

## From Phenomenology to First-person Phenomena and Back

Comments on John Dunne's "Dharmakīrtian musings about Studying First-Personal Phenomena"

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As John notes, various Buddhist metaphysical (Abhidharma) and epistemological (*pramāṇa*) texts are sometimes read as articulating concerns that seem phenomenological in scope. Specifically, they show a preoccupation with mapping the structure of consciousness and related phenomena. But he suggests that this reading is not unproblematic, for reasons having to do with how questions about first-person phenomena are framed in the two traditions.

As someone who has argued at length that broadly phenomenological concerns are not a unique feature of the Husserlian tradition, I'd like to offer some clarification. Hopefully, that might help us negotiate how best to accommodate the insights, argumentative strategies, and forms of disciplined practice found in non-Western philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, especially for a workshop dedicated to first-person methods in the human sciences.

I will focus on three related questions that I find particularly salient to this debate:

- (i) Can there be subjectless consciousness, or does phenomenality itself entail a minimal structure of subjectivity?
- (ii) What is the epistemic status of first-person reports, especially in contemplative contexts?
- (iii) What are the limits of neurophenomenology?

Let me start, first, with a brief point of clarification about the use of 'phenomenology' and 'phenomenological' in discussions of Buddhist philosophy.

A chance encounter between Francisco Varela and the Dalai Lama in Alpbach, Austria, in 1983, laid the foundation for what eventually became The Mind and Life Institute (1987), an organization that for nearly four decades has dedicated itself to bridging the gap between science and human experience. The Institute has been associated, at least in part, with the idea that contemplative practices and introspective methods, if sufficiently fine-tuned, could serve as viable instruments of investigation in the mind sciences. But this idea has an interesting genealogy, one that reflects some idiosyncratic features of Varela's intellectual trajectory. And if scholarship is concealed biography, then it is worth asking how this conception of phenomenology took shape and what follows from it.

Now, unlike John, I did not have the good fortune to meet Varela. Much as I admire his work, it is important to remember that Varela's understanding of phenomenology as a project in European philosophy is relatively narrow in scope when measured against the Husserlian ambition of phenomenology as first philosophy. It is shaped, first, by the French reception of phenomenology, which shifts the emphasis away from transcendental and eidetic analysis toward

embodiment, perception, and situated subjectivity (especially in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry). While this shift yields important insights, it also contributes to a deflationary view of phenomenology as primarily descriptive and experiential rather than constitutive.

Second, this reconfiguration emerges within the intellectual climate of early cognitive science, still marked by the legacy of behaviorism and its suspicion of introspection. Against this backdrop, phenomenology could no longer plausibly function as a foundational philosophical discipline—or so Varela thought. Instead, it had to be reformulated as a disciplined first-person method, capable of integration with empirical research. This is why Varela turns to Buddhism, and specifically to mindfulness meditation, which he sees as an additional critical source of insight in developing robust first-person methodologies (hence, the focus on trained subjects (e.g., meditators), the importance of stabilizing attention, and the need to develop reporting protocols to ensure reproducibility—the latter, as John notes apropos of Antoine Lutz’s research, remains a challenge).

It is within this context that Varela reconceives phenomenology as a mutual constraints strategy, designed to integrate first-person reports with third-person data. This move is programmatically articulated in his 1996 paper “Neurophenomenology: A Methodological Remedy for the Hard Problem,” where phenomenology becomes a methodological tool rather than a transcendental inquiry into the conditions of experience. As Evan Thompson would later acknowledge (in the preface to the second edition of the *Embodied Mind*, 2016), this early portrayal of phenomenology as a failed or exhausted philosophical project was itself misguided. Phenomenology remains a vital and philosophically indispensable enterprise, not least because of its ability to interrogate the very assumptions that underwrite scientific accounts of mind (cf. Gallagher 2005, Zahavi 2005, Noë 2004, and Thompson 2007).

