

“YOU AND I DO NOT ‘SHARE’ THE SAME CONSCIOUSNESS”: APPLYING A NOMINALIST BUDDHIST SEMANTIC PERSPECTIVE TO THE GENERAL EXPRESSION “CONSCIOUSNESS”

“VOCÊ E EU NÃO ‘COMPARTILHAMOS’ A MESMA CONSCIÊNCIA”: APLICANDO A SEMÂNTICA BUDISTA NOMINALISTA À EXPRESSÃO GERAL “CONSCIÊNCIA”

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Abstract: It is recognized that Buddhadharma schools are markedly ontologically, epistemologically, and semantically nominalist. Regardless of that, when it comes to the *use* of the term “consciousness”, there is still a tendency in some Western circles to understand Buddhism in a solipsist or monist way. To this purpose, I argue that the general expression “consciousness” from Buddhadharma texts must be understood according to traditional nominalist Buddhist semantics and theory of entities. In the end, I briefly mention some arguments and viewpoints – *defending* the plurality/diversity of consciousness – of some Buddhist Dzogchen scholars and masters.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy. Exclusion/disregard (*apoha*) semantics. General expressions. Nominalist Buddhist semantics. Individual’s own consciousness.

Resumo: É reconhecido que as escolas do Buddhadharma são marcadamente ontologicamente, epistemologicamente e semanticamente nominalistas. Independente disso, quando se trata do *uso* do termo “consciência”, há ainda uma tendência em alguns círculos Ocidentais em compreender o Budismo de um modo solipsista ou monista. Para este propósito, argumento que a expressão geral “consciência” dos textos do Budadharma deve ser entendida de acordo com a semântica nominalista Budista tradicional e a teoria das entidades. No final, menciono brevemente alguns pontos de vistas e argumentos – *defendendo* a pluralidade/diversidade da consciência – de alguns mestres e scholars Dzogchen Budistas.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia Budista. Semântica por (*apoha*) desconsideração/exclusão. Expressões gerais. Semântica Budista nominalista. A própria consciência do indivíduo.

1. Opening the cyclorama

It is unreasonable to understand Buddhadharma in any solipsist way because of Buddhist nominalism and conventional pluralist Buddhadharma view on entities. On the one hand, since “general expressions” are misleading, “mystifying”, and polysemic, there is a “propensity” in certain “Western circles” to understand Buddhism in a solipsist or

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“monist” way. On the other hand, when one comprehends how Buddhadharmā understands the meaning and use of “general expressions”, one perceives that it is not only implausible but false to claim that Buddhism is solipsist (or even “monist”!).

In this article, I show that there is a kind of connection between “solipsist reasoning” and “universal realist reasoning”. I argue that if one denies any kind of non-nominalist reasoning applied to the general expression “consciousness”, it becomes meaningless to justify a comprehension of consciousness as the/an “universal” or the/an “overarching” type of entity. As it is clearly recognized, according to perception, common sense, and various current scientific theories, it is basically meaningless, strongly unreasonable, and impractical to consider solipsism a *minimally* plausible position. I thereby consider that solipsism is unpalatable.

In order to achieve my goals, in section 2, I present three ways to understand “universal” expressions. I emphasize that none of them are Buddhist. In section 3, I show how there is a kind of cousin connection between the universal realist reasoning and the solipsist reasoning, and I present a very peculiar notion of “omnibus solipsism” that may arise from the universal realist reasoning. I end that section by discussing some reasons that uphold that solipsism is plausibly false. In sections 4 and 5, I present the Buddhist perspective on generality, semantic expressiveness, and Buddhist nominalism. The nominalist position presented in these sections is how a Buddhist understands general expressions, like “consciousness”. Finally, in section 6, I *apply* a nominalist Buddhist understanding to the general expression “consciousness”, and I briefly conclude it by presenting the verdict of Buddhist Dzogchen scholars and masters on the topic discussed. Thus, I show that from these masters’ standpoint, consciousness is always individual consciousness. In other words, the expression “consciousness” never refers to a transpersonal and/or transindividual being, that is, it is never *literally* understood as an/the “overall-encompassing reality”.

One of my goals in this piece is to discuss how a Buddhist conceives the “meaning” of “universal/general expressions” – what I mean by that does not just refer to expressions such as “all” and “some”, i.e., quantifiers, but to general expressions, like “cat”, “sun”, “consciousness”, “void”, “emptiness”, etc. However, it is worthwhile to

provide a contrast between the Buddhist and some non-Buddhist perspectives upon this matter. This is the topic addressed in the following section.

2. Three possible alternatives for understanding the meaning of “universal/general expressions”

Dravid (2001) discusses the problem of universals in Indian philosophy from the Nyāya-vaiśeṣika, the Mīmāṃsā, the Advaita, and the Buddhist schools. For Chakrabarti and Siderits (2011, p. 4), the problem of universals “is fundamentally a problem of explaining sameness in difference”. This means that, on the one hand, there is the belief that “the assumption about the existence of universals is *necessary* in order to explain the relation of resemblance between two things”; on the other hand, there is a contrasting belief that “it is not necessary to assume the former assumption (which would then be false) in order to explain the relation of resemblance between two things”.

