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On Self-Awareness and the Self

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Abstract

Some philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, phenomenologists as well as Buddhist philosophers have claimed that an awareness of an object is not just an experience of that object but also involves self-awareness. It is sometimes argued that being aware of an object without being aware of oneself is pathological. As anyone who has been involved in martial arts, as well as any sports requiring quick responses such as cricket and tennis, can testify, however, awareness of the self at the time of acting becomes problematic: you would not be able to respond to the slight movement of your opponent if you were aware of yourself responding to it. This suggests that it must be possible for us to be aware without being aware of ourselves. The aim of this paper is to clarify the notion of self-awareness and its relation to the self by investigating the phenomenology of the martial artist who is 'in the act'. I shall argue that we can make sense of self-awareness without invoking awareness of oneself.

Self-Awareness and Martial Arts

Imagine that you are in the middle of a *kendō* or fencing match faced with an opponent. You see a slight movement in the tip of the opponent's *shinai* or sabre. In that moment, if you took the brief time to *think* to yourself: "I see an opening, now is the time to counter-strike!", then it is likely that you would already be struck by the opponent before you can counter-strike. Given the speed of the opponent's attack, you do not have the time to think what to do, and then respond. Your response must be instantaneous. However, if you do not think that it is the right moment, how can you even respond at all? How can you respond to the movement of your opponent without thinking?

This koan-like question requires a careful analysis of actions. It requires us to investigate what makes it possible for us to act, and how an instantaneous response can be said to be *our* response, i.e., a response that we are responsible for.¹ However, whatever we can say about actions in relation to our mental activity is also related to the issue of the state of our awareness. Before you can respond to the movement of your opponent, seeing the movement must be part of *your* experience in that moment. In order for this to be the case, an awareness of your opponent's movement must also form part of *your* awareness.

In recent years, some philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists and phenomenologists have advanced the thesis that an awareness of an object is not just an experience of that object but also involves self-awareness. The most sustained argument for the thesis has been provided by Damasio (2000). He has argued that every consciousness or every conscious experience comes with a 'sense of self'. He writes:

You are looking at this page, the text and constructing the meaning of my words as you go along. But concern with text and meaning hardly describes all that goes on in your mind. In parallel with representing the printed words and displaying the conceptual knowledge required to understand what I wrote, your mind also displays something else, something sufficient to indicate, moment by moment, that *you* rather than anyone else are doing the reading and the understanding of the text. (p. 10)

What characterises your conscious experience, according to Damasio, is the ‘presence of you in a particular relationship with some object’ (p. 10). By this, he is not advancing the Cartesian thought that, insofar as *you* are experiencing an object, *you* must be present in order to have that experience. That is, he is not advancing an *ontological* claim that there must *be* you when you experience an object. He means that, from the first-person perspective, there is you, or an *appearance* of you, in the awareness of object. In other words, Damasio’s claim is, I take it, a *phenomenological* one: when you are aware of an object, that awareness includes you. Damasio writes thus:

The full scope of your mind is not confined to images of what is being perceived externally or of what is recalled relative to what is perceived. It also includes you. (p. 128)

According to Damasio, it is, in fact, pathological to have an experience of an object (or objects arranged in a certain way) without having a sense of self. He cites the cases of epileptic automatism and akinetic mutism to show that it is pathological for the self not to be present in one’s conscious experience.²

Now, from a Buddhist perspective, the notion of self-awareness that Damasio argues to be a necessary component of our conscious experience may be thought to be problematic given the Buddhists’ adherence to the no-self (*anattā* or *anātman*) doctrine. Moreover, if we thought that Buddhist doctrines inform (some forms of) martial arts, then the experiences of martial artists who have realised the no-self doctrine might be thought to be counter-examples to Damasio’s thesis that our awareness necessarily involves self-awareness.³

