

## **The First-person Perspective and Beyond: Commentary on Almaas**

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The target papers of this special issue make a variety of interesting claims about the nature of consciousness and self. A persistent theme in many of these contributions is the description of various “selfless” states: modes of experience in which one’s sense of selfhood erodes or disappears entirely, and one is left with bare consciousness and a unifying sense that “all is one”. While phenomenologically intriguing, these descriptions can be somewhat difficult to parse for those of us who’ve not personally realized these experiences. Nevertheless, they are important to consider for a number of reasons—including the different ways they appear to challenge some taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of consciousness and self.

In this commentary, we engage primarily with Almaas’ contribution. We attempt to clarify what we take his claims about selfless experience to amount to, exactly, and then—working from within the phenomenological tradition—we attempt to show how his descriptions of selfless experience and “pure consciousness” might be reconciled with phenomenological approaches to consciousness and self. We conclude by briefly indicating some of the ways a comparative analysis of this sort is mutually beneficial.

### **Phenomenological perspectives on consciousness and self**

Almaas develops a rich phenomenologically-oriented investigation of the relation between consciousness and the self. He appears to have two primary objectives, one ontological and one methodological. His first objective is to defend a kind of deflationary realism about the self, in other words that the self doesn’t really exist. As we understand it, his view is that while a persistent *sense* of self at the core of conscious experience is indeed very real—his analysis of what he terms “phenomenological givens of all experience” (x) is meant to elucidate the structural features of consciousness that generate this persistent sense of self—we are nevertheless misled when we reify this sense of self and infer back to the necessary existence of fixed, enduring, or substantial self somehow *distinct from* this sense of self.

His second objective is to argue that experiential insights uncovered in various contemplative traditions—such as those gained from his own tradition, the Diamond Approach—challenge models of consciousness and self found in the phenomenological tradition. This is because certain forms of illuminative experience appear to involve states that cannot be adequately accounted for within the categories and descriptions characteristic of phenomenological approaches, and therefore suggest the need to adopt a broader and more inclusive method for describing the structure of consciousness, self, and experience. His analysis of concepts like “individual consciousness”, “pure consciousness”, and the “reflexivity” of consciousness, is meant to accomplish this task.

In what follows, we evaluate these two objectives in turn. While we are sympathetic with his first objective, we find his second objective promising, but also somewhat puzzling. We attempt to make explicit some implicit arguments Almaas offers in support of his deflationary realism about the self. Additionally, we try to bring some conceptual clarity and critical discussion to Almaas’ claim critique of phenomenological approaches to consciousness.

### *The narrative self*

As Almaas notes, one of the reasons we are driven to reify the self is because many of us have a deep-rooted sense that we are—or indeed must be—entities who persist over time. Whatever its nature, the self is thought to be something defined by its past and future. And one popular way to think about the temporal nature of the self in philosophy and other disciplines, as Almaas notes, is to see it as a narrative construction.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, the self emerges within, and is ultimately sustained by, the ongoing activity of telling stories. Some of these stories we tell ourselves; others we inherit or appropriate from elsewhere. Whatever their source, our self-narratives are the tools by which we make sense of our actions and experiences, and solidify and negotiate our relationships with others. As Marya Schechtman puts it, “we constitute ourselves as persons...by developing and operating with a (mostly implicit) *autobiographical narrative* which acts as the lens through which we experience the world” (Schechtman 2014, p.100).

The narrative approach gains force when we consider the ubiquity of story-telling in our lives. Consider the act of waking up in the morning. As soon as we’re relatively lucid, most of us

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<sup>1</sup> See Schechtman (2011) for a more nuanced introduction to the narrative self than we can offer here.

will immediately begin planning and thinking through our day. We project ourselves into future scenarios: we think about things to do before getting the kids out the door for school, and last-minute preparations we need to make before an important meeting later that morning; we may also make a mental note to call a sibling later and wish them a happy birthday, or imagine how satisfying it will be to try a newly-acquired single malt whiskey after work. We also remember the past: we might grimace while reliving a callous remark uttered to our spouse in a heated moment during last night's dinner, feel remorse at the hurt it caused, and vow to apologize and not repeat this practice in the future. This capacity for "self-projection", the ability to prospectively inhabit an imagined future and summon a remembered personal past, are central mental capacities enabling us to think of ourselves as selves who persist through time, living out a personal narrative in which we are the principle player (Thompson 2014, p.348; see also Buckner and Carroll 2007). When we exercise these capacities and reflect on our experiences, traits, actions, and dispositions, we enact a narratively structured self.