There are several views on the problem of universals in Indian philosophy. According to Dravid (2001, p. 4, emphasis in original), the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school claims that “universals are eternal entities different from particulars in which they inhere” and the Mīmāṃsā school denies “an absolute difference between the universal and the particular. It replaces the relation of inherence by *identity-in-difference*”. In short, the way in which Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā deal with the problem of universals is by relying on the notion of “identity” (i.e., sameness) – they believe the existence of the very same entity present in two different entities: for example, a cow-1 and a cow-2 are both cows *because* both of them share the same entity of cowness².

In addition to these two realistic positions, Dravid (2001, p. 6, emphasis in original) also states that, for the Advaitin,

Being alone is the true universal; all other universals are only appearances of it. He [the Advaitin] rejects the Nyaya conception of universals as class-essences (jati) and advocates in its place the conception of

² Although I strongly disagree with this stance, I fall back on it in order to exemplify their argument, since it is an example commonly used. I wonder whether in this case a steppe bison (an extinct species) would have the same “amount” of cowness as a cow. Perhaps a likely opponent might complain about the use of the expression “same amount”; however, *by all means I wonder whether in this case a steppe bison would have as much participation as a cow in the entity of cowness.*

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universals as *categories (nama-rupa) of Being*. These categories [...] are empirically real, but ultimately they are not-different from the *universal Being*. The Advaitist thus distinguishes between two levels of reality: the ultimate and the empirical. The ultimately real is the universal Being (*Brahman*), the substratum of all beings, and the empirically real are universals (nama-rupa) and particulars. Even within the empirical level the universal possesses a higher grade of reality than the particular, as it functions as a principle of unity. The universal, in the Advaitic view, is the limited empirical substratum of its particular appearances, just as Being is the unlimited ultimate substratum of all appearances. [...] [U]niversals are not predicates of particulars, as the realist thinks, but subjects of which particulars are predicates. It is for this reason that the universal is said to be more real than the particular. But this gradation is true only within the empirical order; ultimately speaking all universals, as also all particulars, are merely appearances of the *universal Being*.

Although the Advaita position is different from the other two realist perspectives, there is, nevertheless, a certain – and very *peculiar* – sense of “universality” present among the “pseudo-existent particulars” that are referred by some as the so-called “general expressions”. As aforementioned, one example would be using the general expression “cow” to address a cow. From the viewpoints of these realists,

[t]he relation between words and objects was said to be “entrenched” and permanent. If perishable particular horses, cows, humans, and plants were the meanings of words, how could they be the eternally connected meanings of these beginningless Vedic words? The word *gauḥ* (cow) is therefore best taken to be eternally connected to the timeless bovine essence. (SIDERITS and CHAKRABARTI, 2011, p. 3, emphasis in original).

For these schools, as one can see, it is necessary to subscribe to some kind of “semantic realism” at some “ontological level” – probably at a type of “level” that is idealized and abstract. For them, it is only possible to explain the meaning of language if, and only if, one assumes that words have some kind of essential relation to things in some way. Conversely, Buddhists reject that expressions eternally refer to some entity and refuse notions such as “inherence” and “identity-in-difference” as well. Chakrabarti and Siderits (2011, p. 8, emphasis added) explain that “the Buddhist logician finds both inherence and identity-in-difference *equally* unpalatable.”

Since my goal in this article is brief and modest, I do not discuss details of non-Buddhist views on “how to conceive the meaning of universal/general expressions”.

Nonetheless, in the next section, I justify the reason why a solipsist position on consciousness is *reasonably* to be false. This discussion is held here to underline the contrast with the nominalist Buddhist view I intend to present on “how to conceive the meaning of universal/general expressions”. Furthermore, I argue that this is necessary because there can be some kind of cousin connection between a “realist *reasoning* about universals” and a “*reasoning* about the supposedly universal existence of an absolute all-pervasive *I*-consciousness”.

3. The possible relation between a “solipsist reasoning” and a “realist reasoning about universals”

I start this section by discussing the following solipsist thesis: “In fact, there is *the* absolute all-pervasive *I*-consciousness present in *different* persons”. This sentence conveys a notion of what I call “omnibus solipsism”. Since “solipsism” is a very polysemic term, I use the word “omnibus” because it can encompass “all”, i.e., because of its tone of universality. In this case, one has *at least* two senses of “solipsism”³: (1) the assumption of an existence of only *one* “*I*-consciousness”, as opposed to *others’ consciousness*, which would then not exist; and (2) the assumption of *the* only “*I*-consciousness” that is present *in* and *for all* different people, in some sense. In this regard, the “mental life of others” is not denied, even though the “diversity of consciousness” is. Therefore, each person’s mental life is – perhaps even causally – explained on the grounds of *the* only *I*-consciousness.

Although one does *not need* to *establish* the “truth” of that “omnibus” solipsist position with the same kind of a “realist’s reasoning about universals”, my proposition is that there can be some kind of “cousin connection” between that type of “reasoning about universals” (such as, if “there is likeness between cows”, then “there is the entity of

³ In a way, such solipsist position is “monist” in the sense that there is no plurality/diversity of consciousness. Plausibly, the word “monist” is ambiguous as well, since one could argue that “stating that there is no diversity or plurality of consciousness does not mean to affirm that everything is consciousness”. I am aware that there are two relatively different cases here, namely: (1) the case that just supposedly denies the plurality/diversity of consciousness, and (2) the case that claims that “in some sense, everything is *the* consciousness”. In a way, although the second may reasonably imply the first, the first does not necessarily imply the second. Even so, the former has at least a kind of “partially ‘monist’ understanding”, because although it does not state that “everything is consciousness”, it still claims that “the diversity of consciousness is denied”. In other words, I wonder if it is plausible to assume a perspective that *simultaneously* subscribes a monist position that targets consciousness and denies solipsism.

consciousness that *explains cows as cows*”) and the reasoning that seeks to establish (perhaps in another way) that “*the absolute all-pervasive I-consciousness truly exists in different people*”. In this respect, from an “omnibus” solipsist standpoint, regardless of the existence of people, there would be *the absolute all-pervasive I-consciousness*. The “omnibus” solipsist position⁴ is introduced here because I consider it an “extreme” insofar as it contrasts with a Buddhadharmic stance⁵ on the nominalist reading of “general expressions” of “consciousness” and on the tenet of the *diversity* of consciousness.