The 16-17th century Zen Buddhist Takuan Sōhō might be thought to present such a sceptical stance towards self-awareness. In providing Zen teachings to some of the leading sword-masters of his time, he says that if you experience *yourself* responding to your opponent, then, in that very moment, your mind will be taken by the self of which you are aware. Then ‘you will lose your movements and you will be struck by your opponent’ (*Mumyō Jūchi Bonnō* in *Fudōchishinmyōroku* (The Record of Immovable Wisdom)).⁴ In responding to the opponent without delay, an awareness of the self ‘gets in the way’. According to Takuan, because of the awareness of yourself, you may respond to *yourself* counter-acting the opponent’s strike. But, in doing so, you may not respond to the opponent’s strike as such. Once you become aware of yourself, then the game is over. In fact, much of training in *kendō* consists of learning to force your opponent to become aware of themselves. Takuan describes the tactic of making the opponent become aware of the self as ‘Taking hold of the enemy’s spear and making it the instrument of your enemy’s own destruction’ (*Mumyō Jūchi Bonnō*).

Takuan does not provide a detailed account of awareness that he thinks is problematic for martial artists. *Prima facie*, however, Damasio’s thesis about the necessity of self-awareness appears to be inconsistent with Takuan’s teaching. In responding to the opponent’s strike, the martial artists are told to be in a state where they *themselves* are no longer experienced and, thus, there is no self of which they are aware. If this is a rejection of self-awareness, then, according to Damasio, their experiences are said to be pathological or they can hardly be said to be conscious experiences. How would Takuan and other Buddhists respond to this?

In this paper, I shall investigate the notions of self-awareness and no-self.⁵ I shall, in particular, present a discussion of the notions from Buddhist perspectives.⁶ As is evidenced by several Buddhist accounts of no-selfhood discussed in Siderits, Thompson and Zahavi (2011), there

is no unified doctrine of no-self that is endorsed by all Buddhists. Consequently, it is a matter of debate as to how best to understand Buddhist notions of no-self and which no-self doctrine is or should be applicable to the phenomenology of martial artists who are ‘in the act’. I shall consider two Buddhist no-self doctrines: the no-self doctrine that can be found in the *Nikāyas* (part of the Pāli canon) and another that is discussed by the thirteenth century Japanese Zen Buddhist Dōgen. By presenting an early development and a later development of Buddhist thought, I will show a change of focus in considering no-selfhood. Moreover, I will demonstrate that, while *Nikāyas*’ no-self doctrine is not applicable to martial artists, Dōgen’s account accurately describes the phenomenology of martial artists. I will also show that, once we understand Takuan’s teaching in terms of Dōgen’s account, then we can see that Damasio’s thesis does not contradict Takuan’s teaching.

No-Self in the *Nikāyas*

In the *Nikāyas*, the contents of experience are analysed in terms of five ‘aggregates’ (*skandha* (Sanskrit) or *khandha* (Pāli)): material matter (i.e., the object of experience), feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. These ‘aggregates’, in their particular forms, are thought to exhaustively constitute any particular experience. From an experiential point of view, there is nothing other than those aggregates that could constitute an experience. Importantly, it is denied that the self can be found in the bundle of the streams of conscious experiences. In the *Nikāyas*, the Buddha is depicted to have said:

Material matter is nonself. ... Feeling is nonself. ... Perception is nonself. ... Volition is nonself. ... Consciousness is nonself. (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22.59)⁷

In the *Milindapañhā*, an analysis of this kind is extended to a consideration of the aggregates collectively. In the famous (actual or otherwise) dialogue between King Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena, it is said that ‘the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad’ collectively are not the chariot.⁸

According to the *Nikāyas* (and the *Milindapañhā*), there is nothing which forms one’s experience that can count as the self. But what exactly is the self that is said not to form experience? In the *Sallekha Sutta* contained in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, we find the following passage:

[A]s to those various views that arise in the world associated either with doctrines of a self or with doctrines about the world: if [the object] in relation to which those views arise, which they underlie, and which they are exercised upon is seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self,’ then the abandoning and relinquishing of these views comes about. (*Sallekha Sutta*: 3)⁹

