

2. Reflexive Awareness and the Cogito

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To be presented at the APA meeting, Central division, Chicago, April 29, 2006

Draft of April 14, 2006

Reflexive awareness¹⁰⁷ (*svasamvedana*, *rang rig*) is one of the controversial claims disputed in Classical Indian philosophy and the Tibetan interpretative tradition of Classical Indian Buddhist philosophy.¹⁰⁸ I will try to clarify the notion of reflexive awareness, as it is understood in that tradition a bit more in what follows, but as an initial intuitive indication reflexive awareness, or the reflexive nature of consciousness, is simply the luminous quality of any conscious mental event. We could add that it is by virtue of this luminous quality that a conscious mental event is transparent to itself in the sense that when a subject has a certain conscious experience, by the same token she knows that she has this conscious experience. For example, if in normal circumstances, I am visually confronted to a glass of water in front of me, it would be quite natural for me to think:

(1) This is a glass of water.

¹⁰⁷ I prefer to use “Reflexive awareness” as a translation of *svasamvedana* instead of “Self-Consciousness” which is used by D. Cozort (1998), because in contemporary Western philosophy of mind “Self-Consciousness” is mainly used to denote introspection, that is: cases where one deliberately turns one’s attention to one’s ongoing mental events. As it has been clearly pointed out by several authors *svasamvedana* is precisely not to be understood as introspection in that sense (see for instance Cozort 1998, p. 157 and Williams 1996)

¹⁰⁸ As it is pointed out by B. K. Matilal (1986, chap. 5), this issue was one of the central disputes between Nyayikas, who reject *svasamvedana*, and Buddhist philosophers in the tradition of Dignaga and Dharmakirti who accept it. Moreover, as it has been pointed out by T. Doctor, reflexive awareness is one of the “five extraordinary assertions of Santaraksita”. In the Tibetan tradition it is well known that RJe Tsong khapa and subsequent Gelugpa philosophers reject *svasamvedana* while non-Gelugpa philosophers, and notably Mipham, accept it.

And it would be no less natural to think:

(2) I see a glass of water.

It seems plausible that it is precisely because my conscious experience of seeing that glass of water is transparent to itself that (2) would be no less natural than (1).

Now, interestingly enough, the dispute in Classical Indian philosophy concerning whether we should accept, or not, reflexive awareness, seems particularly relevant to contemporary discussions in Western philosophy concerned with the epistemology of Self-Knowledge and its relations with foundationalism, and notably with the Cartesian *cogito*. In other words, the issue of reflexive awareness seems particularly relevant to the claim that in

knowing one's own mind a subject enjoys what has been called first-person authority (FPA), which has been much discussed in recent contemporary philosophy of mind.¹⁰⁹ This in turn raises questions concerning the relations between FPA, reflexive awareness and the Cartesian *cogito*. On the one hand, many of the contemporary discussions of FPA have been motivated by an attempt to defend FPA without being thereby committed to foundationalism in epistemology or to the foundational role played by the *cogito* in Cartesian epistemology. In other words, for many contemporary philosophers the challenge has been to make clear what one could dub a deflationist version of FPA, that is: a version which is epistemologically free from the foundationalist commitments of the *cogito*.

Now, an important aspect of Santaraksita's understanding of reflexive awareness and Mipham's defence of it, as it has been underscored by P. Williams (1996), is that reflexive awareness should be accepted only at the conventional level of analysis and not as the result of an ultimate analysis. Now of course to understand what this means more must be said about the distinction between the conventional and ultimate levels of analysis, which is directly related to the doctrine of the two truths, namely conventional truth and ultimate truth, which is a background assumption of most discussions in Buddhist philosophy, especially in Madhyamaka philosophy. This is something I will try to do in what follows. But before engaging in this clarification, I think we can already anticipate the relevance of Santaraksita's understanding of reflexive awareness to the contemporary attempts at vindicating FPA while steering clear from the traditional foundationalist role of the Cartesian *cogito*. In so far as Santaraksita is right

¹⁰⁹ For discussions of first-person authority, see Abelson (1977), Davidson (1984, 1987), Burge (1996), Cassam (1994), Ludlow & Martin (1998), Moran (2001), Shoemaker (1996).

in claiming that reflexive awareness is acceptable only at the conventional level, then it would seem that this understanding of reflexive awareness could afford us a deflationist account of FPA.