What kind of reasons could lead a solipsist to believe what he believes? Possibly, for our likely opponent, it seems that “it is *impossible* for *another* consciousness to exist”, because it seems to be that the “first person”, *I-consciousness*, is really some type of “absolute” *in a strong sense*, inasmuch as assuming “*another* consciousness” would supposedly imply some kind of “objectification” of the consciousness. Perhaps, according to our likely opponent, if the existence of another consciousness is justified by means of something other than “self-consciousness”, then that would mean knowing the consciousness of another as a “third’s consciousness”, therefore, in an objectifiable way. Our opponent would probably refuse this alternative. From the “omnibus” solipsist point of view, all consciousness actually experienced can only be, in a sense, the *same* consciousness experiencing itself.

The “omnibus” solipsist’s consciousness is whether *contingently* each person’s consciousness or (perhaps, not contingently) *nobody’s* consciousness. Then, our opponent would not be denying that “other people also have sensations, feelings, their own subjectivity *as* persons, etc.” What our likely opponent would *seem* to be trying to affirm is: the *only* way to account for and vouch for “intersubjectivity” would be to *postulate* a “*unique* transcendental consciousness”, which could explain that each person has a mental

⁴ If the position I describe here bears any resemblance to non-Buddhist Indian schools or even Western positions, it is merely fortuitous. I do not intend in this article to criticize any specific Indian or Western position. My objective is to discuss and contrast a “specific idea” and show that that position would be totally incompatible with Buddhist nominalism of consciousness.

⁵ The perspective discussed here would also work for the extreme of “being”, accused by several Buddhist scholars of being a false position merely based on a cognitive and linguistic abstraction (SĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937; (SIDERITS, TILLEMANS, and CHAKRABARTI, 2011). This extreme of “being” can take on several forms. All of these forms are false at any level of the theories of truth from the Abhidharma, Yogachara or Madhyamaka standpoints. For example, some of these positions assume that all these things are mere instances, modes or appearances of that “being”. These positions can gain different levels of what I like to call “conceptual *imagination*”, by assigning *ad hoc* several levels between the instances/modes/appearances and the being as such.

and subjective life. That “*unique* transcendental consciousness” is the “omnibus” solipsist’s consciousness.

The solipsist thesis cannot be the “beginning” of an *argument* since it needs other “justifying statements”. Then, in a sense, it must be some type of “conclusion”. From the viewpoint of Buddhist epistemology (BHATT; MEHROTRA, 2000), if one comes to that “hasty” conclusion, then one arrives at that particular “understanding” by means of some kind of “valid means of cognition” (*pramāṇa*). Of course, if this conclusion is reached in a reasonable non-dogmatic way, then that statement can be accepted as (minimally) logical and epistemologically justified⁶.

From the Buddhadharma standpoint, if it is a position with maximization of epistemic virtues, then one would arrive at this conclusion either through “direct perception” (based on senses) or through “inferences” of some kind. If one claims that it was through perception, then we have good reason to believe that this was not the case. For what can be objected is that it makes no sense to speak of a perceptual experience of the statement: “In fact, there is *the* absolute all-pervasive *I*-consciousness present in *different* persons”. What is most likely to have happened is that one has had some experience of some kind and has *interpreted* it *as* if it *were* the case. Perhaps one could claim something like, “this is the *best* theoretical interpretation according to my conceptual scheme”. However, it is unreasonable to assume that there are enough arguments to justify that *that* chosen conceptual scheme is the best *among* others that could also explain such experience by relying on *opposite* interpretations to the “omnibus solipsist thesis”.

One could also claim that arriving at such solipsist conclusion is actually true based on some kind of inference, perhaps inductive, deductive, or abductive. From a logical vantage point, I do not see how it is possible to offer a deduction or induction that arrives – clearly and *precisely* – logically and necessarily to the “omnibus” solipsist conclusion. However, perhaps one could offer some type of “abductive reasoning” based on the idea of “a better explanation for the diversity of persons’ mental life”. As one knows, in addition to other things, abductive reasoning tries to reach conclusions from the notion of “best

⁶ Conversely, one could assert that “it is possible that this position is true even if one does not offer good epistemic reasons for such a position”. The problem with this claim is that our likely opponent could be unaware of the reasons against that position as well. That is, in addition to the *absence* of reasonable justifications, there are better justifications contrary to this position.

explanation”⁷ (DOUVEN, 2015). That is, in general, abductive reasoning is of the IBE type (Inference to the Best Explanation) (DOUVEN, 2015). If one offers some kind of abductive reasoning for this kind of philosophical speculation *without evincing that it is the best explanation*, then why should one believe that kind of position? In the best of cases, our likely opponent could be treating that situation with the premise that “this thesis is the best explanation for the diversity of persons’ mental life”.