The point of drawing this contrast is not merely historical. It is to clarify what is at stake in treating phenomenology as a method rather than as a philosophical project (however unfinished that latter may be, cf. Glendinning 2007). If phenomenology, in the Husserlian sense,<sup>1</sup> has normative significance, then it plays a critical role in determining what counts as experience in the first place. This has direct implications for the questions raised above.

My central claim is that treating phenomenology as a first-person method obscures its more fundamental role as an inquiry into the conditions under which experience is possible. It is this broader conception that enables the kind of conceptual bridge-building needed to bring Buddhist accounts of consciousness and cognition into its orbit.

Let me turn to the first of the three questions articulated above:

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<sup>1</sup> At least at least as pursued by Husserl, the early Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology does share both a common methodology and a commitment to “the rejection of objectivism, scientism ... and the first-person perspective” (Zahavi 2008, 663).

**(i) Can there be subjectless consciousness, or does phenomenality itself entail a minimal structure of subjectivity?**

John and I share an interest in the modern reception of Dharmakīrti's philosophy, but we differ in how we situate his account of consciousness and intentionality. While I agree with the general contours of what John calls the "Dharmakīrtian account of intentionality," I take it to be more than a descriptive or quasi-empirical model of cognition.

In my view, Dharmakīrti's analysis of intentional content (*ākāra*) and his framing of the reflexivity of awareness (*svasaṃvitti*) thesis inform not merely a theory about how to represent or track an object or content of some kind, but a systematic attempt to articulate the conditions under which objects can be given as objects at all. John describes the structure of an awareness event in terms of what he calls the "phenomenal form of the object" (*grāhyākāra*) and the "phenomenal form of the subject" (*grāhakākāra*). But to make philosophical sense of this distinction, we need to disambiguate the 'phenomenal' from the 'intentional' aspects of experience.

I suggest that we translate *grāhyākāra* as 'intentional content' and *grāhakākāra* as 'subjective mode of givenness' or for-me-ness. These are not two kinds of content, but two dimensions of a single awareness event.

That conscious mental states are taken to be about an object or content of their own is a clear indication that Buddhists think mental states have *intentional content*, even though that does not as yet indicate that they also have a robust conception of intentionality (according to which all conscious mental states are *intentionally constituted*). But conscious events also feel or seem a certain way to someone, however elusive this subjective stance may be. Hence, they also possess *phenomenal character*. And there is some debate about whether this seeming qualitative aspect can be framed in intentional terms.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, if the objective aspect of an awareness event appears in a particular mode of presentation, does that mode of presentation exhibit any phenomenality or phenomenal character? And is that property of phenomenality a kind of intentional or representational content?

Representationalists about qualia (Dretske, 1995; Tye, 1995; 2000; Byrne, 2001) claim that, yes, there is a way to explain the difference: the phenomenal character of experience *just is* how the experience represents itself in relation to its content. But the locutionary force of *just is* leaves

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<sup>2</sup> This dispute, in some ways, mirrors contemporary debates centered on the 'phenomenal intentionality view' (Horgan and Tienson, 2002; Loar, 2003), namely, the view that the aboutness of content is grounded in the subjective or phenomenally conscious character of certain mental states. I myself have waded into this debate recently (Coseru 2024), where I have argued that treating phenomenal character as a species of representational content faces certain limitations. For instance, it cannot satisfactorily explain the difference between the *content* of experience (what the experience is about) and its *subjective properties* (how the experience itself seems), particularly if the phenomenal and content properties of the experience can come apart (Peacocke, 1983; Block, 1996; Kriegel, 2023).

unexplained why there is a *phenomenal difference* between the two kinds of content (that of the object and that of the experience itself). It also calls into question whether the mode of presentation can be properly framed using the vocabulary of intentionality (regardless of whether we take the categories of intentionality to be semantic categories, as Sellars (1963, 180) claimed, or to be the vehicles of thought itself, as Wittgenstein (1958, 34) would have it).<sup>3</sup> That is because the mode of presentation of mental states, unlike their intentionality or aboutness, is not fixed or individuated by what they are about.

