention. It is indeed true that the subject cannot focus her visual attention on the change in her visual attention itself. Unlike in the motion-induced blindness scenario, this is not because some item disappears from view as soon as the subject attempts to focus her attention on it. What she is aware of is simply not manifest in her awareness as a potential object of perceptual attention. The attention-awareness link fails exactly when it comes to awareness of our own attention. In experience, we indeed attend only to external properties. But when we actively change which external properties we attend to, we are aware of that mental action. This awareness is also manifest in experience, but it is not an aspect we can attend to.

[8]Thompson (2011) argues that considerations about memory somewhat similar to the ones mentioned here were important in Śāntarakṣita's argument for the thesis that all consciousness involves pre-reflective self-awareness. What is importantly different here, though, is that in our case the memory concerns a mental *action*. For this reason, my conclusion is that the availability of *agential* self-awareness is essential to consciousness.

[9]Watzl (2017, Ch. 10) for more on this topic. Note that the relevant agential awareness, unlike some cases discussed by Chadha (2016), is not 'thin and recessive' (ibid.) and contrasted with a 'clear and rich phenomenology' (ibid.) in the absence of authorship. We thus have a case that cannot be accounted for by Chadha's 'default theory of sense of agency' (ibid.)

5 | THE ABILITY TO RESIST DISTRACTIONS IS ESSENTIAL TO PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS

At this point, a defender of the no-self view might admit that awareness of our own mental agency is sometimes reflected in phenomenal consciousness. But, while this undermines the transparency claim in its full generality, she may insist, it is not enough to argue against the phenomenal no-self view. After all, the no-self view only claims that neither self-dependence nor self-revelation are *essential* to phenomenal consciousness. For this, transparency only needs to hold for *some* forms of experience. If it follows from the transparency of a specific experience that the phenomenal properties of that experience do not depend on the experience and give the subject no reason to believe that she is undergoing an experience, then self-dependence and self-revelation cannot be part of what it is for something to be a phenomenal property, as the respective claims allege. As an example, the objection continues, just consider the phenomenal properties that characterize my visual experience of the canvas when there is *no* phone beeping and I am also not distracted in any other way. Without any effort of attention, I just look (passively) at the canvas. All the phenomenal properties that characterize *this* experience, given anything that has been argued so far, could still be independent of me and my experience would still provide no reason to believe that I am undergoing any experience. Therefore, it is not part of what it is to be a phenomenal property that it is self-dependent and self-revealing.

I will respond to this objection in three stages.

In stage one, I consider only subjects with the capacity for active attention. In the argument against self-dependence, Tye argued that we must identify phenomenal properties with external qualities like colours and shapes, because phenomenal properties are properties we *can* become aware of in experience and external qualities are the *only* properties we can become aware of in experience. If what I have argued is correct, then any subject with the *capacity* for actively and with mental effort directing her perceptual attention to a perceptually presented quality can become aware of the act of – in experience – so directing her attention to that quality. This removes any pressure to identify phenomenal properties with the external qualities. Instead, phenomenal properties can be identified with the experiencing of those qualities. We identify phenomenal properties with the experience of qualities like colours and not with those qualities themselves. When we actively direct our attention to a quality, we are aware of the experience of that quality and hence become aware of the phenomenal property. This response requires that when we are aware of (actively) attending to x we are thereby aware of experiencing *x*. I think this claim is highly plausible: how could you be aware of directing your visual attention to *x* and yet have no awareness of visually experiencing *x*? If argument is needed, consider the epistemic fact that any subject who is aware of attending to *x* will thereby have a reason to believe that she is experiencing *x*. Overall, I thus take it to be established that self-dependence and self-revelation hold, *if it is essential to conscious experience that its subject has the capacity for active attention*.

Let me also note that the way we in fact most directly come to know about our own experience is by actively shifting attention. Suppose that, having read Dretske's argument claiming that I do not know whether I am a zombie, I try to convince myself of the fact that I have a conscious life. I actively shift my attention from one object to another and thereby I am aware of a change which does not seem to me a change in the objects I am experiencing. It must be a change in my experience of those objects, and so I know, on the basis of my experience, that I am not a zombie. Indeed, we can improve in introspecting our experience by improving our capacity for active attention: we learn how to attend to more subtle qualities (like the perspectival looks of things, our bodily sensations, or the rhythm of our breathing), or we learn to sustain the active focus of attention for longer periods of time. Since awareness of experience, on the view I am suggesting, is achieved though awareness of active attention we thereby become aware of more detail in our experience.

