

Jonardon Ganeri's Transcultural Philosophy of Attention

Evan Thompson

University of British Columbia

Correspondence: Evan Thompson, University of British Columbia.

Email: evan.thompson@ubc.ca

In *Attention, Not Self*, Jonardon Ganeri (2017) writes: “Philosophy of mind is indeed a transcultural undertaking: the search for a fundamental theory of mind must never limit itself to the intuitions and linguistic practices of any one community of thinkers but should be ready to learn from diverse cultures of investigation into the nature of mind and mind’s involvement in world” (p. 5).

This one-sentence manifesto for transcultural philosophy contains three important ideas. First, philosophy of mind is equated with a “fundamental theory of mind.” Such a theory delineates the basic structure of the mind and explains how the mind works. Second, the search for a fundamental theory of mind should be transcultural in its method. There are many cultural and intellectual traditions of investigating the mind, and contemporary philosophy of mind should learn from them. Third, a fundamental theory of mind should be transcultural in its content. Its constructs and models should be formed out of the interactions between diverse philosophical languages and cultures.

Nevertheless, in any given case, we need to ask, what is the theory’s underlying purpose and how does that purpose affect the theory’s contours and structure?

The purpose of Buddhist theories, especially Buddhaghosa’s *Abhidhamma* (Buddhaghosa, 1975/1991), is soteriological—how to purify the mind in order to realize *nirvāṇa* (*nibbāna*) and attain liberation from suffering. That purpose shapes the Pāli *Abhidhamma*; for example, every constituent mental event is classified as either wholesome (conducive to liberation), unwholesome (detrimental to liberation), or neutral. The *Abhidhamma* originates as an interpretive genre whose aim is to systematize the Buddha’s teachings as recorded in the *suttas* in as literal and unambiguous a way as possible. *Abhidhamma* authors, such as Buddhaghosa, write mainly as exegetes. Although we may choose to read Buddhaghosa as if he were a systematic and constructive philosopher, he was first and foremost a translator and commentator.

Ganeri’s approach is to map Pāli Buddhist theoretical constructs onto contemporary philosophical and cognitive scientific ones. Ganeri makes the strong claim that his mappings are inter-theoretic identities (p. 36, 58, 187). This claim worries me, for two reasons. First, even if we make allowance for the fact that his renderings of the Pāli terms and concepts are not meant to be accurate philological translations, but rather are designed to bring Buddhaghosa into the purview of cognitive science, we can still raise questions about their accuracy and how they are linked to cognitive science models.

Second, if the mappings were truly cases of inter-theoretic identity, then we should be able to translate back and forth between Pāli Buddhist theory of mind and cognitive science with little difficulty. But many of Ganeri's renderings would likely be unrecognizable to Buddhists if they were translated back into the Pāli Abhidhamma. This might not matter for Ganeri's own philosophical project. But it does suggest that the notion of inter-theoretic identity is inappropriate and should not be our guiding hermeneutical principle in transcultural philosophy of mind.

Ganeri's principal claim is that "what explains the nature of our consciously active involvement with the world, our freedom from passivity, is attention" (p. 1; see also p. 23). On the one hand, he treats a very wide range of mental phenomena, including intending, introspection, mindfulness, episodic memory, empathy, and one's dying thoughts at the end of life, as forms of attention. On the other hand, he argues that attention is "disunified," that it has no essence and is not a unitary construct or a single psychological kind (p. 25). He calls this viewpoint "Attentionalism," and attributes it to Buddhaghosa.

If Buddhaghosa is an attentionalist, there must be some overarching but nonetheless disunified notion of attention at work in his thought. As Ganeri notes, however, "there is no single word in Pāli or Sanskrit for English 'attention'" and "nothing in the Buddhist theory corresponds to the English term 'attention'" (p. 31, 67). Nevertheless, he argues that distinct Pāli Buddhist technical terms refer to various cognitive phenomena that all seem to have something do with what we call "attention," but without being "regarded as forming a single psychological kind" (p. 67). Ganeri's interpretive method is to translate these terms in a way that brings out how they are attentional, while also indicating that they do not form a single psychological kind. Thus, he offers the following translations:

| Pāli | Standard Translation | Ganeri |
|----------------------|---|---|
| <i>appanā</i> | absorption | attentional placing |
| <i>āvajjana</i> | adverting (consciousness) | subliminal orienting; late gate-keeping |
| <i>ekaggatā</i> | unification (of consciousness) (lit. one-pointedness) | attentional placing |
| <i>cetanā</i> | volition, intention | attentional effort |
| <i>manasikāra</i> | attention | attentional focusing |
| <i>samādhi</i> | concentration | attentional placing |
| <i>sampañicchana</i> | receiving (consciousness) | early attentional selection |
| <i>sati</i> | mindfulness | mindful attention |