Paul Williams (1996) has argued that it is precisely by defending the claim that reflexive awareness must be accepted *only* at the conventional level that Mipham is able to defend the compatibility of reflexive awareness with the Prasangika-Madhyamaka approach according to which reflexive awareness must be rejected at the ultimate level. Indeed accepting reflexive awareness at the ultimate level would entail that it has an inherent nature contrary to the central strategy of Prasangika-Madhyamaka which is to refute any claim to the effect that some entity or other may have an inherent nature. If correct, such an account would undermine the concern that reflexive awareness at the conventional level would be implicitly committed to the Cittamatra view according to which consciousness, and its reflexive nature, must be accepted at the ultimate level.¹¹⁰

But, in his account of Mipham's Madhyamaka defence of reflexive awareness, Williams (1996, pp. 148-149) also suggests that reflexive awareness should be understood as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*. The main argument I want to suggest is that if accepting reflexive awareness *only* at the conventional level is to be compatible with a Prasangika-Madhyamaka, then it is crucial that reflexive awareness should not be understood as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, contrary to what Williams has suggested. Schematically, the core of the argument is that if reflexive awareness is to be understood as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, then this would indeed entail that it must be accepted

ultimately. But, arguably, there is no need to understand reflexive awareness as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, and hence it is compatible with Prasangika-Madhyamaka.

To make this claim clearer, I will first say a bit more about reflexive awareness and about the distinction between the conventional and ultimate levels of analysis, which should make clear why a Cartesian interpretation of reflexive awareness would entail its acceptance at the ultimate level. Finally, I will conclude by making some comparative remarks between reflexive awareness and FPA.

1. Reflexive awareness

According to Santaraksita, reflexive awareness (*svasamvedana*, *rang rig*), or the reflexive nature of consciousness, is simply the defining feature of consciousness, or of conscious mental episodes. As James

Blumenthal puts it in his recent commentary on Santaraksita's *Madhyamalankara*, *svasamvedana* "is the very quality which defines sentience." (2004, p. 82) In other words, it is what distinguishes sentience from non-sentience. This quality is described as "naturally clear" or as a luminosity present in any conscious mental event. To clarify this idea, it may be useful to think of some examples of conscious mental events. When we try to think of such examples, it is typically examples of what has been dubbed *transitive* consciousness (or "consciousness of") that come to mind, that is examples where the conscious mental event is directed toward an object or a content whether it be a sensory content (or object) or a thought content (or object). This is quite natural because typically when we experience some conscious mental event what we are interested in is the object or the content of the mental event. For example, if I look at a beautiful sunset on the ocean and I am immersed in the scene out there, it may seem ludicrous to say that I am conscious of my experience in the sense that I would have at once two different mental states: one looking outside at the sunset and another one looking inside, at the conscious experience. And this is precisely not how reflexive awareness must be understood. But there is a sense in which the conscious mental event is immediately present and transparent to itself so that on any occasion of a conscious experience its conscious character is readily available.

Consider again the example I gave earlier: suppose that in normal circumstances, I am visually confronted to a glass of water in front of me, it would be quite natural for me to think:

(1) This is a glass of water,
and I could also readily think:

(2) I see a glass of water.

It seems that any one of these two thoughts could both just as well arise on the basis of the very same conscious experience. This feature seems to be quite general for any conscious experience, and this indicates that if this is so it is precisely because conscious experiences have this reflexivity feature, namely this luminous character. As Mipham puts it, in his commentary to Santaraksita's *Madhyamakalankara*: "In the very instant that consciousness arises, the factors of clarity and knowing are present to it." (*The Adornment of the Middle Way*, 2005, p. 202) Thus it seems fair to say that reflexive awareness corresponds to the notion of transparency of conscious thoughts as well as the notion

¹¹⁰ This concern is at the center of a standard Gelugpa objection to *svasamvedana* at the conventional level. I discuss this concern in section 3. Five Extraordinary Assertions 95

of immediate presence, which some contemporary philosophers of mind have used in their attempts to clarify the epistemology of Self-knowledge and FPA.

As I will stress a bit later, in the discussion of the claim that reflexive awareness must be accepted *only* at the conventional level, this defining feature of consciousness is not a deep philosophical point, but simply something obvious that is understood from the commonsense point of view. Indeed, this defining feature of consciousness seems just as obvious as any claim of direct perceptual knowledge.

