

### **3. Comments on Self-Awareness**

By Raziel Abelson  
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy  
New York University

I know too little about Buddhist thought to even try to adjudicate between the contrary interpretations offered by Profs, Bernier and Garfield of the views of the great Buddhist thinkers of the distant past. All I can justifiably do is ask questions about what is meant by the terms under dispute. The central of these is the term, “self awareness,” also called “ reflexive awareness” and “reflexive consciousness” These expressions are offered by both Bernier and Garfield as English equivalents of the Sanskrit *svasamvedana* and the Tibetan *rang rig*. Since these two scholars take them to mean the same, I shall take their word for it. But I would still like very much to know what exactly is meant by either the English, or the Sanskrit or the Tibetan expressions. I remain in need of proof that there are any such things at all. My scepticism in this regard may seem to place me on Prof. Garfield’s side of their dispute since he argues against Prof. Bernier’s defense of the so-called “conventional existence”(or reality) of the phenomenon, except that he draws what seems to me the

unwarranted conclusion that we know the workings of our own minds in the same inferential way that others do, and often not as well. He cites, in defense of this dubious claim, a long, rather tedious and, I think

2

philosophically confused study by psychologists to the effect that others can know our intentions better than we ourselves. (I say confused, because they introduce the notion of “naked intentions” as separate from the agents whose intentions they are. Such entities belong with Bertrand Russell’s sensibilia that float around all by themselves.) In any case, their study deals only with intentions, not with the perceptual experiences emphasized by Prof. Bernier. Prof. Garnier’s overarching claim, that “we know our own minds imperfectly, inferentially, through evidence, “ thus in the same way that others know us, reminds me of the old joke about the behaviorist psychologist who, on meeting a colleague on the street, says “Hello, how am I?”

There are two issues at stake here: 1. The ontological issue— is there a mental process, similar to ordinary observation, but so to speak turned “inward.” towards our own minds, sometimes called “introspection”? I think that 20th century philosophy put this question to rest, in the writings of Ryle, Wittgenstein and Austin. 2. The epistemological question resulting from the burial of the ontological question, namely: how then can we know what’s in our minds, if it isn’t by looking inward? ( by the way, why do we never speak of listening or smelling inward? Are there no mental sounds or odors, only pictures? Wordsworth tells us that remembered daffodils flash upon his inward eye—why not his nose?) Still and all,

3

mustn’t we have some kind of private access to our own minds as a source of this knowledge to explain why, as the German song puts it, “Die Gedanken sind frei, wer kann sie erraten? “ (thoughts

are free; who can capture them?), that is , to explain why we can know what we are thinking, feeling, hoping, wishing, imagining and remembering , when others can only guess or infer with some degree of likelihood what is going on in the privacy of our minds?

Prof. Bernier seems to argue for this kind of private access to our mental acts; as he puts it, “there is something very..nice in accepting reflexive awareness as the defining feature of conscious experience, namely, this would be a very good way to explain why it is that we so readily grant the status of first person authority to self reports.”

As an explanation, this looks a lot like Moliere’s fake doctor’s explanation that opium puts you to sleep because it has a *virtu dormitiva*. How could the alleged reflexivity, or luminosity of consciousness, if it defines consciousness, also explain its epistemic authority, since asserting its luminosity presupposes, rather than proves, its claim to truth?

A word about first-person authority. Prof Bernier seems to understand it to mean the same as what many philosophers, including Richard Rorty, wrongly called “incorrigibility,” which Rorty, somewhat like Bernier, considered the

4

essence of the mental. But since Bernier was kind enough to cite my book, *Persons*, on this subject, perhaps it is not inapposite to point out that I there distinguished many different kinds of self reports, none of which can claim absolute certainty. All self reports can be false, although some cannot be mistaken but can at least be insincere or self-deceptive. For a notorious instance, consider the man who invites a woman to his apartment for a late night drink, assuring her of his honorable intentions (or vice versa in this age of feminism).

like ambition, cruelty, honesty and reliability. The latter group are, as both Ryle and Garfield, maintain, known only by inference from behavior and so have no claim to first person authority. Only the occurrent concepts can be asserted of oneself without inference from evidence, and these only in the present tense.