The notion of selfhood which is denied in the *Nikāyas* seems to be something we construct in relation to what we experience. When I become aware of harsh words directed at me, for example, I may identify *myself* as someone who is described by those words. According to the *Nikāyas*, what I am doing when I make such an identification is that I am taking *personal ownership* of what those words describe; that is to say that those words become *mine*. It is not only the object of awareness (i.e., harsh words) that is taken as mine, but the whole experience consisting of those words and other aggregates such as feeling associated with them that may also be personally owned. As a result, that experience becomes identified as mine. The self, ‘mineness’, which arises from this process is, however, a construction. By making identification and taking personal ownership of the ‘image’ that I construct based on the harsh words, I identify myself with those words in my experience. It is this constructed self which is thought to arise as soon as we become aware of objects and other aggregates that is often described to be problematic in the *Nikāyas*.¹⁰

According to the *Nikāyas*, the identification of an object or an experience on the whole as *me* involves a creation of ‘me’ out of the fleeting streams of consciousness. Such identification involves a unification of the contents of consciousness at each moment. This unification gives rise to synchronic identity as me now. Unity created in identification also involves a projection of the self to the past and the future giving rise to diachronic identity. The contents of consciousness across times are unified and given diachronic identity. But, the synchronic and diachronic self created in this way assumes more stability and continuity than the fleeting nature of the streams of consciousness can warrant.¹¹ Hence, so the argument goes, the self that is created to form one’s experience is only an appearance. The no-self view expressed in the *Nikāyas* is that there is nothing in consciousness which corresponds to any attribute that the self is said to have.

Now, in responding instantaneously to the movement of the opponent, it is problematic for martial artists to treat an experience as *mine* and constructing a fictional entity, i.e., a self, of which they become aware at the time of responding. However, is the awareness of a fictional self problematic for the martial artists because it is an awareness of something which, in fact, does not exist? It is certainly the case that thinking of something as existing while it in fact does not is epistemically problematic. Yet, is there anything problematic about the awareness of a fictional self specifically in the context of responding instantaneously?

The answer seems to be no. In fact, the no-self view described above does not seem to be applicable to the experience of martial artists. On that view, a construction of a self is made possible by identifying experiences as mine. This means that there is, in fact, nothing personal about the streams of consciousness. However, in order for me to respond to the opponent’s movement, an experience of seeing the movement must already be *my* experience before the identification. For my immediate response to be possible, the content of that experience must be immediately available to *me*. The reason why I can respond to my opponent is because the opponent’s movement is experienced as directed towards *me* from the very first moment of seeing the movement. Hence, the no-self doctrine described in the *Nikāyas* does not accurately capture the experience of accomplished martial artists. We need to provide a different no-self view that, nevertheless, can explain the availability of the contents of their experience to themselves.

Self-Awareness and the First-Personal Givenness

In analysing the phenomenology of martial artists, we have, so far, focused on the object-directed nature of our conscious experience. Insofar as it is an experience of objects, the experience that a martial artist has is, in some sense, ‘given’ to them. My experience of the opponent striking me, for example, is not necessarily a result of the free creation of the mind. The opponent’s movement must be experientially ‘given’ to me for it to count as my *experience* of the opponent, even though the experience may not be completely veridical with respect to what is, in fact, in front of me.

As Zahavi (2005) and other phenomenologists also emphasise, an experience of objects must be more than this. If it were not, my experience of the opponent as I stand in front of her or him would be exactly the same as your experience of it if we were to be in the same circumstance. The ‘external’ situation involving the opponent just ‘gives’ us the same contents of experiences. Assuming that it is the same situation we are experiencing, we would then have to conclude that our experiences are exactly the same. This would mean that we could not talk about ‘what it is like’ to be faced with a fierce opponent in the way that would explain the differences of our experiences. Depending on the level of accomplishment, however, we may experience an opening for counter-strike or a feeling of defeat as advanced martial artists can testify. So, we must assume that we bring something to the experienced object or situation. That is, that which is given to us must be ‘coloured’ by what we bring to it. What colours the content of experience may be thoughts, beliefs, ideas, feelings and volitions, giving some quality to the object or situation that is experienced. They may

also be physical such as bodily sensations. Pain in my ankle may add more physical and psychological discomfort to my experience of being struck, for example.