In discussions of reflexive awareness, commentators systematically stress a certain misunderstanding which is important to avoid. The mistake is to construe this reflexivity on the model of transitive consciousness, that is as involving a relation between a subject and an object (or content) where the object (or content) would be the very conscious state itself. For example, on this misguided construal, a conscious experience such as my seeing a glass of water would be reflexive in the sense that it would have two different contents, as it were, one content being the glass of water or the state of affair perceived and the other content would be my experience of seeing the glass of water, so to speak. One problem with this way of understanding reflexive awareness is that it would obviously trigger an infinite regress generating an infinity of conscious mental states. But, more importantly, this understanding is mistaken precisely because it construes the reflexive nature of consciousness as a relation, namely a relation between the subject and his conscious experience. But reflexive awareness must not be understood as a *relation*. It must be understood simply as a luminous or transparent *quality*. Thus, it seems that it is better to understand reflexive awareness as what contemporary philosophers of mind have called *intransitive* consciousness. While transitive consciousness is a relation between a subject and a content (or object), intransitive consciousness is a monadic property of conscious episodes, indeed the defining property by virtue of which mental events are conscious.

Now here one might be tempted to object to this characterization of consciousness by invoking the well-known case of blind-sight. The objection would go like this. Blind sight patients are certainly aware, in a certain sense, of the objects in their blind side, but their mental state which is in that sense aware of the blind side certainly does not have the characteristic of reflexive awareness, since the blind-sight patient would deny that she has the conscious experience of seeing something in her blind side. Thus, reflexive awareness is not a defining feature of consciousness.

I think that the case of blind-sight is useful precisely because it helps clarify, by way of contrast, what is involved in reflexive awareness. Here it seems obvious that we should indeed deny that whatever mental “quasi-vision” is involved in the blind sight patient has the reflexivity character. But this only indicates that even if blind-sight patients do have an interesting cognitive relation to their environment, it would be a mistake to say that these mental events are conscious. Or it would only be an equivocation in the use of the term “awareness”. After all, nobody would deny that in so far as our mental lives are extremely rich there is a lot of mental activity which is crucial to our cognitive transactions with our environment and to our survival, which is not conscious. In fact, if we can make sense of zombies, that is cognitively apt creatures which have no conscious lives, it is precisely because it is very easy to conceive systems or organisms which could have unconscious cognitive transactions with their environment. But then it would be highly misleading to equivocate between cognitively apt transactions and conscious episodes. If one insists to

say that the blind-sight patient is aware of what's in his blind side, then this would be only a terminological dispute. We could reply simply by saying: Of course he is aware but in the same sense that a robot on the assemblage line is aware of the presence of the object in front of it, which is insufficient to say that the robot is conscious or that the quasi-visual state of the patient is conscious.¹¹¹ To put it in the words of Ned Block, the mental state of the blind sight patient is only access-conscious but it is not phenomenal-conscious, and only phenomenal consciousness is consciousness in Santaraksita's sense, or is reflexively conscious.

Now, from Santaraksita's point of view, reflexive awareness is something supposedly obvious from the point of view of commonsense, but it seems that it can also be supported by a argument.¹¹² From the commonsense point of view, we accept that we have direct perceptual knowledge, that is: many of the claims we make directly on the basis of perceptual experiences, for instance visual experiences, enjoy the status of knowledge, without the need to be inferentially supported by some further claims. But if a question would arise as to whether one does have or not the perceptual experiences on the basis of which one makes such claims, then how on earth could we have such direct perceptual knowledge? If our perceptual experiences would not have this reflexivity feature, it seems that our perceptual knowledge could only come from some inference, just as a blind-sight patient could probably be trained

¹¹¹ It is perhaps more accurate to say that unlike the robot, the blind-sight patient does have a conscious mental state after all, but one which is much dimmer, so to speak. In other words, the patient may be in a position to describe his blind-sight experience in the same way that a person who suffers from severe short-sightedness is able to describe her conscious experience when looking far away without her glasses.

¹¹² Mipham presents a different but somewhat similar argument (see Kapstein, 2000, p. 107).

to justify his visual guesses on the basis of general empirical claims about his unconscious quasi-visual mechanisms. Thus reflexive awareness seems to be a condition which is necessary for direct perceptual knowledge.