For instance, to use John's own example of the teacup: there is the object *as intended*, that is, *as seen, as judged, or as desired*. And then there is the *object that is intended*, the actual teacup. The students' failure to grasp the correct shape stems from confusion about this distinction, not from any distortion in their visual awareness or from an erroneous conceptual schema that causes them to see oval shapes as round. After all, once the correct instruction is given and students attend to the *intended object*, that is, to the *object as seen*, not to the *object that is intended*, the confusion goes away. Students know that the intended object (that is, the teacup that is seen) has certain properties (roundness, etc.) that belong to it, even though, as the object of an intentional act, the teacup is only revealed in profiles.

The question is whether the mode of presentation of conscious mental states is likewise intentionally constituted, such that their givenness is made manifest only as a result of itself becoming the object of an intentional act (of attending, thinking, introspecting, etc.). I don't think that is the case because of the asymmetry between the subjective and intentional dimensions of experience (between *what it is like* and *what it is about*). As the Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan noted more than half a century ago, "objects are present by being attended to, but subjects are present as subjects, not by being attended to, but by attending. As the parade of objects marches by, spectators do not have to slip into the parade to become present to themselves; they have to be present to themselves for anything to be present to them" (Lonergan, 1967/1988, 210).

The Dharmakīrtian tradition does confront this issue, and John is right to note that these qualitative features are presented in experience through what he calls "the subject-form". What makes this presentation possible is "reflexive awareness" (*svasamvitti*), a seemingly formal and invariant dimension of awareness.

How does this dimension of awareness relate to what John identifies as the two phenomenal forms of cognitive episodes (i.e., the 'subjective' and the 'objective')? We are not given any clues beyond statements to the effect that "affective states, intentions, and even spatio-temporal location...are bound up with the sense of subjectivity presented in that cognition."

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<sup>3</sup> For Wittgenstein, as intentional mental states as acts of thinking cannot be separated from their content. That is, we cannot separate a thought from what the thought is about since thoughts are individuated by their intentional content (cf. Brandt 2009, 69).

Taking *grāhyākāra* and *grāhakākāra* to stand for two dimensions of a single awareness event has the advantage of avoiding the confusing notion of ‘subject-object intentionality’, which one often comes across in contemplative science studies (as a category that marks ordinary cognitive states apart from states of non-dual awareness). This reframing of the technical vocabulary has implications for how to understand the critique of ‘first-person phenomena’ that John advances on behalf of Dharmakīrti.

A key issue in the debate about the relation between consciousness and content is whether the content in question should be primarily understood as intentional content. For Dharmakīrti, the answer is yes, it can, but only if consciousness is taken to exhibit a reflexive or self-reflexive dimension. Now, given what the reflexivity thesis entails—namely, that the object-directedness of consciousness is necessarily self-presenting—it would seem that to uphold it effectively amounts to a transcendental grounding of experience. George Dreyfus, who also frames the issue in phenomenological terms, hints in this direction when he writes that at its deepest level, consciousness is nothing but a sort of empty or “basic self-presencing or reflexivity that is irreducible to the usual structures of our ordinary conception of experience” (Dreyfus 2011, 122). Is this view tenable on phenomenological grounds?

Statements to the effect that cognitive awareness is ultimately undifferentiated—a view that Dharmakīrti appears to endorse in his *Commentary on Epistemology (Pramāṇavārttika)*<sup>4</sup>—have on occasion been interpreted as making the case that, in its purest state, consciousness is actually subjectless and contentless because content entails the dualistic distortion of a lower-level, error-prone, conceptualizing mind. But while such interpretations may be tenable on textual and doctrinal grounds, it is arguable whether they withstand scrutiny on phenomenological grounds.