A narrative approach is compelling because it seems to capture both the *temporal* and *social* dimensions of the self (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.201). We've seen how our narratively-mediated capacity for self-projection establishes the former. When we describe something we did several weeks ago, we make a claim on that experience; we mark our present self as both the author and owner of that past action and, in so doing, incorporate it into our narrative identity. But our stories don't occur in a social vacuum. We share them with others. And we do so by participating in a community that existed before we came into being. When we participate in this community by weaving a self-narrative, we rely on conventions and practices established by others; the form our self-narratives take reflect the values, ideals, and aspirations of the sociocultural context in which they unfold (Flanagan 1993, p.206). And we often modify our narrative practices in real-time by responding to stories that others (parents, siblings, friends, romantic partners, children, etc.) tell about us.

Narrative approaches to the self have enjoyed increased popularity in a number of disciplines in recent years, including both philosophy and psychology.<sup>2</sup> But is a narrative approach sufficient to establish the existence of a persistent or substantial self? As Almaas notes (pp.25-27), to evaluate this question requires first clarifying the strength of the narrative thesis being asserted. There are at least two options here. On one hand, one might defend a weaker form of the narrative

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Bruner (1986), Dennett (1991), Donald (2001), MacIntyre (1981), Nelson (2003), Taylor (1989), Ricoeur (1992), Rudd (2009), Schechtman (1996, 2014), and Velleman (2006).

thesis, what Krueger (2011) calls the “Narrative Enhancement Account” (NEA). According to NEA, our narrative practices are an important part of everyday life. But narratives don’t actually *constitute* the self; rather, they simply enhance or enrich a previously-existing *pre-narrative* self. For example, it may be that some aspects of our self-understanding (e.g., features of our cultural or ethnic identity, gender representations, etc.) only emerge when we engage with and appropriate different narratives. But NEA need not be committed to the claim that narratives exhaust the ontological reality of the self.

A stronger and more philosophically substantive thesis is the “Narrative Constitution Account” (NCA). For NCA, the self is an inherently narrative entity. It is constituted by the stories it tells about itself and others tell about it. Dennett, for instance, endorses this kind of narrative constitution claim. He tells us that “[o]ur tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source” (Dennett 1991, p.418). And while her narrative account of self is more nuanced than Dennett’s, Schechtman’s “self-constitution” view appears to endorse a similar claim when she writes that, “[a]n individual constitutes herself as a person by coming to organize her experiences in a narrative self-conception of the appropriate form” (Schechtman 1996, p.134). Similarly, the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner tells us that, “In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives” (Bruner 1987, p.15).

However, as Almaas observes, there is a straightforward but powerful objection to NCA. In order to construct a narrative self, one must already be a subject of experience, that is, a subject capable of having—and also caring about and reflecting on—experiences that provide content for the narratives we construct *about* that content (Krueger 2011, pp.37-43; see also Menary 2008; Zahavi 2007). We only construct narratives about our experiences if we’re the sort of creature capable of having experiences in the first place. And this capacity to have experiences, and potentially (although not necessarily) subject them to narrative scrutiny, requires the presence of a first-person perspective, a conscious subject. Narrative selves thus presuppose the prior existence of *experiential* selves—conscious subjects phenomenologically and ontologically more basic than our self-reflexive narrative practices. Narrative selves are thus derivative; they rest on a more fundamental form of selfhood and, accordingly, cannot be said to *constitute* the self. Additionally—and more pertinent to Almaas’ analysis—narrativity alone is insufficient to establish the existence

of a persistent or unchanging self since there is reason to think that some sort experiential self remains in cases where the narrative self is profoundly compromised or missing altogether.

Although Almaas is mainly concerned with experiential insights gained from different contemplative practices, this objection gains additional support from a number of other sources. For example, Jerome Bruner observes that a neurological disorder called *dysnarrativia*—a severe impairment in the ability to tell or understand stories associated with neuropathies like Korsakov’s syndrome or Alzheimer’s disease—leads to a condition in which “selfhood virtually vanishes” (Bruner 2003, p.86). Without the ability to reflect on their past and anticipate a future they inhabit, individuals suffering from *dysnarrativia* lack the basic tools needed to construct the sense of being a self that endures through time (Young and Saver 2001). Something similar has been observed in schizophrenic patients, some of whom exhibit great difficulty in planning and initiating action, keeping track of the sequence of events, and placing themselves in time (Gallagher 2007). However, while *dysnarrativia* clearly has catastrophic consequences for our ability to develop the kind of self that emerges from and is structured by our narrative practices, it’s less clear (*pace* Bruner) that the ability to form a sense of self *at all* has completely gone missing in these cases.