2. Conventional and ultimate levels of analysis

The distinction between the conventional and ultimate levels of analysis looms large in Santaraksita's understanding of reflexive awareness. And this rests in turn on the distinction between the two truths, namely conventional or relative truth and ultimate or absolute truth, which is a classical distinction in Buddhist philosophy. As Mark Siderits (2003) makes it clear in the first part of his recent book (*Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*), some form of this distinction between relative and absolute truth is present in virtually all the different schools of Buddhist Philosophy be they Theravada or Mahayana. This distinction is a huge topic and obviously I must restrict myself here to very minimal remarks. As Siderits's presentation makes it clear, in the early Abhidharma schools this distinction seems to be motivated by a concern of ontological priority, which also motivated much of Ancient Western philosophy and which also motivates contemporary ontology. Even if it is true that in Buddhist philosophy this distinction is importantly motivated by soteriological concerns, which is not a prominent concern in Western philosophy¹¹³, it seems helpful to use some examples from Western ontology in order to make clearer the distinction

between the ultimate and conventional levels of analysis. Consider for example, the ontological debate concerning whether we should, or not, accept only particulars in our ontology. This is a typical issue in Western philosophy, which illustrates a philosophical endeavour to find something ultimate, namely what we should ultimately accept in our ontology. Thus, this example provides a western analogy to what would be called an ultimate analysis in Buddhist philosophy. A nominalist who argues that particulars have some kind of ontological priority over universals engages into a rational endeavour which is on a par with the endeavour of say a Vaibhashika philosopher who argues that partless particles exist ultimately.

The examples from ontology can easily be multiplied. For instance: Do particulars exist as separate existences or can they be analysed in terms of something philosophically or ontologically more fundamental, for example in terms of bundles of qualities? Do theoretical entities exist ultimately or are they reducible to some more

¹¹³ Perhaps to the exception of the search for *ataraxia* in some schools of Ancient Greece. Philosophy.

basic entities which we do accept in our ontology? In which case theoretical entities would be accepted only at the conventional level.

Now, in Western philosophy, and especially in Ancient Western philosophy such analysis into the ultimate, have taken a definite ontological form. But such questions of philosophical priority, or the philosophical endeavour to find the philosophically ultimate have pervaded much philosophical discussions. In modern philosophy it is clear that these concerns for the ultimate has somewhat shifted to the epistemological ground or to a mixed bag of ontological and epistemological concerns. For example, why is it that Berkeley and Hume reject the existence of bare particulars? Well because they find that the existence of ideas or of sensory impressions is so much more obvious, namely that it has an epistemological priority. Though my knowledge of Classical Buddhist philosophy is limited, it also seems clear that there too the philosophical quest for the ultimate moves between ontological and epistemological considerations. For instance when the Vaibhashikas claim that partless particles exists ultimately, they seem to express their answer to an ontological question. But when the Sauntranika hold a view very similar to Lockean representationalism, namely that both objective and subjective dharmas exist ultimately, they too are sliding back and forth between ontological and epistemological concerns.

These remarks are extremely sketchy, but I hope they will help to clarify minimally the idea of the ultimate level of analysis. To sum up one could say that it is a philosophical analysis that seeks what we, as philosophers, should accept as ultimately real, whether this be partless particles, moments of consciousness, particulars, universals, sense-data, or what have you, The important idea is that of priority in our ultimate scheme of things.

Now of course, such talk of ultimate truth as the result of ultimate philosophical analysis implies that some of the things we talk about are not accepted at the ultimate level. To use an example from Mark Siderits's book: one can be a reductionist about persons which means that even though one would deny that persons exist ultimately, one could still hold that it is very useful to talk as if persons did exist, and hence that we should accept persons only at the conventional level. Another example would be that of Methodological individualism in the philosophy of social science: While on such a view only individuals

exist ultimately, which means that collectives do not exist ultimately, still we could agree, for convenience sake to use the notion of collective entities in our social theories. In this sense, collectives would be accepted at the conventional level of analysis but not at the ultimate level.

I hope this much will suffice to make clear how we must understand Santaraksita's claim that reflexive awareness is to be vindicated only at the conventional level. Claiming that reflexive awareness is the defining feature of our conscious mental lives is just very useful when we try to understand ourselves as sentient beings. Claiming that we accept this defining feature only at the conventional level means that we do not thereby imply that it has some ultimate meaning: it does not entail that conscious mental events, in so far as they have this reflexive nature, would be included in what exist ultimately. If Mipham is right in his Madhyamaka defence of reflexive awareness, only emptiness is accepted at the ultimate level.