This is an essential point that bears on the question John raises later in his paper, specifically when he asks, “...how can one know the nature of mind without relying on subject-object intentionality?” This is why, he contends, “subjectivity is such a crucial feature of the Mahāmudrā contemplative traditions, precisely because...the initial nonconceptual moment of presenting subjectivity, even in object-oriented cognitions, must itself be intransitive and unstructured by intentionality”. That is, the non-conceptual aspect of awareness must, in some sense, be already present in ordinary states that exhibit a subject-object structure, or else it could not be made known or manifest. But since this dimension of awareness cannot be an intentional object of awareness, how can it be studied scientifically or objectively?

This is where my early clarificatory remarks about the scope of phenomenology should come in handy. If, on a phenomenal intentionality view, the *appearance of things* always happens in a specific *mode of presentation*, then any claim that experience lacks a subjective dimension must

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<sup>4</sup> PV 3.212bc: *jñānasyābhedino bhedapratibhāso hy upaplavaḥ* (“Cognitive awareness is not differentiated, though its appearance is differentiated, therefore [appearing as differentiated constitutes] an obstacle.”)

already presuppose the very structure it denies. John recognizes this tension but does not fully resolve it, in part because he oscillates between a structural account of reflexivity and an evidential reliance on first-person testimony.

A more consistent position would treat the for-me-ness dimension of reflexivity not as a contingent feature of certain states (those still in the grip of the so-called ‘subject-object duality’), but as a condition of phenomenality itself. On this view, the dissolution of egological or reifying structures—what contemplative reports often describe—does not entail the disappearance of subjectivity, but rather a transformation in its mode of givenness. The relevant contrast is not between subjectivity and its absence, but between *objectified subjectivity* and *non-objectifying self-presence*.

This reflexive dimension of awareness (*svasamvedana*) may be taken to stand for the *metaphysical fact* that all conscious cognitions manifest a subjective aspect, in the sense that to be conscious is implicitly to be self-conscious. But it is mainly intended to ground, first, an *epistemic fact*, namely that cognizers are immediately aware of their cognitions as they occur, and second, and more importantly, a *phenomenological fact*, specifically that their awareness is experiential in a sense that captures its distinctively phenomenal character or feel.

On a broadly Dharmakīrtian view, then, insofar as conscious cognitions presuppose a direct, which is to say nonconceptual, acquaintance with their mode of presentation, we are directly aware of occurrent mental states even though we can only articulate their content conceptually. In other words, the epistemic fact that the notion of reflexive self-awareness is meant to establish is that one could not possibly lay any claims to knowledge indirectly or inferentially, via some externalist account of mental content. Although the complexity of human thought is only conceptually articulable, it is a further epistemic fact that such articulation only becomes known in consciousness.

One can offer two readings of this account. On a *deflationary* reading of *svasamvedana* that is in keeping with the axiomatic distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, the phenomenological fact of there being knowers would not entail the metaphysical fact of there being subjects to whom the attribute of knowing belongs. The doctrines of momentariness and no-self, in principle, would block such a reading. But the deflationary view confronts several problems. Chief among them is that it cannot account for the *diachronic unity* of such conscious experiences as memories, judgments, and inferential thoughts.

Since Yogācāra metaphysics blocks an *inflationary* account of self-awareness as entailing a metaphysics of subjects, it seems that all we are left with is the *phenomenological fact* that conscious episodes manifest a subjective aspect. Buddhist metaphysics thus limits the ability to account for the variety of intentional content that is present to consciousness in terms of—to borrow Husserl’s terminology—act-intentionality (Husserl 1964). But the crucial problem remains: does the subjective aspect belong to the variety of intentional content? I don’t think so, for reasons I have already articulated.

On some Buddhist accounts of the structure of experience, such as those championed by Asaṅga, the subjective and intentional aspects of experience are seen as the product of a ‘afflicted mind’ (*kliṣṭa-manas*) engendering a (false) sense of oneself as subject attending to some external object or content. But for Dharmakīrtians, the reflexivity of awareness becomes an occurrent, hence categorical, dimension of our cognitive architecture, indispensable to successful epistemic practice.