I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that if one makes such an “abductive move”, then he would have to *show* some argumentative *steps* in a *precise* manner. It seems reasonable to affirm that in this particular case, *explaining how things would be like* if the proposition “in fact, there is *the* absolute all-pervasive *I*-consciousness present in *different* persons” were true *is not the same as providing an abductive argument for that same proposition*. In other words, justifying how this “omnibus” solipsist consciousness “manifests” in various ways is not equivalent to *showing, arguing that it is true*. If that were actually the case of abductive reasoning, then it should *demonstrate* that the “omnibus” solipsist thesis is the best explanation for the *recognized* diversity of persons’ mental life.

It is worth noting that until now all that our likely opponent could have done would be to conceptually *imagine* things and schemes in his own mind, and perhaps our hypothetical opponent has confused that conceptual imaginative exercise with abductive reasoning. However, *up to this point*, our opponent *would have not established a palatable argument in any way*.

It is plausible to affirm that the reasons that one can usually give to support the “omnibus” solipsist thesis are questionable. For example, it is not true that “accepting a plurality of consciousness” is *sufficient* to accept that “each consciousness is an absolutely closed box in itself”. Besides that, accepting intersubjectivity does not necessarily imply that each person “shares”⁸ the absolutely same consciousness with others. That is, it is not true that recognizing that “others have qualitative experiences *like* mine” is only possible if,

⁷ Even if one claims that abductive reasoning does not really need to be based on “IBE reasoning”, in this context, one should still *show* that his position is the best explanation for the occurring diversity.

⁸ Our solipsist opponent might state that it is not that people share the same consciousness, as if each person were the “owner” of that same consciousness. He might suggest that we should understand the situation in reverse: “It is the consciousness that owns each person’s mental life”. In light of that, I point out that such assertion does not affect my stance at all.

and only if, there is the/an absolute single consciousness. In this sense, for our opponent, this solipsist consciousness would then be, in some way, an “objective” and “universal” “level”.

Part of the opponent’s reason that supports the idea that there is only one consciousness could be the logical possibility that “people who express their mental life through their behavior may express it without actually having a mental life of any kind”. In this sense, the solipsist would reason that “it is necessary to be just a single consciousness instilled in each person so that we can justify our belief in the subjectivity of other people”. However, I claim that this reasoning is not sufficient to justify that behaviors *in general* are not really expressive. The point is that behaviors in general are expressive because *one’s own consciousness is contingently and relatively private – it is not inherent and absolutely private*. Although there may be some kind of asymmetry between “I-consciousness” and “s/he-consciousness”, it is not an “absolute asymmetry” that can only be accounted for and vouched for if there is only one “I-consciousness” expressing itself somehow as many “s/he-consciousness”.

Perhaps our “omnibus” solipsist opponent believes that by “breaking” the barrier of the illusion of diversities he could find the “absolute cohesive consciousness”. Then, he could state: “The only way not to fall into the ‘problem’ of ‘atomic consciousness’, ‘closed and isolated in itself’, is to accept that, in some way, at some level, some type of ‘x’, *permeates* all different people”. The word “permeates” here is misleading. There is a kind of “use” of a spatial metaphor and/or analogy in a context that is not exactly spatial.

The “omnibus” solipsist might argue that this would be a misconstruction of him, since in some way “all people have the same consciousness” or that “all people are possessed by the same consciousness”. In one way or another, *even in a non-egoic way*, this constitutes a kind of solipsism which tries to avoid what is reasonable, grounded on a mere unreasonable metaphysical *temptation*.

Besides that, it is simply very odd that solipsists can cast some kind of “skeptical doubt” about the subjective and private lives of people as some type of justification-ladder. This “justification” is given in order to be able to state that the only way to explain or justify the occurrence of a mental life of other people would be to accept the “omnibus” solipsist consciousness, which would be the “nature” of each person’s mental life.

The solipsist could claim that: “Even if you accept the mental life of another, if you do not accept my solution, then you only have the option of possessing ‘isolated atomic minds’ *unable* to know if the mental life of other people is to a minimal degree similar to yours”. My likely opponent might state that I would then be the “solipsist” since my notion of consciousness leads to “absolute isolation”. I completely deny this notion of “*absolute* isolation”. In this respect, I reinforce that one’s consciousness is not absolutely and inherently private, since we have more reason to believe that behaviors are legitimately *expressive*. Our opponent may not be convinced, because for him, the only way to justify another’s mental life is to stand for a “solipsist consciousness *for all*” or a “solipsist consciousness for each one”. One may notice that perhaps several types of “idealism” fall on the type of conceptualization that I try to point out here.

According to Buddhadharmā, that kind of speculation is *merely* a confusion based on a person’s *capability of abstraction* of one’s own consciousness. The matter at hand is much more natural and concrete, as well as grounded on a perception of senses of one’s own consciousness. Buddhists do not and cannot agree with any type of solipsist “line of reasoning”, especially since there is a nominalism and a type of pluralist “ontology” that Buddhists accept. After all, it does not make sense to speak of a “*real* unity” between “two different things” (JONES, 2011; LONGCHEN; LINGPA, 2010). In the words of Siderits (1991, p. 91), the universe “consists of an infinite domain of particulars, each particular being what it is by virtue of its difference from any other particular”.

In the next section, I briefly discuss the nominalist Buddhist meaning theory about universal/general linguistic expressions.