Consider Antonio Damasio’s (1999) discussion of “David”. Due to a severe case of encephalitis that resulted in major damage to his left and right temporal lobe, David lost both the ability to retain any new facts as well as recall any facts about his personal history (Damasio 1999, p.115). In virtue of this dramatic memory loss, David lives in the immediate *now*—or, more precisely, a continually-shifting window of about forty-five seconds—and is, accordingly, incapable of constructing a narrative self. However, in Damasio’s terminology, David still retains “core consciousness”: a primitive moment-to-moment sense of being a minimal *experiential* self (Damasio 1999, p.16). David is awake and alert, responds to others and things happening around him, experiences emotions, engages in intentional goal-directed actions, and articulates various preferences. Despite his inability to construct a narrative self, David still retains a basic prereflective awareness that the experiences he undergoes are *his*; he is immediately aware of himself as a locus of consciousness and agency.

Oliver Sacks (2007) recounts the similarly dramatic case of Clive Wearing, a well-respected musician and musicologist who suffered a brain infection in his mid-forties that, like David, left him with devastating anterograde and retrograde amnesia. Unlike, David, however, Clive perpetually inhabits an even shorter “now” confined to a mere few seconds. His wife, Deborah, tells

us that, following Clive’s infection, “[h]is ability to perceive what he saw and heard was unimpaired. But he did not seem to be able to retain any impression of anything for more than a blink. Indeed, if he did blink, his eyelids parted to reveal a new scene. The view before the blink was utterly forgotten” (quoted in Sacks 2007, p.188). Like David, Clive lacks the resources to construct a narrative self. But also like David, Clive nevertheless retains a minimal sense of experiential selfhood anchored in an immediate, pre-reflective awareness of his own conscious episodes *as his*. This minimal self-awareness is clear from the tragic journal entries following his infection: “2.10 pm: this time properly awake...2:14 pm: this time finally awake...2.35 pm: this time completely awake”; “I was fully conscious at 10.35 pm, and awake for the first time in many, many weeks” (quoted in Sacks 2007, p.189).

The takeaway point of these observations is that they appear to affirm Almas’ claim that appealing to narrativity is insufficient to establish the existence of a persistent or substantial self. We are misled when we reify the sense of self established and maintained within our narrative practices. Narrative selves depend, both phenomenologically and ontologically, on the primacy of a minimal experiential self; the latter provides the conditions of possibility for the former.<sup>3</sup> Narrative self-reflexivity thus involves what, as we’ll see below, appears to be a more fundamental *experiential* self-reflexivity. This latter feature of consciousness receives the bulk of Almas’ attention—and it places his analysis in-step with phenomenological approaches to consciousness—so we turn to a consideration of this notion now.

### *Self-reflexivity and the minimal self*

The discussion in the previous section indicated that looking at narrative self-reflexivity is insufficient to discern a permanent self. Almas is aware of this, and therefore spends much of his discussion unpacking the phenomenological structure of a more primitive form of pre-narrative self-reflexivity. This focus puts Almas in a direct dialogue with phenomenological treatments of consciousness and self. For phenomenologists, the self is not first and foremost a narrative construction but rather an *experiential dimension*, a core feature central to the very structure of consciousness. To be a creature capable of experience is to possess a first-person perspective on the world. From a phenomenological perspective, this first-person perspective is a

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<sup>3</sup> See Krueger (2011), pp.41-43 for some possible narrative responses to this objection. See also Schechtman (2011), pp.407-411. Strawson (2004) offers additional arguments against the narrative self, both as a descriptive claim as well as a normative ideal.

“minimal” phenomenal self (Zahavi 2005).<sup>4</sup> Within the phenomenological tradition, arguments for a minimal self generally stem from the intuition that “even if all of the unessential features of self are stripped away...there is still some basic, immediate, or primitive “something” that we are willing to call a self” (Gallagher 2000, p.15). Additionally, developmental studies of neonate imitation (e.g., Melzoff and Moore 1989; Nagy et al 2007)<sup>5</sup>, as well as work on motor representations and agency (e.g., Legrand et al 2007) and self-disorders in schizophrenia (e.g., Sass and Parnas 2003) are some of the streams of empirical work summoned to further motivate the idea of the minimal self.