3. Why it is a very serious mistake to interpret Santaraksita's understanding of reflexive awareness as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*

As I noted, according to Williams (1996) Mipham provides a coherent defence of the following claims: i) reflexive awareness is acceptable at the conventional level and ii) accepting reflexive awareness at the conventional level is compatible with the Prasangika-Madhyamaka claim according to which reflexive awareness should not be accepted at the ultimate level. Now much of this "Madhyamaka defence" of reflexive awareness, understood as a conventionally accepted feature of conscious mental events, rests crucially on Santaraksita's suggestion that reflexive awareness is so obvious that it needs not even be supported by an argument. As Williams puts it: "In his *Madhyamakalankara* [...] Santaraksita introduces *svasamvedana* not through argument – through recourse to, say, the memory argument – but through assertion, an appeal to its fundamental obviousness." (1996, p. 21) Williams also points out that according to Kamalasila "it is not fitting to criticize this self-awareness, since it is established even for cowherds." (*ibid.*, p. 24) Williams also notes that this pre-reflective understanding of reflexive awareness "which is felt to be obvious even to peasants" (*ibid.*, p. 24) is reminiscent of G. E. Moore's appeal to the commonsense of the man on the street. I think this suggestion of Santaraksita, and the way Williams underscores it, is very well taken. Indeed, if reflexive awareness is to be accepted only conventionally, this is how it must be understood. It is worth noting that this assertion of reflexive awareness, as obvious to commonsense, is also quite similar to the way in which contemporary philosophers who accept first-person authority assert this claim. A subject enjoys first-person authority with respect to her own mental states in the sense that her own self-ascriptions of mental states are epistemically warranted without the requirement that they be supported by any evidence whatsoever. Here again first-person authority is asserted simply as an understanding of our commonsense practices

of accepting at face value claims of self-knowledge, that is claims a subject makes with respect to her own conscious mental states.

But, as I already noted, Williams also makes the striking suggestion that reflexive awareness, understood as a conventional feature of conscious mental events, comes very close to a version of the Cartesian *cogito*.¹¹⁴ But, I think that this suggestion is highly misleading for, as I now want to argue, if reflexive awareness was to be construed as a

version of the Cartesian *cogito*, then contrary to the purpose of Mipham's Madhyamaka defence, reflexive awareness would have to be accepted as the result of an ultimate analysis.

Let us take a closer look at Descartes's *cogito* argument and its epistemological motivation. As it is well known, Descartes's *cogito*, and especially the claim that "I am, I exist" is "necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind"¹¹⁵ is not so much an argument as the conclusion of an argument, namely the evil genius argument which in turn is a particular application of Descartes's strategy known as "doute méthodique" or the method of doubt. It is crucial to understand the method of doubt within the overall epistemological context in which Descartes introduces it. This epistemological context is Descartes's foundationalist motivation to find a way out of the fallibilist predicament, namely the simple understanding that many beliefs we have had in the past and which we took to be knowledge were after all not knowledge. From Descartes's foundationalist point of view, this is an epistemological predicament in so far as it could well turn out, from a logical point of view, that any of our actual beliefs which we now take to be knowledge could also turn out not be knowledge after all. Descartes's stringent understanding of what knowledge should be is that nothing short of infallible knowledge could count as knowledge. And, as it is well known, the purpose of his method of doubt is precisely to find an infallible foundation of knowledge, on the basis of which the rest of our knowledge could be grounded, because only this could guarantee that we have any knowledge at all. As we know, the evil genius argument consists in imagining a logically possible scenario – which is quite extraordinary from our commonsense point of view – according to which most of the claims which we usually accept as true would in fact be false. For instance, as far as I can tell I could have the same

¹¹⁴ See Williams (1996, pp. 148-149). As I argue in what follows, this claim is extremely misleading. However, it should be noted, on behalf of Williams, that this is a very brief remark he makes by cautiously avoiding to state explicitly that reflexive awareness is actually a version of the *cogito*. But, since I am convinced that taking reflexive awareness to be a version of the Cartesian *cogito* would make Mipham's Madhyamaka defense incoherent, I think it is important to make this argument clear to see that if the coherence of Mipham's view is to be defended, reflexive awareness should be understood as totally different from the Cartesian *cogito*.

¹¹⁵ See Descartes's *Meditation on First Philosophy*, trans. by D. A. Cress (1993, p. 18).

sensory impressions and the same beliefs as the ones I do have, but contrary to what I believe these could be produced by an evil genius trying to deceive me. Here is a relevant passage from Descartes's famous second meditation:

But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus [...] "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind. (*ibid.*, p. 18)

The first thing to note is that the Cartesian *cogito* must be understood in the context of Descartes's overall epistemological project. And, in that context, Descartes considers this

result of his rational investigation, namely the *cogito*, as something which does provide the infallible foundation he was seeking in his endeavour to avoid the fallibilist predicament. Nowadays, it is universally accepted that Descartes's overall foundationalist project, at least in his own version of it, fails.¹¹⁶ But, it is quite clear that Descartes's project and his use of the method of doubt resembles, if anything does, an ultimate analysis, that is a philosophical endeavour to find something ultimate, that is something which resist an ultimate test namely the artificial construction of the evil genius argument. We are far from what cowherds, peasants, and the man on the street accept as obvious. In other words, Descartes takes the result of his evil genius argument, the *cogito*, to be *infallible in the strongest possible sense we can imagine*. If this is not intended as the result of an ultimate analysis, I wonder what would be.