4. Generality, nominalism, and the Buddhist point of view

I must stress that my objective is not to *refute* solipsism. Rather, my intention is to show it is an implausible thesis inasmuch as it is a mere analysis of one’s own conceptions, which is not sufficient to prove or even reasonably justify its propositions. In order to do that, I present a Buddhist stance, which is *necessarily* not solipsist, as it recognizes the plurality of consciousness. I add the caveat that when a Buddhist addresses “universal

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expressions of consciousness”, s/he does not mean “*the* consciousness”, but consciousness *in general*, in the nominalist sense.

Buddhist philosophy is composed of many kinds of “pluralist realists” and “pluralist non-realists”. Siderits (1991, p. 87, emphasis added) states that

[t]he Buddhist philosophical tradition is rich, complex, and varied, ranging from the empiricist reductionism of early Buddhism (the doctrines of the Buddha and his immediate disciples) and Abhidharma (the scholastic elaborations and extensions of early Buddhism), through the *subjective idealism of Yogachara* and the thoroughgoing *anti-realism of Madhyamaka*, to the applied *anti-realisms of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*.

All of these schools are intended to provide a reasonable explanation of the path and realization of the Buddhist goal. That is, any conceptual creation that these schools have come to develop must be taken as “means” to one “end”. As Siderits (1991, p. 87) explains, “[a]ll of these schools and tendencies are united by their commitment to a set of principles articulated by the Buddha: [...] the eradication of human suffering (the attainment of liberation from suffering)”.

Besides, it is only possible to walk the “Buddhist path” and accomplish the “Buddhist realization” with the “recognition of the truths that persons are devoid of a self or essence, and that all existing things are impermanent” (SIDERITS, 1991, p. 87). Although Buddhist schools assert that each person (i.e., human and nonhuman sentient beings) is empty of “intrinsic being”, there is a difference between those schools that claim that “only people and ordinary objects are empty, but not the (mental and material) atoms which compose them” (as Abhidharmikas do), and those that assert “even the atoms are completely insubstantial, therefore empty of any intrinsic being” (as Madhyamikas do) (LONGCHEN; LINGPA, 2010).

This set of “bricks of the world”, regarding universal/general expressions, which is conceived in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist texts, is non-realist from the very beginning. Buddhists understand “universals” as a cognitive and linguistic abstraction. From the Buddhist view of “bricks of the world”, there is no “ontology” of an “eternal Being”, with “non-eternal

instances”. Also, there is no “ontology” of “*absolute* universal entities”, with numerous “instances”⁹. Dharmakīrti reacts to the realist’s situation as follows:

It [i.e., the universal present in one instance] does not go [to another], it was not there [before the instances], nor is it there after [them], nor does it have parts. [...] [And even when in other places.] it does not leave the previous locus. *Oh my! It’s just one disaster after another.* (TILLEMANS, 2021, online).

As the reader can see, the conventional “ontology” presupposed in Buddhist texts, even among realist Buddhists, does not offer space for a type of “inherently substantial ontological distinction” between “properties” and “objects”, “universal” and “particulars”. The distinction between “predicates/characteristics” and “objects/characterized” occurs only at the conceptual-cognitive and semantic level of one’s own mind. This particular point was sufficiently elucidated by the systematizers of Buddhist logic, epistemology, and semantics, namely, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti¹⁰. I follow some general notions of Buddhist semantics proposed by them in order to discuss the topic of general expressions of “consciousness”. From that, I address the central topic of this article: How to apply nominalist Buddhist semantics to universal/general expressions of consciousness.

When one looks at the Abhidharma (JAMPAIYANG; COGHLAN, 2019; RINPOCHE, 2004) through these cognitive-semantic nominalist perspectives, one realizes that everything in the Buddhist Abhidharma can only be perceived as “a set of particulars”. Furthermore, one may also realize that all the generality that can be seen there cannot be

⁹ There is no Buddhist “ontology” of “multiple self-identical universals” present in different individuals. Once “being” is denied, then one might be tempted to understand that there is an ontology of “non-being” in Buddhist texts. That would also be completely unfounded. One can easily compare the “bricks of the world” ontology of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya with the Buddhist Abhidharma. A proper analysis of the three may show that, from the very beginning, Buddhists do not have an ontology of “being” or “non-being”. Whoever accepts these expressions of “being” or “non-being” as referring to any-entity or super-entity consequently accepts a non-nominalist conception, in Buddhist terms. It is also not possible to conclude that Madhyamikas, in criticizing Abhidharmikas, would then accept another ontology of “being” or “non-being”. This is not the case at all. The Madhyamaka point of conflict with Abhidharmikas relates to the conventional “bricks of the world”. While for Abhidharmikas the world is made up of “substantial individual atoms with inherent existence”, for Madhyamikas, the world is “made up” of “illusory and completely insubstantial individuals”, that is, particulars are just dream-like appearances, and they are not supported by analysis, i.e., *they are not established in any way at all* (JONES, 2011; LONGCHEN; LINGPA, 2010). “Not being established at all” does not mean that there is a real “being” behind it. This also does not mean that the “being” of appearances is a “great homogeneous illusion” or an “illusory homogeneous super-entity”.

¹⁰ I do not explore details of the work of these scholars in this article.

subscribed by means of some kind of “transcendental step” of the cognitive structure of sentient beings towards a (unitary or not unitary) set of existential and absolutely established universal (entity or) entities.