As we saw both with Damasio’s David as well as with Clive Wearing, losing one’s narrative capacities and sense of historicity doesn’t simultaneously entail a loss of one’s *subjectivity*. Both David and Clive remain aware that their moment-to-moment synchronic experiences are their own, even if they lack diachronic awareness of themselves as temporally-extended narrative selves. From a phenomenological perspective, this is because conscious states are characterized by their inherent self-referentiality or *ipseity* (from the Latin *ipse*, meaning “himself” or “herself”). The notion of *ipseity* is meant to capture the sense of coinciding with one’s experience at a given moment: that is, the tacit feel of owning one’s experiences *as one lives through them*. This tacit sense of ownership, which phenomenologists insist is an invariant structural feature of consciousness, is subjectivity revealing itself to itself in the act of consciousness. As Michel Henry puts it, “The interiority of the immediate presence to itself constitutes the essence of ipseity” (Henry 1975, p.38).

When I feel a twinge in my lower back, say, lift my arm to scratch my nose, or bite into and savor a particularly juicy peach, I don’t have to first reflect on the experience in order to then ascertain that it’s mine. Rather, all of these experiences are immediately felt as such. I *pre-reflectively* experience them as my own. Unlike the narrative self, then, the minimal self is, according to this line of thought, not something constructed over time. Rather, it is built into the very structure of consciousness. For phenomenologists, the significance of this subtle “minimal” form of experiential selfhood is that it must be central to any consideration of consciousness. As Sartre puts it, “pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness” (1956, p.123).

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<sup>4</sup> The minimal self refers to more than just the first-person perspective (for instance intentionality and an internal time consciousness). The first person perspective, however, is at the core. In this commentary, we operate with the minimal self as essentially identical to the first person perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Although see Jones (2009) for a critical look at neonate imitation studies.

We find a cluster of similar ideas within the Buddhist tradition.<sup>6</sup> Buddhist thinkers such as Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Śāntarakṣita, for instance, speak of the self-reflexive character of consciousness with their notion of *svasaṃvedana* (self-awareness), which appears to be very close to what phenomenologists mean when they speak of *ipseity* and pre-reflective self-awareness. Dignāga, for example, argues that “Every cognition is produced within a two-fold appearance, namely that of itself (*svābhāsa*) and that of the object (*viṣayābhāsa*)” (Dignāga 1968, p.28). The idea—again, anticipating phenomenological insights—is that every act of conscious has a dual-aspect, Janus-faced structure. When I am aware, say, of the car rumbling down the street outside, I am simultaneously aware, in that single experience, both of the object-as-given (i.e., the sound of the car) as well as my *experience* of the object-as-given (i.e., the auditory experience of the car as *my* experience). Conscious states thus disclose or “illuminate” both their features of the world as well as features of the first-person perspective experiencing the world (Coseru 2009). They are intrinsically self-reflexive.

On the face of it, this phenomenological model of a minimal experiential self would seem to present a challenge for Buddhism, Almaas, and other contributors to this volume who claim that experiences in a mode of genuine selflessness are possible. For, if the minimal self is, as phenomenologists claim, a necessary and invariant structural feature of consciousness—and *experiences* of selflessness (whatever these experiences amount to, exactly) are indeed possible—they would seem to entail the presence of a minimal self *having* the experience. Unlike the narrative self, which we saw previously is relatively “disposable”, a minimal experiential self appears, at least from a phenomenological perspective, to be a necessary feature of any conscious episode.<sup>7</sup> Yet Almaas and other contributors speak freely of various kinds of experiences that purportedly occur in a mode of genuine selflessness. Careful phenomenological analysis of what these different claims amount to is thus needed. With these phenomenological concepts in place, we turn to that task now.

## Consciousness and self in Almaas

The enlightened experience in all the target texts involves a falling away of ego or self. Put in simple terms, it is the experience that “all is one”. Such an experience runs counter to the

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<sup>6</sup> See Dreyfus (2011) and Mackenzie (2008) for further discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Although it is not at all clear that embracing something akin to a “minimal self” entails committing oneself to the idea of a permanent or enduring self. See Krueger (2011) for further discussion than is possible here.