A key distinction in this scheme is between "attentional placing" and "attentional focusing." Attentional placing is centering attention and eliminating distractors. Ganeri describes it as an "exclusion operation which controls the window of attention" (p. 122; see also p. 112-115). Attention is stabilized on a region, so that items not at that location are excluded. Attentional focusing is selecting and accessing the objects and properties at that region, such that they are identified and recognized.

Ganeri deploys the distinction between attentional placing and attentional focusing in creative and insightful ways for philosophy of mind and cognitive science. This is one of the many original contributions of his book.

Nevertheless, the way he projects the distinction back onto Buddhaghosa has costs. Notice that he uses "attentional placing" for three distinct terms—*appanā*, *ekaggatā*, and *samādhi*. Although these terms are interconnected, calling them all "attentional placing" elides their specifically normative aspects and their precise meanings in Buddhaghosa's Theravāda psychology of meditation.

Samādhi is concentration, especially meditative concentration. Buddhaghosa says he will confine his treatment of concentration to "profitable unification of mind" (*Visuddhimagga* III:2; p.

85). “Profitable” means wholesome or virtuous. “Unification of mind” is the term *ekaggatā*, which literally means “one-pointedness.” *Samādhi* and *ekaggatā* can be treated as synonyms. Buddhaghosa describes them as “the centering (*ādhāna*) of consciousness and consciousness-concomitants evenly (*samaṁ*) and rightly (*sammā*) on a single object; placing, is what is meant” (*Visuddhimagga* III:3, p. 85). He also says that “concentration has non-distraction as its characteristic” (*Visuddhimagga* III:4, p. 85–86). So far, so good. But Buddhaghosa goes on to distinguish between two kinds of concentration—“access” (*upacāra*) concentration and “absorption” (*appanā*) concentration (*Visuddhimagga* III:6, p. 86; IV:32, p. 125). These are meditative states. “Access concentration” occurs when the five “hindrances” of sensual desire, ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, agitation-and-worry, and uncertainty are overcome; the result is said to be a state of powerful and unwavering one-pointedness and non-distraction. Access concentration is a necessary preliminary to absorption concentration. In absorption concentration, the mind is not only unwavering and non-distracted; it is said to merge with its object so as to become one with it. This happens in the exalted meditative states of concentration called the *jhāna*-s (absorptions). In access concentration, the so-called “*jhāna*-factors” are weak, like a very young child who when lifted up and put on its feet, repeatedly falls to the ground, whereas in absorption concentration, the *jhāna*-factors are strong, like a healthy adult who can stand for a whole day (*Visuddhimagga* IV:32, p. 125). In addition, according to Buddhaghosa, some objects of meditation lead only to access concentration, whereas others lead to absorption. In short, these normative, meditative, and soteriological aspects of Buddhaghosa’s psychology are lost in rendering three distinct Pāli terms with the one English term “attentional placing.” Although *appanā*, *ekaggatā*, and *samādhi* all have something to do with attentional placing, “attentional placing” is not inter-theoretically identical with any of them.

Let me turn to some of Ganeri’s other inter-theoretic mappings. He derives the overall architecture of his attentionalist theory from two of Buddhaghosa’s taxonomies of consciousness (*citta*), the “consciousness-concomitant” (*citta-cetasika*) taxonomy, and the “consciousness process” (*citta-vīthi*) taxonomy. The first taxonomy consists of the phenomenon of consciousness (*citta*), understood as a momentary cognizing of an object, together with its “concomitants” (*cetasika*-s) or associated factors, some of which are invariably present in each moment of awareness and some of which are variable. The second taxonomy consists of the momentary mental events that occur in the series leading from a passive state of rest (*bhavaṅga*) to an active state of cognition, and back again.