The reader can verify in the epistemology and theory of language of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism a truly plausible development of the integration of “bricks of the world” (Abhidharma) with the Buddhist epistemology and Madhyamaka school (LONGCHEN; LINGPA, 2010; RINPOCHE, 2004). This is possible to verify in the work of scholars like Śāntarakṣita, Sakya Pandita, Gorampa, Jigme Lingpa, Mipham Rinpoche, etc. Following Buddhist nominalist reflection, two types of cognition are recognized as legitimate: those cognitions based on the five senses (sight, smell, taste, etc.) in addition to the mind-sense and conceptual cognition developed through several types of reasoning. However, the reader needs to understand that the notion of “conceptual cognition” here must be understood in the sense that an inference would only make sense *within* a given semantic, cognitive, and epistemic context. That is, there is no sense in talking about “*definitive* concepts” in *abstract*. These two types of cognition can be subdivided into sub-classes, should it be pragmatically necessary. From that, it is possible to speak of several general types of knowledge.

5. Nominalism and “universal” expressiveness as semantic-cognitive generality from a Buddhist point of view

Buddhist semanticists have developed a type of semantic and epistemological “theory” to explain how Buddhists *use* “universal/general expressions”. One of the reasons for that type of development was the criticisms of universal realists in relation to the Buddhist non-realism of universals. According to some realists, Buddhism would be unable to explain the meaning of “universality” or “generality”. Buddhists have not seen a point in systematizing this theory as “proof” against realists. Our interest here is not to criticize realists, but to show that general Buddhist expressions of consciousness *must be necessarily explained through Buddhist semantics*. In order for one to understand general expressions from the Buddhist semantics, it is necessary for one to minimally understand Buddhist nominalism, which would only be possible with an understanding of how Buddhists understand language and conceptual cognition.

From a Buddhist standpoint, there is no such thing as a universal and abstract language. Language is always constructed by its speakers. This is justified not only on the grounds of the assumptions that accompany Buddhist reflection, but also by virtue of its epistemology and nominalist meaning theory. The Buddhist understanding of language and its pragmatically “constituent” generality is based on the exclusion/disregard (*apoha*) theory. This theory both relates to language and concept-formation, and it was minutely systematized by Dharmakīrti and Dignāga. In general, the entire Tibetan Buddhist tradition has followed Dharmakīrti’s nominalist reflections (DREYFUS, 1997; HAYES, 1988; TILLEMANS, 2014) through Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṅgraha* (1937). This theory has been studied in philosophy (SIDERITS; TILLEMANS and CHAKRABARTI, 2011), semantics (GILLON, 2011), and cognitive sciences (CHATTERJEE, 2011). Chatterjee (2011, p. 247), for example, draws attention to the fact that “contemporary cognitive sciences and the Buddhist theory of *apoha* can be mutually supportive”.

According to the *apoha* theory perspective (hereinafter, exclusion/disregard theory), a “universal/general expression” can only be explained cognitively and pragmatically. In other words, a “universal/general expression” does not exist independently of one’s mind. For example, when we use expressions, like “cat”, we imply something like, “One should disregard anything that is not relevant to what we would *call* a cat”. An *apoha* theorist would explain that based on a type of “double-negation”, such as “not → not → cat”. *But we have to be careful here.* If the reader understands the “double negation” in a strong ontological and literal sense, as in some kind of relationship of negation between things that would exist on its own side and independently of individuals, then the reader *probably misunderstood* something. It is necessary to see this idea in a pragmatical way. That is evidenced very clearly, for example, in Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṅgraha* (1937). The double negation must be understood as some type of *instruction* on how to account for generality, something such as the command: “Disregard that which is not fitting to what we *conventionally* name as ‘cats!’”. The whole point has something to do with an act of disregard/exclusion: “Do exclude that which is not the cat”. See the picture below:

Image 1 – A dog and a cat



Source: Personal archive¹¹.

In order to exemplify my argument, I present two statements here: “Do not look at the not-cat” and “look at the dog”. Although both propositions speak of the same state of affairs, they have different senses or meanings. In the first statement, the “exclusion” is more explicit than in the second one, albeit in both cases the act of disregard is present. The idea I suggest here is that the use of a “double negation” brings out some “information” about how to deal with expressions. According to Gold (2014, p. 367, emphasis in original), Sakya Pandita recognizes that

the meaning of a word is a generality or a concept, he says, which is mistaken for a bare particular. [...] [W]hen we analyze words, we need to make this distinction between the individuals and the generalities; but when we *use* language, we succeed in reaching our object because we *mistake* the generalities for individuals. [...] For Sa-pan, it is perfectly accurate to say that we mistakenly superimpose concepts upon individual entities, but what makes the superimposition a *mistake* is that there is no *real similarity to justify it*.

In this sense, the general expression “refers” only to something particular or to a collection of particular things. For example, when one claims, “In general, cats are furry” or “That cat has a peculiar color”, that is, when we talk about cats with people, we *disregard*

¹¹ These pictures were taken by me.

what is not relevant to the criteria we *conventionally* establish for the term. *That does not mean that there is the entity “catness” that determines our linguistic criteria.*

The “negation of the negation” here does not “mirror” a reality ontologically. In fact, it just plays a role of “instruction”, a *tip*. The language is not a portrait of reality. The Buddhist idea is that “generality” has something to do with a set of cognitive and linguistic *acts of disregard* of what is not relevant to specific *contexts*. This kind of nominalist explication is extensively utilized by Śāntarakṣita (1937), especially in chapters 13, 16, and 19, when he refutes the realist notion of universals and discusses the Buddhist *refusal of other means of knowledge that are not perception and inference.*

If the reader tries to understand the use of “double negation” here as some kind of “essential *definition* of generality”, then s/he has probably already missed the “point”. It is not an essential *definition* of “generality” (ŚĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937). It is a way to deal with linguistic, inferential, and cognitive generalities. Hayes (1988) has discussed several ways of arguing without presupposing any realist notion of “universals”, that is, several ways of inferring and reasoning in a strongly nominalist and Buddhist way.