phenomenological contours we have drawn above. If everything is truly one, there can be no distinct first-person perspective on the world, no individual self-consciousness (i.e., “minimal self”) apart from the things and events experiences are experiences *of*. In several of the target papers, we find the position that the self is something associated with, or constructed by, *craving*; this craving is a kind of suffering, an excessive focus on the self and its desires, which is overcome or transcended through spiritual practice. This transcendence, taking different forms in the different target papers, can purportedly lead to a complete annihilation of the first-person perspective, conceived of as a structural feature of individual consciousness. We are told, for example, that within this transcendence, we lose “any sense of subjectivity” (Adyashanti x); we see “from the point of view of life and existence and eternity” (Adyashanti x); we have an experiential realization that there “is no separation of one thing from another” (Almaas x), and that “we are all and everything, which is a nonnumerical oneness” (Almaas x). These are striking claims. Initially, it seems there is little hope for any conceptual reconciliation between phenomenology and the forms of spirituality that subscribe to the “all is one” idea. However, another look at Almaas’ text, in particular, seems to offer a way out—a middle ground in which the central claims of the two traditions seem to be closer than might initially appear. In order to show this, we will first discuss a couple of key passages and then relate them back to the phenomenological analysis of consciousness and self introduced above.

Almaas’ text is structured around the seeming tension as just presented. Again, the tension is this: on the one hand we have an enlightened, purportedly nondual experience whose distinctive feature is that it is a mode of experience without a (minimal) self; on the other, we also have “phenomenological givens”, such as a primitive self-recognition, that structure all experience—even enlightened, purportedly *nondual* experiences. And as we saw in the previous section, these phenomenological givens arguably constitute a minimal phenomenal self. In his abstract Almaas writes:

“This paper addresses the phenomenological givens of all experience: first personal givenness, reflexivity of consciousness, and unity of experience in space and time. The discussion so far has focused on pure consciousness, the ground of being in many Eastern spiritual teachings and the illusion of an individual self. I contend that this does not fully account for these phenomenological givens and propose an individual consciousness through which pure consciousness expresses itself.” (x)

To see how this tension might be resolved, let us first give a brief description of these two dimensions, the “phenomenological givens” and “pure consciousness”, and then consider how Almaas relates them to one another.

*Almaas on the “phenomenological givens”*

In developing his notion of “phenomenological givens”, Almaas tells us:

“You have your stream of experience, and I have mine. Your stream of experience might be of nondual realization of satchitananda and mine might be of nondual empty awareness, but obviously there are two, and they are different. Such observation indicates that first personal givenness persists even in nondual experience, for it is not constructed.” (x)

This is a helpful clarification. For, it appears that no matter how genuinely nondual an enlightened experience might be, for Almaas, if two people are simultaneously having it, then they belong to two different streams of consciousness. A subject will not mistake her nondual experience as somehow given to another. Echoing phenomenology approaches, Almaas takes first-personal givenness to be an essential structural feature of consciousness.

So what exactly does he mean by “first-personal givenness”? Arguably the same thing phenomenologists mean: namely, the subjectivity or ipseity of experience, i.e., the minimal self. This is clear because Almaas explicitly appropriates Zahavi’s view of first-personal givenness (p.\*\*). In developing his analysis of “phenomenological givens”, Almaas relies heavily on Zahavi’s contribution to the 2011, *Self, No Self?* volume. Once again, however, maintaining the ubiquity of the first-person perspective does not entail holding that an entity, a self, or a subject, owns or is separate from the stream of experience. Rather, it means that consciousness is structured such that it is self-presenting or self-given—that is, phenomenally manifest to a first-person perspective.

As his second “phenomenological given”, Almaas mentions self-presentation or self-givenness as “the reflexivity of experience” (x). He writes: “You do not simply see an apple; you are always aware that you are seeing an apple.” We have mentioned this under the term that consciousness is “Janus-faced”, that whenever an object is present, it is always given as “present-for” or “present-to”. The manifested object always includes and refers back to its dative “for me”. Almaas presents different varieties of reflexivity of experience, but for the purposes of the present discussion, we want to simply emphasize a reading in which the reflexivity of experience, as Janus-faced, is equivalent to saying the consciousness is always manifest to a first-person perspective.

Finally, Almaas holds that experience is phenomenally given as both synchronically and diachronically unified. Firstly, according to Almaas “Synchronic unity is the fact that at any moment all the elements of our experience are known to be our experience. They are unified as belonging to the same consciousness.” (ibid.) For Almaas, it appears that synchronic unity, reflexivity of experience, and first-personal givenness together constitute the ipseity of consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, Almaas holds these three features of consciousness—first-personal givenness, reflexivity of experience, and dia/synchronic unity of experience—to be phenomenological givens that can be found in all experience.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Almaas’ characterization appears to be consistent with a phenomenological approach to consciousness and the minimal self. But Almaas also claims (representing the Diamond approach) that the nondual, enlightened experience is characterized by “no separation of one thing from another” (Almaas x), or that “we are all and everything, which is a nonnumerical oneness” (x). Let us give a slightly more detailed characterization before then analyzing how these two perspectives are to be integrated.