The reflexivity thesis (*svasaṃvitti*) can be understood in at least two ways, both of which remain philosophically live options. On one reading, reflexivity is a *constitutive, sui generis* feature of consciousness—a kind of intrinsic luminosity or self-manifestation that belongs to conscious states simply in virtue of being conscious. On another reading, it is a *structural feature* of awareness, capturing the way in which experience is given to itself without requiring a second-order act. The former treats reflexivity as an intrinsic property; the latter treats it as a relational or structural feature.

While both readings have support in the Buddhist<sup>5</sup> and Western<sup>6</sup> traditions, I remain agnostic about which is ultimately correct. What matters for present purposes is that, on either reading, reflexivity secures a minimal form of subjectivity—one that is not reducible to conceptual or reflective self-ascription

If subjectivity is understood as structurally constitutive rather than report-dependent, then the evidential role of first-person reports must be reconsidered. This brings us to the second question.

## **(ii) What is the epistemic status of first-person reports, especially in contemplative contexts?**

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<sup>5</sup> Buddhist traditions trace this view to the canonical literature, where the notion that the mind is naturally luminous (*prabhāsvarāṃ cittam*) is used to account for the difference between enlightened and unenlightened states of mind: “Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements” (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* I 10, in Bodhi 2012, 97). In a discourse aimed at describing the nonconceptual experience characteristic of an enlightened being, the Buddha refers to a “consciousness that is invisible, infinite, and luminous of its own” (*Dīrgha-āgama* 24, in Anālayo 2017, 18). See also Frauwallner (1953, 236), Ruegg (1989, 51f), Berger (2015, chapter 3), and MacKenzie (2007; 2017) for accounts that explore the trope of luminosity in both Brahmanical and Buddhist accounts of the character of consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes, Locke, Kant, Fichte, Husserl, and many philosophers working today in the post-Kantian German idealism and phenomenological traditions (e.g., Henrich 1971; Frank 1991; Zahavi 1999, 2004; Drummond 2006) endorse versions of this view, and it has been argued that we may even find support for it in Plato (1961, 169d–170a; Gloy 1998) and Aristotle (1984, 425b15–17, 1074b35; Caston 2002).

The epistemic status of first-person reports is not merely a methodological issue, but a philosophical one. Reports are always mediated by conceptual, linguistic, and cultural frameworks. They cannot serve as neutral access points to the structure of experience.

John is rightly sensitive to this issue. He notes that reports of non-dual awareness may be shaped by doctrinal expectations, and that the very act of reporting introduces conceptual distortion. But these observations remain largely methodological. What is needed is a clearer account of how our understanding of the phenomenological structure of consciousness constrains what can be reported in the first place.

Of course, the idea that phenomenal consciousness is experientially individuated in some fundamental way runs counter to the view that individuation is either a deceptive construct or a real but reducible feature of our cognitive architecture. And here one must contend with the fact that explaining individuation cannot dispense with disputes in the metaphysics of mind about grounding.

The problem of the epistemic status of first-person reports, particularly when involving claims about non-dual awareness, is that such unmediated experiential states must still somehow be accounted for in epistemically relevant terms. There are roughly two positions on this issue.

Those who take subjectivity to stand for the question of how first-person knowledge is obtained, that is, knowledge that one is the subject of one's conscious states, are more likely to endorse the (Humean) view that many, if not most (all?), conscious states lack such subjective reference. On this account, the subject of experience is elusive because self-awareness is taken to be an observational state that, while introspectively available, does not disclose any persistent locus or subject of experience. In this case, first-person reports that purport to ground an ineliminably subjective dimension of awareness would not be trustworthy. But whether subjectivity depends on such explicit representations of the subject as an owner or agent of experience is debatable.