So, our experiences must have at least two aspects. On the one hand, there must be a passive aspect: the givenness of the object experienced. On the other hand, there must be an active aspect: the bringing of something to that which is 'given'. An experience is where these two aspects are tightly interconnected. It is because of the enmeshment of these two aspects that an object appears to us in the way it does. As Zahavi puts it:

Phenomenology pays attention to the givenness of the object, but it does not simply focus on the object exactly as it is given; it also focuses on the subjective side of consciousness, thereby illuminating our subjective accomplishments and the intentionality that is at play in order for the object to appear as it does. When we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear. (p. 123)

That is, experience is where an object becomes available to the subject of experience, and, thus, an investigation of experienced objects necessarily involves a disclosure of the subject.¹²

Zahavi characterises the enmeshment of the passivity and activity of experiences in terms of the *first-personal givenness*. As he writes:

This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experiences *subjective*. To put it another way, their first-personal givenness entails a built-in self-reference, a primitive experiential self-referentiality. (p. 122)

According to Zahavi, the reason why my experience is available to me is because my experience is something that is first-personally given to me. It is because of this first-personal givenness that some experiences can be said to be *my* experiences. In order to capture this aspect of experiences, Zahavi characterises them in terms of the *reflexive* nature of experiences.

To understand experiences in this way is to think of my experience as individuated simply because it is *my* experience. When I see the movement of the opponent, I wouldn't experience it as someone else's experience. It is experienced as *my* experience. This minimum sense of *mineness* is what Zahavi calls the self. Thus, for Zahavi, the self is not something that stands in an external relation to experience. The self is just mineness that is integral to the structure of experiences that can be revealed from a first-person perspective.¹³

It is important to recognise that, on this view, self-awareness is not an awareness *of* the self. 'I' is not something that is added to what is first-personally given. Rather, it is the structure of awareness that reveals what is available for the subject of experience. In this sense, self-awareness can be understood as 'world-immersed'-self-awareness. As Zahavi writes:

[S]elf-awareness is not to be understood as an awareness of an isolated worldless self, nor is the self located and hidden in the head. To be self-aware is not to interrupt the experiential interaction with the world in order to turn to gaze inward; on the contrary, self-awareness is always the self-awareness of a world-immersed self. The self is present to itself precisely and indeed only when worldly engaged. (pp. 125-126)

This is why my awareness of the opponent's movement is also my self-awareness which makes possible for *me*, and not anyone else, to respond instantaneously.

Zahavi uses this minimum notion of the self as forming an argument for the reality of the self. He rhetorically asks:

Why not rather insist that the self is real if it has experiential reality and that the validity of our account of the self is to be measured by its ability to be faithful to experience, by its ability to capture and articulate (invariant) experiential structures? (p. 128)

The advocates of the no-self doctrine do not necessarily have to reject the world-immersed nature of awareness as we will see in the next section. What they would have to object to is calling the minimum sense of *mineness* the self.¹⁴ For what we should reserve the word ‘self’, however, seems to be just a semantic question and no significance can come out of debating on the question. What is important is understanding the nature of self-awareness and its relation to selfhood understood in this minimum sense.

If we follow Zahavi and understand the self in terms of the first-personal givenness of experiences, then the self does not seem to get in the way of responding to the opponent for martial artists. If anything, it is because the experience is mine and immediately available for me to respond that I can instantaneously react to the opponent’s movement. Instead of getting in the way of responding, self-awareness seems to be what enables martial artists to respond. However, does this mean that self-awareness is an unproblematic notion for martial artists? As we will see in the next section, Dōgen has a warning about self-awareness and it is exactly this warning that Takuan can be thought of as offering to the martial arts.