The second important thing to note is that Descartes takes the *cogito*, namely the alleged infallibility of his knowledge that he exists, to be a quite substantial claim. As he puts it:

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses. [...] Is it not *the very same "I"* who now doubts almost everything, who nevertheless understands something, who affirms that this one thing is true, who denies other things, who desires to know more, who wishes not to be deceived, who imagines many things even against my will, who also notices many things that appear to come from the senses? What is there in all of this that is not every bit as true as the fact that I exist" (*ibid.*, p. 20, our emphasis)

This "thing that thinks", the existence of which he claims to know infallibly looks very much like something which has an inherent nature, something which exists from its own side, to transpose a terminology used in the Madhyamaka literature. It is important to note that this claim is different from the further famous argument of

¹¹⁶ But see Bonjour (1998) for a recent attempt to resurrect an amended version of Descartes's foundationalist project.

Descartes which tries to defend the immaterial nature of the Self on the basis of the indubitability of the *cogito*. At this stage, Descartes is indeed saying that the "I" is a thinking thing but he is not saying anything yet about its immaterial nature. But, at this very stage, Descartes claims to have hit upon something which exists substantially, whatever the nature of that substance may be, hence something which Descartes would certainly accept in his ontology. This should be enough to see that, given the overall epistemological context in which the argument is stated, the *cogito* corresponds indeed to what a Madhyamaka philosopher would consider to be the result of an ultimate analysis. And, obviously, this Cartesian result, just as the *atma* of the Hindus, is something that is denied not only by Madhyamaka philosophers but by virtually all Buddhists.

The upshot should be clear. If reflexive awareness is understood as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, then this would be sufficient to deny that it can at once be accepted conventionally and rejected ultimately, and reflexive awareness would be incompatible with Madhyamaka philosophy. Thus if Mipham's "Madhyamaka defence" of reflexive awareness, understood conventionally as a feature of consciousness, is to be maintained we should be cautious to insist that it is very different from the Cartesian *cogito*. Indeed, if reflexive awareness is understood as a version of the *cogito*, then this would lend support to

an objection against the acceptance of reflexive awareness, at the conventional level, which is common in the Gelugpa doxography. A general assumption of this argument is that there are some things which we cannot accept at the conventional level without thereby accepting them at the ultimate level. The best example is that of a creator God, since it is indeed difficult to see how we could accept talk of a creator God as a convenient expedient at the conventional level while denying that God has some kind of ontological priority. As Jay Garfield (2004, p. 28) has pointed out, the following passage from Thubten Jinpa summarizes this general line of argument:

RJe Tsong khapa's central objection is that positing such a faculty is tantamount to resurrecting the ghost of *svabhava*, i.e., intrinsic being, which he has vehemently argued against. In the final analysis, *svasamvedana* remains another metaphysical postulate whose purpose is to

provide a firm grounding for a substantially real world of consciousness. This, according to RJe Tsong khapa, is nothing but an attempt to absolutize consciousness." (Jinpa, 2002, p. 127)

If what I have argued so far is correct, then if reflexive awareness is to be understood as a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, then the kind of concern expressed in this quote would be justified in so far as the *cogito* absolutizes not only consciousness but the ego.

Now, one might be tempted to object that accepting reflexive awareness at the conventional level entails something weaker than the *cogito*, yet something which is strong enough to entail that consciousness exists inherently, and hence that its acceptance at the conventional level entails its acceptance at the ultimate level. As I noted, there are two important aspects to the *cogito*: i) that it is understood as constituting the ultimate infallible foundation that Descartes was seeking and ii) that one's own existence *qua* thinking subject is something substantial. But, arguably, while i) may be accepted, as a result of the evil genius argument, ii) need not be accepted. In other words, it is arguable that while the evil genius argument establishes something that can be known infallibly, and thus something which could provide an ultimate foundation to knowledge, yet it does not support the stronger claim that this ultimate foundation is the Cartesian ego. On such an interpretation, there would be no need to claim that the evil genius argument does establish something which virtually all Buddhists reject, namely the existence, at the ultimate level, of a substantial ego. This weaker interpretation of the result of Descartes's evil genius argument is well illustrated by the following remark of G. C. Lichtenberg:

We are acquainted only with the existence of our sensations, imaginations, and thoughts. 'Thinking is going on' (*Es denkt*) is what one should say, just as one says 'Lightning is occurring' (*Es blitzt*). Saying '*Cogito*' is too much, as soon as one translates it as 'I am thinking'. Accepting, postulating the *I* is a practical requirement. (1971, p. 412)¹¹⁷

This passage is quite instructive. But it seems that in the context of the present discussion it can be interpreted in one of two different ways. First, if the remark is simply understood as a bit of phenomenology which attempts to make more explicit our common understanding of our conscious mental lives and our conscious mental episodes, then it could indeed be used as a further way to illustrate the reflexive nature of consciousness, understood in Santaraksita's

This quote, and especially the first sentence, echoes the famous passage of D. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*: "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception
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sense, namely only at the conventional level. Thus interpreted, this passage would simply be another way to try to say something about the immediate presence and transparency of conscious experiences. In other words, on this interpretation this remark would simply be taken out of the context of the epistemological inquiry into an ultimate infallible foundation of knowledge. But, then of course, such an impersonal understanding of conscious experience could well be accepted only at the conventional level, since this would not entail that it serves as the ultimate epistemological foundation that Descartes was trying to establish.

or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without

However, this quote from Lichtenberg could also be interpreted within the epistemological context of a search for an ultimate foundation of knowledge. Here the idea is simply that Lichtenberg would point out that Descartes was partly right, namely in the claim that there is an ultimate foundation of knowledge, and that he was partly wrong, namely in the way he characterized that foundation, that is: as the Cartesian ego. This infallible foundation would be something else, perhaps some kind of impersonal Consciousness, with a capital C, or else perhaps the Given or the sense-data. In fact this interpretation of the result of the evil genius argument is in line with the foundationalist project as it has been developed in classical empiricism, where it is only *sense-data qua* purely mental objects which can be known infallibly to exist. If this is how this quote should be understood, then of course, just as in the case of the cogito, we could not accept this claim only at the conventional level. That is: we could only accept it at the ultimate level. On this second interpretation, we would have something that looks very much like the position of the Cittamatra, interpreted in the sense that Consciousness exist ultimately. And, insofar as reflexive awareness, accepted as a conventional feature of consciousness, would entail this interpretation of Lichtenberg's famous impersonal view, then accepting this version of reflexive awareness would be incompatible with the Madhyamaka point or view and this would be "tantamount to resurrecting the ghost of *svabhava*, i.e. intrinsic being", and it would be "nothing but an attempt to absolutize consciousness." (Jinpa, 2002, p. 127).

But the reply to this objection is obvious enough. We can make sense of reflexive awareness without accepting this second interpretation of this passage of Lichtenberg. In other words, reflexive awareness does not need at all to be committed to the foundationalist agenda be it Cartesian, empiricist or otherwise. Saying that the reflexive character of consciousness is accepted conventionally is precisely saying that it is not the result of a philosophical analysis searching for something ultimate like an infallible foundation of knowledge which resists an

a perception and never can observe any thing but the perception." (Book I, vi, 6)

analysis like Descartes's method of doubt. It is simply saying that it is something that is presupposed by our common understanding of our conscious mental lives and our conscious mental events. Thus, the objection according to which reflexive awareness cannot be accepted at the conventional level without *ipso facto* entailing its acceptance at

the ultimate level. The upshot is that when reflexive awareness is properly understood only as a conventionally accepted feature of our concept of conscious experience, then it entails neither a version of the Cartesian *cogito* nor the weaker “impersonal” interpretation of the Cartesian argument, and thus it is compatible with Prasangika-Madhyamaka.

4. Reflexive awareness and First-person authority

Now, let me conclude by underlining what I take to be some important similarities between reflexive awareness and FPA. As I noted at the beginning of the paper, this discussion has some interesting similarities with the current discussions, in contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, concerning FPA and its relation to the Cartesian *cogito*. As many contemporary philosophers have pointed out, it seems to be part of our practices of communication, our commonsense transactions, to readily accept claims a subject makes about her own mental states, and to take such claims as warranted even if the subject does not have any evidence to “back it up”.¹¹⁸ But, FPA does not need to rest on a philosophical argument like that of the evil genius, it is something that is readily acceptable to the man on the street. Hence, FPA can be understood as different from the Cartesian *cogito*. In other words, it is one thing to say that it is obvious that a conscious subject enjoys first-person authority, but it is quite another thing to exploit this fact in the context of an epistemological project, namely as the infallible result of the application of the method of doubt. Thus, if what I have argued so far is correct, it seems that just as FPA can be accepted as obvious from the point of view of commonsense without thereby being committed to the Cartesian *cogito*, reflexive awareness can also be accepted as a conventional defining feature of consciousness, without entailing a commitment to the Cartesian *cogito*, or to an ultimate consciousness.