I now get to the second stage of my response: it is plausible that *all* actual subjects of conscious experience (in particular all phenomenally conscious animals) have the capacity for active attention. In particular, there is good evidence that insects like bees and flies (arguably at the lower border of phenomenal consciousness) have that

capacity.[10] There is, for example, evidence that bees can, in response to reward, actively direct their attention to local information in a visual pattern over global information, while the latter is intrinsically more salient to them (Avargues-Weber, Dyer, Ferrah, & Giurfa, 2015). Similarly, bumble bees are able to selectively prioritize or deprioritize perceptual colour discrimination depending on integrating information about the presence of predators and the expected reward resulting from success in the colour discrimination task (Wang, Ings, Proulx, & Chittka, 2013). There is, thus, good evidence that the capacity for active attention is present in all conscious animals.

The claim that conscious experience goes together with the capacity for active attention is further supported by considering the evolutionary function of conscious experience. As a defeasible test for whether an animal has phenomenal experience, several philosophers (including Tye, 2016) suggest looking at whether an animal exhibits adaptive flexibility in response to a stimulus. If, against the self-involving picture, we thought of conscious experience simply as the presentation of external properties like colours and shapes, there is no reason to think that experience will give an animal such adaptive flexibility: the presentations need not be integrated in any way with an animal's motivational system. By contrast, the capacity for active attention integrates stimulus information with the motivational state of the animal: by actively shifting perceptual attention in response to the animal's current needs or behavioural goals, the animal will be able to react differentially to the same stimulus depending on those needs. Arguably, this is indeed the simplest form of behavioural flexibility that is indicative of mentality (Watzl, 2017).

Finally, the third stage of my response: the defender of the no-self view may say that she can at least *conceive* of a creature that is phenomenally conscious but does not have the capacity for active attention. The conceivability of such a creature, she would continue, lends support to the claim that phenomenally conscious experience without the capacity for active attention is possible. In response, consider that only positive conceivability, which is a kind of imaginability, is a plausible guide to possibility (Chalmers, 2002). The simple fact that something is not *a priori* ruled out does not show that it is possible (it is not *a priori* ruled out that water is not H_2O, yet that is not possible). But when a proponent of the no-self view imagines a form of experience, she must simply imagine a certain kind of external world. As Tye (2009, p. 190) himself says: 'I cannot conceive of the color experience's phenomenal character coming apart from the experienced color.' To imagine what it is like to experience *x* will just amount to imagining *x*. So, if a proponent of the no-self view positively conceives of a form of experience, she will just imagine a world of qualities like shapes and colours. Which mental capacities are present in a certain world in order to experience those qualities is not something the proponent of the no-self view can claim to positively conceive of. She must take any claim about which capacities enable experience to be an *a posteriori* matter, i.e. a matter of empirical discovery. And on that front, as I have argued, we have good evidence for the claim that there are no conscious experiences without the capacity for active attention.

6 | CONCLUSION

Let me conclude. I have defended a self-involving picture of phenomenal consciousness against the argument from transparency. Specially, I have argued that in conscious experience we can become aware of actively changing our focus of attention. When we resist distractions, we are not just aware of external items, but aware of our own mental agency. It is in virtue of that awareness of our own mental agency that we can become aware of our own conscious experience, and thus have reason to believe – simply on the basis of experience – that we enjoy such conscious experience. In active attention, the self is phenomenally manifest as the mine-ness of mental agency. Since the capacity for active attention is essential to phenomenal consciousness, we can defend a self-involving picture of phenomenal consciousness against the phenomenal no-self challenge.

[10] Nityananda (2016).

At the beginning of my paper, I distinguished phenomenal no-self challenges of the form I have discussed from metaphysical no-self challenges. Given that we are aware of ourselves in conscious experience as active agents, we would now need to ask: does this lend support to a substantial metaphysics of selves? Indeed, our considerations naturally raise the following questions: can the self be reduced to attention? Is it a construct based on the presence of a subjective, active and self-revealing point of view that manifests in the way attention structures consciousness (see Ganeri, 2018)? Or is it impossible to account for the way attention structures consciousness without a more substantial self that, as an irreducible third term, has the point of view manifest in attention, and is revealed as a distinct and causally active substance (see Dicey-Jennings, 2017; Nida-Rümelin, 2007)? Once the phenomenal no-self view is defeated, the debate between such constructionist and substantivalist views on the self becomes again visible and, indeed, pertinent. Arguably, it is this discussion that has engaged so much of the classical Indian debate between the Brāhmaṇical and the Buddhist views (see Coseru, 2012; Ganeri, 2018; Watson, 2014). Unlike those who simply miss an important aspect of the character of consciousness, the participants of this debate arguably understood exactly what to discuss when it comes to the role of the self in conscious experience.

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