The Exertion of the Self

In order to understand the kind of experience that becomes problematic for martial artists, let’s reconsider the two aspects of experiences that we discussed before. We have seen that experiences can be characterised in terms of their passivity and activity. My experience of facing an opponent is, on the one hand, passive in the sense that the opponent’s movement must be ‘given’ to me. On the other hand, it is active in the sense that there must be something that is added to the ‘given’. It is because of this active element that the experience is *my* experience. But what is added to the ‘given’ in order for the experience to be of a certain quality comes in degrees. In facing the opponent’s movement, a number of psycho-physical elements must come together to form an experience. Depending on the degree of fear I have in facing a superior opponent, I may experience uneasiness or terror. When pain in my ankle in the form of bodily sensations asserts itself, my experience may be of discomfort or anguish. So what contributes to the particular quality of experience depends on not just what qualities make up experience but also the degree to which each quality is brought to the surface.

In some situation, some elements may be forcefully exerted in order to have certain experiences. For example, the thought that “*I see an opening, now is the time to counter-strike!*” may form my experience of seeing the opponent’s movement. Such a thought can allow me to experience the opponent’s movement as an attack, rather than a trick, which needs to be responded. Given that I can respond to the attack only if I see the movement as an *attack* rather than simple forward movement, I may forcefully bring the thought of counter-striking into play *so that* I can parry the opponent’s strike. In such a situation, responding to the opponent becomes possible by the presence of the self that forms the thought. Because of the self in addition to what is given to me, however, the experience is of *myself* counter-striking the opponent. As Takuan tells us, when we forcefully bring ourselves to the situation in order to respond, our mind is caught by the self of which we are aware and, as a result, we are unable to respond to the opponent in time.

According to Dōgen, such an exerted self is the result of striving to achieve an end. We want to put ourselves in a certain situation by means of action. When a self is brought to bear *in order to* counter-strike, however, we are (phenomenologically) carrying ourselves forwards in responding to the opponent’s movement. In carrying ourselves forwards in order to achieve an end, the self is brought above what is first-personally given. An awareness of the opponent’s movement then

becomes an awareness of ourselves being about to be struck. Such awareness creates a distance between what is first-personally given and the self of which we are aware, since the self is brought into play over and above what is first-personally given.¹⁵ In order to be able to respond immediately, however, we need to put our mind to what is right in front of us and let it form our experience. As Dōgen puts it:

Carrying the self forward to verify-in-practice the myriad things is delusion; for the myriad things to come forth and verify-in-practice the self is enlightenment. (*Genjōkōan*: 4)¹⁶

Once the self is forcefully brought into play over and above what is first-personally given, we become unable to respond immediately to the opponent's movement. It is this self that the martial artists must 'forget'. By paraphrasing Dōgen:

To study the way of martial arts is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world].¹⁷

By forgetting the self, nothing arises above what is first-personally given. It is when the self is not exercised as a means to end that a martial artist can have immediate engagement with the world without any mediation by the self. Martial artists must be self-aware in the sense that their engagement with the situation must be immediately available to them. Yet, they must not be aware of the self which is brought to the surface *in order to* respond. Martial artists must just respond immediately.

Self-Awareness, the Self and Martial Arts

Who's there when I am faced with an opponent? There is the opponent, of course. But there is also *me* since that is what it is for *me* to respond. From the point of view of some Buddhists, such answer may appear to be problematic because of their adherence to the no-self doctrine. However, that there is a subject responding to the opponent is just a fact for the martial artists. There is nothing but *me* to get out of the situation that the opponent has forced me into.

Faced with an opponent who is about to strike me, I can respond by thinking to myself: "I see an opening, now is the time to counter-strike!" According to Dōgen, responding in this way involves the self *in terms of which* I could respond. We can think of Takuan as following Dōgen and urges the martial artists not to respond to their opponents in that way. The 'I' that is exerted over the first-personally given in order to experience my opponent's attack and to control my movement in response is problematic. It is the instrumentally exerted self over and above the first-personally given experience that Takuan identifies as problematic.

Now, Damasio has claimed that when I am aware of an object, I necessarily have the sense of the self. He has argued that it is pathological not to be self-aware when I experience an object. If we understood his claim to be that I must be aware of myself *in order to* have an experience of the object, then the experiences of the martial artists might be thought to be counter-examples to Damasio's claim. Takuan urges the martial artists to disengage from such experiences.