¹¹⁸ In a lucid and detailed analysis of the status of avowals, Abelson (1977, chap. 2) has made clear why such self-ascriptions enjoy this kind of epistemic authority. According to this analysis, while avowals do have truth-conditions, and thus can be known to be true, still they work in a way which is very similar to so-called performatives, such as “I dub thee Sir Lancelot”, in the sense that the subject making such self-ascriptions would “introduce new facts by declarational fiat” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

But there is an important difference between FPA and reflexive awareness. Discussions of the former have been mainly motivated as a linguistic analysis of the meaning and the epistemological status of first person utterances in which one attributes some mental properties to oneself. Such self-attributions can be illustrated with sentences such as the following:

- (2) I see a glass of water
- (3) I feel a pain in my back
- (4) I am hungry
- (5) I believe that snow is white,

and so on. As I noted, most contemporary philosophers who have proposed an account of FPA have been motivated to hold that such first-person utterances do enjoy the status of knowledge claims even if typically they do not require a justification of one sort or another. And again, most philosophers have tried to find a way to account for FPA without being committed to a foundationalist epistemology. My purpose is not to discuss the various problems that are related to this issue. The analogy with the acceptance of reflexive awareness only at the conventional level is clear enough. If we accept Santaraksita’s

understanding of reflexive awareness as a feature of conscious experience, that is only at the conventional level, this meshes very well with contemporary accounts of FPA which are independent from foundationalism.

But, moreover, there is something which 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 FPA to self-reports as the ones illustrated with the examples (2)-(5). Indeed if conscious experiences are conscious, by definition, in as much as they have this luminous quality, then it is no surprise that conscious experiences are readily available either to express self-reports or simply to take a reflective attitude towards them, in introspection. The accounts of FPA which focus exclusively on our linguistic uses of sentences of that kind, what we could call self-reports, may do a nice job to account for the epistemological status of such self-reports. However, it is unclear that they are helpful in clarifying the strong commonsense intuition according to which it is not only self-reports that enjoy such a status, but also simple non-verbal thinking about one's own conscious experiences. Much of one's conscious mental life, that is the relatively continuous succession of conscious episodes occurring when one is awake, goes on without being expressed linguistically. And our commonsense intuitions about FPA are not

restricted only to self-reports, that is to our linguistic expressions, but they apply also to the availability of such conscious experiences to non-verbal thinking. It seems highly plausible to hold that it is not only self-reports that enjoy first-person authority but also non-verbal thinking about one's own conscious experiences. The appeal of reflexive awareness is that it can readily account for that. Moreover, if what I have argued is correct, it can do so by incurring a commitment neither to foundationalism in epistemology nor to the acceptance of reflexive awareness at the ultimate level.

Let me recall the gist of my argument. First, if reflexive awareness understood as a conventionally accepted feature of conscious mental events was a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, or if it entailed the *cogito* or the weaker "impersonal" version of the *cogito* suggested by Lichtenberg then, from a Madhyamaka point of view, reflexive awareness could not be accepted even as a conventional feature of consciousness, because it would entail either that the ego exists ultimately or that consciousness exists ultimately. But, secondly, I have stressed that reflexive awareness, understood as a conventionally accepted feature of conscious mental events is not at all a version of the Cartesian *cogito*, and that it entails neither the *cogito* nor the weaker "impersonal" version of the *cogito*. And, hence, reflexive awareness is compatible with Prasangika-Madhyamaka. In developing this argument, I have underlined an interesting analogy between the conventional acceptance of reflexive awareness and the acceptance of first-person authority as a presupposition of our language games of ascriptions of mental states. A central aspect of this analogy is that just as first-person authority is acceptable as a presupposition of our colloquial language games without entailing a commitment to the Cartesian epistemological project, reflexive awareness is acceptable conventionally without entailing a commitment to reflexive awareness ultimately. Finally, I have suggested that reflexive awareness can account not only for FPA understood as restricted to self-reports, but also for the general intuition that one enjoys FPA over one's non-verbal thinking about one's conscious experiences.

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