As the reader can notice, for Buddhists, “expressions” do not refer to entities in a metaphysical way (ŚĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937). The relationship between “linguistic terms” and “concepts” (i.e., mental fabrications) and “entities” is always contingent, relative, and conventional (ŚĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937). For this reason, it is unreasonable to talk about an “idealized language”, in any sense. Language is what we do, it is what we engage with, build and develop concretely, as a community of speakers, and *nothing more than that*. Therefore, from a Buddhist point of view, language is not explained through any notion of “reference” previously given, independent of our criteria, as a community of speakers, in any way (ŚĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937). Siderits (1991, p. 91, emphasis in original) stresses, for example, that “Dharmakīrti’s strategy will be to attack the assumption that meaning is *exhausted* by reference”.

This is related to some important questions. Part of the reason that supports the discussion on “universal entities” is *directly or indirectly* inspired by the “predicative structure” of our language. Since Buddhists do not explain the notion of “meaning” by an exhaustion of its reference, any notion of *mirroring* the relationship between “language” and “reality” *is weakened*. In this sense, language works by means of a series of

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conventions, uses and contextual functions (ŚĀNTARAKṢITA, 1937). This suggests that the distinction between property and object is not backed by reality in any mirroring sense. In fact, there is a certain asynchrony between the structure of our language and the structures of reality.

If one does not genuinely question the mirroring relationship between language and reality, they will probably be led to formulate or believe, for example, that “when there are two bovine entities, there is ‘an identity/a unity in difference’”. When we analyze both the state of affairs which this proposition speaks of, as well as language itself, we can see that there is a complexity that is much greater than the ordinary language *presupposes* and that metaphysical speculation about universal entities suggests. We could infer that Buddhists in general would strongly agree with the following proposition: “*There is no truly unity in difference*”. Siderits (1991, p. 91, emphasis added) explains that

[i]t is a fundamental tenet of Yogachara-Sautrantika that strictly speaking all existents are absolutely unique. The Yogacara-Sautrantika ontology thus consists of an infinite domain of particulars, each particular being what it is by virtue of its difference from any other particular. One consequence of this is that the distinction between property (*dharma*) and property-possessor (*dharmin*) is ultimately groundless. One way of seeing this point is by way of the uniqueness thesis: if an entity is absolutely unique, it cannot be said to have any properties in common with any other entity; there can be no universal which is common to both it and other entities.

Once we consider the distinction between property and object as groundless, the only nature that distinction has is a merely conventional, semantic, relative, and cognitive nature. Tillemans (2021, online) states that

subject-predicate differences in language do not mirror a corresponding difference between substances and properties in reality. Bare particulars that somehow have properties, or in which properties are instantiated, would thus be ruled out.

The author summarizes the Buddhist call by affirming that

it is important to emphasize that for Dharmakīrti and many other Buddhists particulars are not separate entities that own or have separately existing properties/powers. Much of the argument here in Buddhist

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Epistemology (and in other schools of Buddhism) is essentially an appeal to perceptual evidence and common sense: particulars are real and must be objects of perception; nobody perceives a particular without its properties, and indeed nobody can see a difference between the bearer of the properties and the properties themselves; hence any such distinction is unreal. (TILLEMANS, 2021, online).

By dethroning the property-object distinction as a real ontological and/or metaphysical distinction, nominalism and linguistic conventionalism are verified by many Buddhist scholars. Dharmakīrti (1999, p. 45), for example, affirms that “[t]he individual character of *whatever* [...] entity [...] *alone* is existence.” In other words, anything that “truly” exists is always a “particular thing”, while any generality is something mentally *constructed* by one’s own mind in a conventional context (Bhatt and Mehrotra, 2000; Śāntarakṣita, 1937).

I must underline that Buddhists do not deny the “essential distinction between characteristic-characterized” *with the objective to just* use that negation as a “step” to reach an “absolute all-pervasive *I*-consciousness”. As a Buddhist, I point out the *radical relativity* of the relationship between “characteristic-characterized”. Besides that, in no way that negation should be used as a ladder to deny the diversity that appears to one’s own consciousness so as to establish or justify an absolute unity behind the appearances somehow.

In the next section, I apply a Buddhist understanding to the discussion at hand in order to address “universal/general expressions” of consciousness.

6. Applying the Buddhist meaning theory to the understanding of the general expression “consciousness”

From my vantage point, solipsism is absurd. As it was shown in the previous sections, my intention is not to try to refute solipsism, as it is highly likely that anyone who is convinced of such a position will not be convinced otherwise.

It is important to stress that the very assumptions on which Buddhism is grounded prevents something like solipsism from being true – or even making sense – in the first place. What I try to underline here is just that: (1) if one truly believes that there is “*the* all-pervasive *I*-consciousness”, then one believes some kind of solipsism; and (2) Buddhism is

not solipsist, once we consider its *own* assumptions. When the *general* expression “consciousness” is conceived in a realist way, it might seem to suggest some kind of “omnibus” solipsism; however, from a Buddhadharmic standpoint, it must be understood according to nominalist Buddhist semantics and its conventional view on entities. Therefore, there is no rational and plausible reason to see the “omnibus” solipsist position in Buddhadharmic.