Some (e.g., Howell and Thompson, 2017; Howell 2023) claim that only reflective experiences have a sense of subjective givenness or mineness, whereas others (e.g., Zahavi 2005; 2006; Kriegel 2009; Billon 2017) think the constitutively subjective character that gives an experience its distinctive for-me-ness is a universal feature of all conscious mental states. I think Dharmakīrtians could plausibly be interpreted as falling into the second camp. The argument here is that phenomenal consciousness exhibits an ineliminable experiential structure that, at a minimum, provides the sense of internal distance necessary for introspective or observational acts to manifest as the intentional states of an owner or subject of experience.

Whatever experiential invariants the neurophenomenological method is meant to derive—and Lutz's work here is quite significant—it still operates under a particular metaphysical constraint: namely, the *a priori* truth that there cannot be such a thing as a subjectless experience because undergoing, let alone reporting on, such an experience presupposes what is being denied: the

subjective or self-intimating givenness of experience that makes its reporting possible (cf. Strawson, 2017).

Still, there is a growing body of literature that argues against the view that conscious experience is individuated in some fundamental way by appealing to a family of non-ordinary and pathological states (drug-induced ego dissolution, depersonalization disorder, meditative absorption, trauma-induced minimal conscious states, etc.) whose experiential content is said to be indeterminate (at least by certain measures). Specifically, such states are said to lack specification of spatial, temporal, dispositional, and, occasionally, even agentive content.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, a few observations about the third question.

### **(iii) What are the limits of neurophenomenology?**

One key limitation of neurophenomenology follows directly from this analysis. By treating first-person reports as data to be correlated with neural processes, it presupposes that the structure of experience is already given and does not require philosophical analysis. But mapping the structure of conscious experience includes the conditions under which anything can appear or become manifest. And those conditions cannot be captured by correlation alone.

John implicitly acknowledges this limitation when he notes the difficulty of stabilizing reports, the variability of phenomenological descriptions, and the lack of clear validation criteria, though Lutz's five layers or steps toward "deep computational phenomenology" suggest some progress in this direction. But I am not sure the proponents of the method fully appreciate that these are not merely technical problems. Rather, they are symptoms of a deeper issue concerning the intelligibility of experience itself as an object of scientific inquiry. And it remains an open question whether the structural features of conscious experience can be operationalized for empirical research without presupposing the very structure such research is meant to elucidate.

### **Conclusion**

In raising these three questions, I invite John and the participants in this workshop to reflect on whether probing the liminal aspects of conscious experience that contemplative practices are supposed to deliver is primarily a practical rather than a theoretical matter. The ambitions of the neurophenomenological research program certainly point in that direction. But here I would submit that the two enterprises must go hand in hand if we are to advance this line of inquiry.

This is not a new problem. The Buddhist tradition, as John well knows, is host to a long-standing debate about the relation between meditation and philosophical analysis. One key inflection

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<sup>7</sup> In a special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* on this topic (*Is Subjectless Consciousness Possible?* 5-6, 2024) that I edited, we considered, for instance, whether the central claims of the Self-model Theory of Subjectivity (Metzinger 2003), which states that even the most minimal experience of being someone arises through a transparent phenomenal self-model (which itself can in principle be reduced to brain processes) can be defended on phenomenological and not merely metaphysical grounds.

point is the famous (or infamous) Lhasa Debate between Indian Buddhist scholastic Kamalaśīla and the Chinese Chan master Mo ho Yen on whether enlightenment is achieved gradually through cultivation or suddenly through direct insight. At its core lies a broadly philosophical dispute about the nature of cognition and error: Is conceptual analysis indispensable to the path (as Kamalaśīla argued), at least in its initial stages? Or is it rather the case that conceptuality is the problem itself (as Mo ho Yen claimed)?

The debate parallels modern philosophical discussions not only about whether insight is immediate or requires cognitive restructuring, but also about how first-person methods relate to, and possibly compete with, philosophical analysis, and the critical role of the latter in dispelling various tacit presuppositions about what such methods can and do deliver.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.