Damasio's claim can be understood differently, however. Damasio argues for the necessity of self-awareness. However, he does not argue, as far as I am aware, that the awareness of the self is what allows us to have experiences at all. All he argues is that it is pathological for me to have an experience as someone else's experience, or not as my experience. In other words, as Zahavi argues, if my experience does not have the reflexive structure allowing its content to become available to me, I cannot be said to have experiences at all. Takuan doesn't deny this. He does not urge the martial artists not to experience the opponent's movement as their experience. In fact, it is the self-awareness as understood by Damasio and Zahavi that makes them possible to respond. Hence,

Damasio's claim can hardly pose a problem in characterising the martial artists' experiences as conscious experiences if we understand their experiences from the perspectives of Dōgen and Takuan.¹⁸ What the martial artist must *not* do, according to Takuan, is forcefully bring the self into play *in order to* respond. In other words, Takuan identifies the instrumental notion of selfhood as problematic for the martial artists. Martial artists must be self-aware without being aware of themselves in terms of which they can respond.

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¹ For a discussion of actions involved in *kendō*, see Finnigan and Tanaka (2010).

² See Damasio (2000): 94ff and other places where he refers to his clinical observations.

³ I use the phrase ‘martial artists’ with some reservation. The phenomena with which I am concerned in this paper are more salient in tennis, cricket and soccer than in tai chi, for example. Nonetheless, I talk about *kendō* players as ‘martial artists’ in general for convenience even though I do not suggest that my discussion is applicable to all or only forms of martial arts.

⁴ Translations of Takuan’s writings contained in this paper are mine. An alternative English translation can be found in Wilson (1986).

⁵ Phenomenology of sports players has been discussed by, for example, Breivik (2013) and Dreyfus (2002). Their discussions focus on representation and deliberation that may or may not be involved in sporting activities rather than self-awareness and no-self.

⁶ Several contemporary Western philosophers of mind have also advocated no-self views and they have explained the kind of consciousness that does not involve the self in terms of such views. See, for example, Dennett (1991) and Metzinger (2003).

⁷ An English translation can be found in Bodhi (2000) pp. 901-902.

⁸ An English translation can be found in Horner (1969) p. 37. For an analysis of the *Milindapañhā*, see for example Siderits (2003) ch. 3.

⁹ An English translation can be found in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2001) p. 123.

¹⁰ I own this analysis to Albahari (2006) which contains an excellent discussion of the issues of self-awareness and the self from the perspective of the *Nikāyas* (although the position on consciousness and the self she develops in the end is something that I do not recognise as Buddhist nor do I agree on). See, in particular, Albahari (2006) ch. 3.

¹¹ The *Nikāyas* contain several passages presenting arguments of this kind in terms of impermanent nature of experiences. See, for example, the *Nandakovāda Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. An English translation can be found in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2001) pp. 1120-1125.

¹² This is also the way that Arnold (2008) characterises the Buddhist notion of *svasaṃvitti* or *svasaṃvedana* developed by the Buddhist epistemologists/logicians Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. I have left out an analysis of *svasaṃvedana* as it is a controversial issue among Buddhist scholars. I have, instead, appealed to the phenomenological investigation by Zahavi to bring out an element of experience that is important for the martial artists.

¹³ See Zahavi (2005): 124ff.

¹⁴ See, for example, Albahari (2011) who, while accepting most of Zahavi’s notion of self-awareness, argues against Zahavi’s claim about the reality of the self.

¹⁵ We can think of this distance as the subject/object duality that is often emphasised in the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy.

¹⁶ This translation is from Davis (2009). For a commentary emphasising the notion of the self, see Davis (2011). In this passage, Dōgen is rejecting the instrumental nature of practice according to which practice is instrumental in bringing about enlightenment. For a discussion of this point, see Finnigan (forthcoming).

¹⁷ What Dōgen says is the following: “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world].” (*Genjōkōan*: 6) This translation is from Davis (2009).

¹⁸ Given that one crucial element of Madhyamaka ethics is the breaking down of the ‘barrier’ between my experience and everyone else’s, the Mādhyamika might have a problem with Damasio’s thesis. I let the Mādhyamika provide a different treatment of Damasio’s thesis.