Moreover, there are different degrees of authority even of first person present tense mental self reports. Memory reports, as Sidney Shoemaker pointed out, are

5

necessarily generally true ( otherwise we would have no knowledge at all), but not totally incorrigible, as we know from the notorious unreliability of accident witnesses. Perceptual reports, like “I see a cow in the road,” are somewhat more reliable, but again, not incorrigible. We sometimes try to make them incorrigible by expressing them as phenomenological reports, such as, “I see what I take to be a cow in the road.” No one can disprove so weak a claim, but it may still be doubted as insincere. Because, as Prof. Bernier rightly says, it is inappropriate to question them, our most authoritative self reports are of our occurrent feelings of pain, pleasure, joy, sorrow, etc., and our present thoughts (“Die Gedanken sind frei”.) But even these may sometimes be questioned, like the mother saying to her small child, “No you are not hungry, you just had lunch.” The authority to avow one’s mental state has to be earned by linguistic and moral reliability, and may be withdrawn even in adulthood from childish persons whose avowals prove unreliable, like the hypochondriac in the dental chair, whose dentist chides him: “You can’t be in pain– there’s nothing wrong with your teeth.”

All this is a far cry from the ontological and epistemological theories of the Buddhist sages which, as I announced at the beginning, I am not qualified to judge.

But I have serious doubts about any comparisons made between ancient philosophical writings and those of contemporary analytical philosophers like Ryle.

6

Wittgenstein, Quine, Putnam and Austin, because of what Rorty has felicitously called “the linguistic turn” that these latter thinkers have brought about. There’s no use trying to think out just what processes are going on in our minds, to decide whether or not they are luminous or reflexive, since to do so we have to assume precisely what is in dispute, namely, that we have some kind of privileged access to the inner workings of our minds. There, I think, Garfield is right in his criticism of Bernier, while the latter is right as against Garfield, in maintaining that our reports of our mental states have some privileged authority to be accepted without observational evidence. Both writers seem to me to overstate their cases. Garfield seems to deny, mistakenly, that psychological self reports have any special authority, while Bernier seems to be claiming, with equal overzealousness, that all self reports have absolute authority, that is, incorrigibility.

Another key concept in the Buddhist tradition, frequently employed by both Garfield and Bernier, is what they call “conventional reality”, or “conventional existence,” and contrast with “inherent existence,” or “absolute reality”, or “the result of ultimate analysis.” These phrases completely mystify me. So my next question is: What do they mean? How many kinds of conventional reality are there? For example, are primary qualities more conventionally real than secondary qualities? Are solid objects like tables more or less conventionally real than clouds

7

of molecules, or bundles of superstrings? Are any mental processes as

conventionally real as physical processes: I won't ask questions about absolute reality because I am told that it is non-conceptual. Wittgenstein says, at the end of his *Tractatus*, "*Worauf Mann nicht sprechen kann, darauf soll er schweigen*, so I guess, on this subject, I'd better schweig.

It may appear that I am agreeing more with Garfield than with Bernier while charging both with overstating their views on self awareness, since like Garfield I am denying any inward observation of a private mental theater; but that need not be a fair interpretation of Bernier's understanding of *rang rig*. Suppose we take it to mean, not that we always do, in fact, take note of what we are experiencing, but merely that we always can do so. Perhaps Bernier's claim to the "luminosity" of consciousness is only a claim to the ever present capacity to take note of our experience, rather than the exercise of that capacity. In Rylean terms, perhaps *rang rig* is a dispositional concept, not an occurrent one. In that happy case, Garfield and Bernier *can* both be right, and we can drink a toast to our *deus ex machina*, Gilbert Ryle.

In his classic work, *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle made an epochal distinction between two basic types of mental concepts: a. occurrent and b. dispositional. Examples of the former type are feelings like pain and pleasure, immediate thoughts that occur to us, the way things look to us, memories of past experiences, etc. Examples of dispositional mental concepts are attitudes like disapproval and inattentiveness, emotions like love and anger, and character traits