#### *Almaas on pure consciousness*

For Almaas, the realm of pure consciousness is reached through “spiritual practice and contemplation”, which is:

“basically a divesting of the individual consciousness of its stories, structures, concepts and ideas of itself and reality. Such baring reveals the individual consciousness in its purity as a clear medium of consciousness, totally transparent and capable of immediate experience of its nature.” (x)

While this is a suggestive formulation, we want to emphasize that the realm of pure consciousness, described thusly, is somewhat difficult to understand and analyse. We can start to get a grip on this idea by noting that there are parts of this description that resonate with themes discussed earlier. For instance, when Almaas speaks of pure consciousness as “divesting individual consciousness of its

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<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to address Almaas’ rich understanding of time and presence vis-à-vis Husserl’s work on “internal time consciousness”. Such a discussion, however, is tangential to the present commentary.

<sup>9</sup> We are not sure if Almaas holds that these three exclusively are phenomenological givens or whether there might be more.

stories”, this strikes us as an attempt to isolate a pre-narrative mode of experience similar to the sorts of experiences discussed above. Almaas looks to plumb the depths of elusive pre-narrative experiences that take us beyond the narratively structured “ideas of self and reality” and which define our common everyday experience of selfhood: thinking of ourselves as persistent subjects distinct from the world and others, for example, or defining ourselves according to various social, culture, political, or religious narratives.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, phenomenology is also aimed at overcoming everyday taken-for-granted conceptions of self and reality—in other words, moving beyond the “natural attitude” (x) in order to discern deeper invariant structures of consciousness and the self-world relation. However, if pure consciousness as Almaas appears to define it, is only achieved by a total stripping away of all that we (think we) know, there would seem to be very little material for phenomenology to work with.<sup>11</sup>

As we understand it, the idea seems to be something like the following: through spiritual practice, which involves enacting various techniques to divest oneself of preconceived conceptions, ideas, narratives and structures, one may reach a clear, immediate understanding of one’s own true nature. This is pure consciousness, a nondual mode of experience in which:

“there is no sense of being an individual consciousness. Rather than individuality, there is a sense of being the whole, or more exactly, the sense of indeterminate boundaries.” (x)

“Although there may be differentiation in nondual experience, there is no separation of one thing from another. By recognizing we are the consciousness, we recognize we are everything, for everything is simply the manifestation of consciousness.” (x)

In nondual experience there is no experienced separation between me and the world. Hence, there is no “me” and no “world”, “no separation of one things from another”, but rather a “sense of being the whole” with no determinate boundaries. It seems to follow from this that there can be no “you” apart from “me”, no objects separate from one another or separate from me. It is difficult to grasp

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<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting question of whether the phenomenological method of using the *epoché* and phenomenological reduction has significant similarities to some of the spiritual work of the contemplative practices. This question is beyond the scope of the current commentary.

<sup>11</sup> There is indeed a pressing question whether pure consciousness or enlightened experience can be understood conceptually at all, in other words whether it can be understood apart from being directly experienced, perhaps as what Almaas calls “knowing by being”. This question is motivated for instance by Gautama Buddha’s claim that: “The Law [to which one is enlightened] is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it” (Gautama Buddha/Watson 1993, 31). In the target papers, we also find Adyashanti speaking to this dimension of consciousness as “hard to think of”, “paradoxical” and “beyond all imagination” (x)

what it must be like to undergo such an experience because in our ordinary lives we always experience the world through a fundamental separation between self and world, a division between “me” (i.e., as a first-person perspective, or minimal self) and “objects out there in the world”.<sup>12</sup> Within the phenomenological tradition, the notion of ipseity is formulated in part to account for this fact. How would we live in a practical world without this fundamental separation between me and objects out there? How would I locate my phone and make a call if I cannot separate where my body ends and the phone begins? It seems that Almas’ answer to such a question lies in his distinction between “differentiation” and “separation”. In nondual experience, there is differentiation, but not separation between me and the world. It is difficult to think of a differentiation that is not also a separation in some form. To help thinking this distinction, Almas uses the metaphor of the ocean and its waves.