Ganeri transforms these two taxonomies into an original framework for transcultural philosophy of mind. He uses the distinction between doxastic and subdoxastic states to interpret the relationship between the “consciousness-concomitant” (*citta-cetasika*) model, which provides an analysis of the structure of conscious intentional states, and the “consciousness process” (*citta-vīthi*) model, which provides an account of what makes a mental state intentional by delineating the causal processes that constitute the state’s occurrence in a dynamic series of mental events (p. 60–61). He proposes that the “consciousness-concomitant” (*citta-cetasika*) model is of consciously accessible cognitive processes (doxastic states), whereas the “consciousness process” (*citta-vīthi*) model is of cognitively insulated (subdoxastic) processes.

This intriguing proposal offers a new interpretive framework for the Abhidhamma taxonomies. But how accurate is it as an account of Buddhaghosa? Ganeri sometimes implies that being faithful to Buddhaghosa is a requirement of his transcultural theory. For example, he rules out the idea that the “consciousness process” (*citta-vīthi*) model provides a functionalist reduction of the “consciousness-concomitant” (*citta-cetasika*) model by saying that “[n]owhere does Buddhaghosa indicate that he thinks in such [functionalist reductionist] terms” (p. 59). Nevertheless, as far as I can see, nowhere does Buddhaghosa indicate that he thinks in terms of a distinction between two distinct kinds of doxastic and subdoxastic accounts of the mind.

Consider that both taxonomies are taxonomies of *citta*. Specifically, the elements of the “consciousness process” (*citta-vīthi*) taxonomy are classified as types of *citta*. The difference between the two taxonomies is that one of them gives a structural analysis of how any given moment of conscious awareness relates to its object, whereas the other one gives an analysis of how consciousness proceeds as a series of discrete moments.

Ganeri uses the traditional Buddhist image of conscious awareness as like a hand grasping an object. The mental concomitants are the fingers and the intentional directedness is the palm. Given this image, the “consciousness-concomitant” (*citta-cetasika*) model corresponds to the mind’s grasping an object, and the “consciousness-process” (*citta-vīthi*) model corresponds to the mind’s picking up and putting down sense objects by means of successive sets of concomitants or associated mental factors. Thus, both analyses operate at the same level, but one analysis is synchronic and the other is diachronic.

These interpretive points about Abhidhamma may not ultimately matter for Ganeri’s twofold framework as a stand-alone theory. His theory can be Buddhaghosa-inspired without having to be Buddhaghosa-faithful. But I cannot tell which way Ganeri wants us to read him—as striving to be Buddhaghosa-faithful or as just being Buddhaghosa-inspired. I cannot tell when he takes himself to be speaking in Buddhaghosa’s voice and when he takes himself to be speaking in his own voice. I also cannot tell how much he thinks it matters to transcultural philosophy of mind that we be as faithful as possible to our source materials or whether he thinks we can drop this requirement for the sake of creative reinterpretation.

A related issue is how to think about the Abhidhamma taxonomies in relation to issues in cognitive science about what is consciously accessible versus inaccessible, and whether the Abhidhamma contains anything like our (contentious) distinction between “access consciousness” and “phenomenal consciousness.”

Ganeri addresses this issue in terms of the Abhidhamma model of the five aggregates. He proposes that *vedanā*, which he renders as “felt evaluation” (but which is usually rendered as “feeling”), corresponds to phenomenal consciousness, whereas *saññā*, which he renders as “identificatory label” (but which is usually rendered as “recognition”), corresponds to access consciousness.

These renderings and mappings are problematic. *Vedanā* arguably does not involve evaluation or appraisal; it is simply a sensory state of feeling, which is understood to have as its intrinsic nature being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Evaluation or appraisal—the interpretation of a hedonically valenced feeling—would seem to belong rather to the aggregate of “mental formation” (*saṅkhāra*). Furthermore, although *vedanā* is phenomenally conscious, I doubt that it should be equated with phenomenal consciousness. Phenomenal consciousness arguably involves *viññāṇa* (usually translated as “consciousness” but also sometimes as “cognition”).