In this respect, I must underscore that nominalism affects the Buddhist understanding of the nature of one’s own consciousness. If the reader pays close attention, s/he can see that much of the confusion about “general/universal Buddhist expressions” associated with mind, consciousness, emptiness, etc. exists because of a misunderstanding of the conventional Buddhist meaning theory (i.e., nominalist theory) and its *relative* “ontology”¹².

Despite the fact several Buddhist scholars and masters (Lopon Tenzin Namdak, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, Turku Ugyen Rinpoche) (have) developed several arguments to show that there is no way for Buddhadharmic to be solipsist in any way, the confusion¹³ and attempt to see Buddhist expressions through non-nominalist and realist semantics is still present in many Western circles. Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (1996) stresses that the Buddhist “primordial state” is “the primordial state of *every individual*” and that it is not a transcendent over-reality encompassing every sentient being. Both Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche (1992) and Lopon Tenzin Namdak (2006) emphasize that each consciousness is an

12 Even Madhyamikas accept Abhidharma as a conventional shastric “ontology”. That is, the conventional “ontology” of Madhyamaka Buddhism is the ontology of Shastras as well (Stoltz, 2006). The distinction between Madhyamikas and Abhidharmikas exists because the former does not accept the “inherent substantiality” of atoms. It is absurd to think that, for example, Madhyamikas persistently criticize the notion of “absolute nature/intrinsic being” only to accept it in the “ultimate level” in the monist form. *Madhyamikas deny such notion on all levels.*

13 In addition, it is also reasonable to affirm that, to some extent, the confusion generated around speculation about “non-dualism” and “dualism” in Buddhism revolves around – at least in part – the fact of unfamiliarity with Buddhist epistemology. In a certain way, it does not make sense to talk about duality between absolute substances existing in themselves, and the like. Nevertheless, that does not mean that there is just *one* substance or monad, but simply that, because there is nothing like that in the appearances, the universe is empty of any substantiality from the very logical beginning. In this sense, there is no duality because there is no substance(s). Thus, even so, *diversity is not denied at all.* The *insubstantial* network of diversity is perceived and experienced in many ways in order to be denied. It is no coincidence that Madhyamikas compare appearances with dreams, because within the conventional context appearances come through. Conversely, when appearances are analyzed *all the way to the “bottom”*, their substance is not found in any way – it is bottomless, groundless, rootless, etc. It is worth remembering that a *good part* of the Tibetan Buddhist philosophical discussion started with Śāntarakṣita, who made a synthesis of Buddhist epistemology and Madhyamaka, for example.

individual consciousness, albeit with similar qualities, and they argue that should it not be the case, then when one sentient being attains the Buddhist realization, all other beings should attain it as well. Our “omnibus” solipsist opponent could possibly justify that not everyone achieves realization when one achieves it, based on some concept introduced in an *ad hoc* mode or in other ways.

When a Buddhist uses general expressions, such as “consciousness”, s/he does not mean it is literally the *same* “thing” present in different persons. Such expressions must be understood as a *generic* characteristic in a conventional way. In the same vein, when Buddhists claim something like “each sentient being has the same quality of consciousness”, the expression “same” here must not be understood literally, but rather in a nominalist and general way. That is, the “sameness” is not explained with the assumption that there is an entity instantiated in two particulars. The notion addressed here can only be understood in a Buddhist way, within the semantic universe of Buddhadharma.

7. Conclusion

As it was pointed out, from a nominalist Buddhist viewpoint, one’s own consciousness is always *an* individual and subjective consciousness, and thus never a trans-personal, trans-individual, trans-particular, etc. entity. When Buddhists claim something like “consciousness permeates each sentient being”, that does not mean something like “the *same* x present in different sentient being with infinite power to appear in countless ways”. We have enough reason to believe that my consciousness is similar to the reader’s, albeit the two consciousnesses are not the same one which would possess us or be shared by both of us and everybody else. I must add that the “similarity” between each consciousness is not (and it does not need to be at all) explained by means of the idea of the same “identity-in-difference”.

What Buddhists basically propose is a way of seeing “consciousness” that is “natural”, intuitive, and empirically explainable, and hence not speculative, since it can be tested by each one’s own consciousness. In a sense, this proposal is a direct way to deal with one’s own consciousness. For example, Buddhist semantics suggests that linguistic contexts require cuts, exclusions, and abstractions for specific targeted purposes.

Finally, by providing such an understanding about one’s own consciousness, we treat “consciousness” as a general term; however, this general term in no way realistically refers to an “x” that is instantiated in countless ways in different concrete people. Each person “has/is” their own *continuum* of consciousness. And, in many ways, it is possible to speak of general characteristics of these continuums. Similarly, we do something like any kind of legitimate predication. We talk about “the tonality of blue”, “cats”, “planets”, etc. For instance, we say that planets in general have a certain shape, a specific mass, and determined general characteristics, etc.

To sum it up, Lopon Tenzin Namdak (2006, p. 137) synthesizes that “each individual has a different mind or stream of consciousness” and “the attaining of Nirvana is not like a drop of rain falling into the sea”, and therefore, “whether we find ourselves in Samsara or Nirvana, there exists individuality”.

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“You and I do not ‘share’ the same consciousness”

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