“They [the forms] are like the waves of the ocean, not separate from the ocean. (x)

The idea here seems to be that individual consciousness is like a wave, while pure consciousness is the all-embracing ocean. From the perspective of a wave – let us call this ordinary unenlightened, dual experience - one wave is separate from the next wave: it might be impossible to point out exactly where one wave ends and the next begins, admittedly, but they are nevertheless separate insofar as we see a plurality of waves and not just one single wave. From the underlying perspective of the ocean – the enlightened nondual experience – however, although the waves might in some sense be differentiated from each other, they are nevertheless unified insofar as they are part of one and the same ocean. They are, in other words, individual transient expressions of this single ocean—they quite literally share a common (aquatic) ground—and thus are not something substantially separate from it. The waves are thus one of the *forms* the ocean takes. Accordingly, one cannot intelligibly talk about where a wave ends and the ocean begins because their boundaries are continually shifting and indeterminate. This metaphor gives sense to enlightened experience as non-dual and all-embracing. Yet, it remains difficult to imagine what it is like to live and experience in this ocean-like way. The presentation above certainly does not exhaust the meaning or experience of nondual experience, but is adequate for us to begin discussing how the phenomenological givens can possibly be reconciled with nondual experience.

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<sup>12</sup> Note that separation does not entail disconnection. For instance, we can only perceive others as separate and non-coinciding with ourselves because we are connected to them. The phenomenological notion of intentionality is supposed to account for this.

Almaas moves back and forth between the two perspectives of the phenomenological givens on the one hand, and pure consciousness, on the other. One is easily confused about whether they are meant to be contradictory or complementary—and in the latter case, how that might even be possible. To set up the tension in its starkest possible form, we can ask: how can one hold the following two propositions simultaneously:

“You have your stream of experience, and I have mine. Your stream of experience might be of nondual realization of satchitananda and mine might be of nondual empty awareness, but obviously there are two, and they are different.” (x)

“there is no sense of being an individual consciousness. Rather than individuality, there is a sense of being the whole, or more exactly, the sense of indeterminate boundaries.” (x)

Almaas’ conclusion is not as clear as one might hope. He writes that:

“[T]he minimal self, if taken to mean the simple fact or feeling of self recognition, can also be present in the nondual experience of pure consciousness, so prevalent in Advaita Vedanta. It can also be missing, at least some of the time, in deep Samadhi or absorption, this way allowing for the Buddhist no self kind of realization.” (x)

How can we understand a position in which the “minimal self, if taken to mean the simple fact or feeling of self recognition” is sometimes present, but also sometimes missing? We suggest that the seeming incompatibility above can be resolved by introducing a distinction between the *content* of experience and the *structure* of the givenness of experience.

### *The content and structure of the “givenness” of experience*

In a personal correspondence, Almaas writes:

“What I wanted to use is the fact of first personal givenness. It is a fact regardless of whether one is aware of it or not. The absence of mixing of two streams of experiences is a factual truth independent of the experience of the individuals. We know that an infant has its own stream of experiences, and hence first personal givenness in this sense, even though the infant might not know that.”

According to Almaas, there is independently of the quality of any given experience a “factual truth” of experience and this truth is nothing less than the phenomenological givens. In the context of nondual experience, we take this to mean that the quality or content of experience might be completely unified and without determinate boundaries, but that experience is always given within a

structural, non-experiential framework of first-personal givenness such that each individual experiences that he has his own stream of potentially nondual experience.

While it is not easy to grasp what an experience of pure consciousness might be like for those of us who've not had it, we might appeal to some potentially analogous forms of experience to render these descriptions more accessible. We have all heard about the “absorbed, selfless” artist, who, caught up in the flow of performance or inspiration, *loses* herself in her work as she performs or creates it. Some phenomenological research has targeted this type of experience in classical musicians, for example, who claim to experience a blackout-like trance with no perceptual or cognitive content, and indeed no self-awareness while performing or practicing (Høffding 2014). Along the same lines, some jazz musicians claim, after a performance, that it wasn't them who played, that they can't play as well as the person who just performed (Bastian 1987). We have to treat such claims with great care (see Høffding and Martiny 2015) but we believe that they do point to a type of experiences unlike ordinary experiences, experiences void of narrative self-structure. But are they also void of the phenomenological givens as Almaas defines them? In other words, are they completely (minimally) *selfless*? In a different context that probably connects musical absorption and non-dual experience, Evan Thompson writes about yoga and meditation studies and the experience of consciousness in dreamless sleep- an experience of absence of phenomenal content:

“Absence” doesn't mean absence of consciousness; it means absence of an object presented to consciousness... The traditional commentaries describe the absence experienced during sleep as a kind of “darkness” that completely overwhelms and envelops consciousness... Yet darkness is a visual quality with its own phenomenal presence. Similarly, in the “darkness” of deep and dreamless sleep, there's nothing to be cognized or known, yet this absence itself is said to be subliminally experienced as remembered upon awakening. So the absence is a felt absence, not a simple nonexistence. (Thompson 2014, 238)”

Thompson's claim is that even dreamless sleep has a minimal “phenomenal presence” or “a felt absence” which is experientially retained after waking. The subject is not in doubt that it was he that was sleeping, just like the classical musician is not in doubt that it was he who underwent the “blackout-like” experience. Thompson refers to Zahavi's minimal self in his own work, but labels this experience as the “bare feeling of being alive” (ibid. 234-5). Even in this bare feeling of being

alive, since one does not fail in self-ascription upon waking (from sleep or “blackout-like” experience) a minimal, pre-reflective first-person perspective is retained even in this experience. In other words, we are here dealing with a seemingly *contentless* kind of experience, in which there is no separation of subject and object, simply because no objects are given. Yet, the *structure* of this contentless experience implicitly includes a first-person perspective.

The potential phenomenological connections between these various kinds of purportedly nondual experiences certainly need more argument to hold, but here we merely wanted to look to other kinds of experience that might help us grasp how an experience might, on one hand, have experiential content in which “all is one” while, on the other, maintain a first-personal structure differentiating that experience from both its (nondual) content as well as the experiences of others. And to return to Almaas, then: on our interpretation, whenever he is talking about the phenomenological givens or the individual stream of consciousness, he is addressing a necessary *structural* dimension of consciousness and when describing pure awareness or nondual experience, this pertains to the quality or content given *within* that structure. Like the “infant” who “has its own stream of experiences” without being aware of it (personal correspondence), we need not be aware of the structural conditions of our experience; they do not figure as experientially given themselves. To put it in other words, the structure Almaas points to as the individual stream of consciousness is very similar or even identical to what we have called ipseity of consciousness or plainly the minimal self. Drawing on Henry, Zahavi writes about the primitive pre-reflective structure in a way we think would resonate with Almaas: “When speaking of self-affection one should simply bear in mind that we are dealing with a non-relational type of manifestation: at this level there is no subject-object dichotomy, there is no difference between the dative and genitive of manifestation”. (Zahavi 2005, 71)

So where does all this leave us? Potentially, we have arrived at a position that allows nondual experience to coexist alongside the phenomenological givens, such as the first-person perspective. This meeting and co-existence is exciting indeed, and ought to encourage more collaboration between phenomenology and spiritual work. Almaas, a spiritual master, successfully brings strong phenomenological thinking into his own tradition and shows such an integration to be of mutual benefit. On this conclusion, we want to suggest further avenues in which a collaboration could be developed:

As mentioned in the introduction to this special issue, the meeting of academic and spiritual traditions is not the first of its kind and can be seen as a continuation of Varela and colleagues' work as found in *The Embodied Mind* (1991) and *The View From Within* (1999). The study of meditation and other spiritual practices combined with phenomenology, philosophy of mind and neuro-psychology has emerged as a very powerful research program, witnessed not only by numerous prestigious publications (Thompson 2014; Siderits et al. 2011; Flanagan 2011; Albahari 2006, Ganeri 2012) but also in the swift rise of the practice of yoga, mindfulness and different forms of mediation in the “West” over the last decade. It is not unlikely that the authors of the target papers could contribute to the work already in progress in this promising interdisciplinary domain.

As part of this effort, it is crucial to clarify the explanandum in order to get a more robust grasp of the nature of the nondual experiences in question. As academics without direct acquaintance with these experiences ourselves, we believe that a fruitful approach would be to engage in comprehensive qualitative interviews with spiritual masters and other practitioners. There is precedence for such an approach combining various interview forms with phenomenology in the field of dance and athletics (Legrand & Ravn 2009; Ravn & Hansen 2013), musicianship (Høffding 2014, Høffding & Schiavio 2015), psychopathology (Parnas et al 2005), physical impairment (Martiny 2015), pristine experience (Hurlburt 2011) and various requisite methodologies are under continual development (Vermersch 2009; Petitmengin 2006; Høffding and Martiny 2015). If spiritual masters, such as those who have contributed to this special issue as well as other revered teachers from other traditions, would be willing to engage in direct, thorough interviews, this would be a valuable opportunity to delve even further into the experience of self and no-self—a meeting from which both parties would undoubtedly benefit.

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