Ganeri argues, however, that we should not simply assume that *viññāṇa* “is a locus of phenomenal quality” (p. 49). Whether to render *viññāṇa* in any given context as “consciousness” or “cognition” is a tricky issue, especially if “consciousness” is taken to mean phenomenal consciousness (see Sharf 2018). He suggests *viññāṇa* is a “consuming system” for recognition (*saññā*), and that it is “the consuming system responsible for judgements about action and planning” (p. 101, p. 104). Nevertheless, as far as I can tell, Buddhaghosa generally treats such mental apprehension as what we would call “phenomenal” (subjectively experienced). In other words, *viññāṇa* apparently has a phenomenal character that is not just a function of feeling (*vedanā*).

It also seems problematic to equate *saññā* (recognition or “identificatory labeling”) with access consciousness. Buddhaghosa states that the function of *saññā* “is to make a sign as a condition for perceiving again ‘this is the same,’ as carpenters... do in the case of timber” (when they mark a piece of wood) (*Visuddhimagga* XIV:130, p. 464). Another example is “the perception that arises in fawns that see scarecrows as men.” So, *saññā* clearly does not require language. The basic idea is that of recognizing something on the basis of a distinguishing mark or characteristic. As Ganeri discusses, *saññā* “has to do with

the recognition of an object's categorical identity through its properties" (p. 98). In perceptual psychology terms, *saññā* is not mere sensory discrimination of particulars, but rather is categorical perception and recognition, the type-identifying of stimuli and recognition of them as instances of kinds. Access consciousness, however, is defined as the "global availability" of content for cognitive tasks. Categorical perception and recognition are necessary but not sufficient for such global availability. We may categorically perceive and recognize things to which we do not have global cognitive access, and access consciousness requires more cognitive capacities than just categorical perception and recognition. For these reasons, *saññā* and access consciousness do not seem to line up with each other.

I have now mentioned some cases where Ganeri's inter-theoretic mappings between Abhidhamma and philosophy of mind and cognitive science seem problematic. These mappings do not give us inter-theoretic identities. But I also think that we should not be looking for inter-theoretic identities anyway. We should not expect concepts that are crafted within a soteriological framework to line up in any one-to-one way with concepts crafted in a scientific framework that purports to be neutral and descriptive. Although cognitive science may have tacit normative commitments built into some of its concepts, and engaging with Buddhist philosophy may help to reveal those commitments, searching for inter-theoretic identities does not seem to be the right way to go about revealing them.

Here I find an analogy from Larry Barsalou helpful. He suggests (in conversation) that we should think of the interactions between Buddhist and cognitive-scientific traditions of investigating the mind as giving rise to creole languages. These languages arise as hybrids of simplified versions of their parent languages and they enable the traditions to communicate with each other. Eventually, they may develop into full-fledged new languages, and new investigations may proceed from them, inspired by new questions, hypotheses, and methods. Right now we may still be at the pidgin stage of interaction, but no philosopher has done more work to create new creole languages for philosophy than Ganeri. So, I hope he will welcome this analogy and favor it over the search for inter-theoretic identities.

Let me come back to Attentionalism (that attention is disunified and all conscious active involvement with the world is attentional). I would like to mention an alternative idea and relate it to Buddhaghosa.

The alternative idea is that attention is a way that intentional directedness is modified, or more precisely, a whole family of ways intentional directedness is modified, all of which involve emphasizing or giving priority to something in cognition, while making other things peripheral. Husserl (1983, §92, p. 222–226) and Gurwitsch (1964) analyze attention this way. The idea is central to Carolyn Dacey Jennings's (2015) and Sebastian Watzl's (2017) recent work on attention and consciousness. The idea seems compatible with Christopher Mole's (2010) thesis that attention is not a process but rather a mode in which multiple cognitive processes unfold in relation to each other, the mode he calls "cognitive unison." My point is that we can take intentional directedness as basic and regard attention as a modification of intentionality. We do not have to identify perception, episodic memory, and empathy with attention. Rather, we can say that attention comprises a cluster of ways that these mental processes can be modified in their intentional directedness. Whereas Ganeri has to face the problem of how the construct of attention can have explanatory centrality while not being a single psychological kind (Watzl 2018), we can say that attention has a high-level theoretical unity: it introduces salience and priority structures into cognition, and thereby structures experience. Or we could put the idea adverbially: to cognize attentively is for some crucial range of cognitive processes to operate in unison in the service of a task (Mole 2010). Such high-level, unified constructs of attention can encompass Ganeri's important analysis of attentional placing and attentional focusing, as well as the other attentional phenomena he discusses.

If we bring these ideas to bear on Buddhaghosa, we will not read him as an attentionalist. Instead, we will read him as analytically presenting and trying to systematize numerous Buddhist taxonomies of mental phenomena, where by "mental phenomena" are meant all the various kinds of *citta*. Theravāda Buddhism always defines *citta* as object-directed awareness or cognition. So, we will read

Buddhaghosa as concerned with all the ways the mind can be intentionally directed, including especially all the ways mental directedness can be structured through a Buddhist life of cultivation and purification. Many of these mental structurings are attentional ones. Some of them, however, namely, the exalted meditative states of concentration (the *jhāna*-s), may go beyond attention as we currently understand it. In any case, “attention” will not be the organizing concept for understanding Buddhaghosa; rather, it will be “intentional directedness” (*citta*) and its “purification.” As Sean Smith (2019) observes, if Buddhaghosa’s philosophical project in the *Visuddhimagga* is organized around a single concept, the best candidate is “purification” (*visuddhi*), not attention. Smith’s observation also serves to remind us of the inherent normative and soteriological framework of Buddhaghosa’s project.

My last comment is to note an interesting difference between *Attention, Not Self*, and Ganeri’s other books on the self. *Attention, Not Self* focuses on one South Asian philosophical tradition, Theravāda Buddhism in Pāli, and one philosopher, Buddhaghosa. Ganeri’s earlier books, *The Concealed Art of the Soul* (Ganeri 2007) and *The Self* (Ganeri 2012), weave together many South Asian philosophical traditions and thinkers. These books give us some of the richest accounts of the self in contemporary philosophy. Whereas these books draw from both Brahminical self-theories and Buddhist no-self theories, Ganeri now defends a version of the Buddhist no-self viewpoint in *Attention, Not Self*. This makes me wonder how he sees the relationship between this book and his earlier work. Is *Attention, Not Self* a supplement to or elaboration of Ganeri’s earlier view of the self, or has his view changed? Are his earlier views consistent with his current view? It would be interesting to hear his answers to these questions.

To conclude, I would like to say that Jonardon Ganeri is one of my philosophical heroes. His work is an exemplar of cosmopolitan philosophy. My job here, however, has been to be a critic. I hope my comments will be useful for advancing his inspiring vision of philosophy of mind as a transcultural undertaking without borders.¹

REFERENCES

- Buddhaghosa (1975/1991). *The path of purification* (Visuddhimagga) (B. Ñāṇamoli, Trans.). Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Publishing/Buddhist Publication Society.
- Ganeri, J. (2007). *The concealed art of the soul: Theories of self and practices of truth in Indian ethics and epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ganeri, J. (2012). *The self: Naturalism, consciousness, and the first-person stance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ganeri, J. (2017). *Attention, not self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gurwitsch, A. (1964). *The field of consciousness*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. First book* (F. Kersten, Trans.). The Hague/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Jennings, C. D. (2015). Attention and perceptual organization. *Philosophical Studies*, 172, 1265–1278.
- Mole, C. (2010). *Attention is cognitive unison: An essay in philosophical psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharf, R. (2018). Knowing blue: Early Buddhist accounts of non-conceptual sense perception. *Philosophy East and West*, 68, 826–870.
- Smith, S. M. (2019). Paying Attention to Buddhaghosa and Pāli Buddhist Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*.
- Watzl, S. (2017). *Structuring mind: The nature of attention and how it shapes consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watzl, S. (2018). Review of Jonardon Ganeri, attention, not self. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Retrieved from <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/attention-not-self/>

¹For helpful discussion, I am grateful to Jonardon Ganeri, Chris Mole, Susanna Siegel, Sean Smith, and Sebastian Watzl.