



Abhinavagupta, the hard problem of consciousness, and the moral grounding problem

Loriliai Biernacki *The Matter of Wonder: Abhinavagupta's Panentheism and the New Materialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 264 pp. \$83.00 (hc)

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Overview of the book

The Matter of Wonder: Abhinavagupta's Panentheism and New Materialism is a cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary work that draws from a broad palette, including medieval Indian philosophy, contemporary analytic philosophy, neuroscience, physics, and information theory. The book aims to expisit the eleventh century Indian philosopher Abhinavagupta's unique form of panentheistic dual-aspect monism. It does so by bringing it to bear on contemporary problems of philosophy, such as the nature of sentience and the relation between matter and consciousness. Like micropsychism and cosmopsychism, Abhinavagupta's account takes consciousness to be fundamental, and like Russellian monism and Pauli-Jung monism, it has the structure of dual-aspect monistic theory. The book shows how useful it can be to work across traditions and disciplines to reveal new insights about consciousness.

Biernacki's elucidation of Abhinavagupta's views on subjectivity, sentience, wonder, the subtle body, the light of consciousness, and active awareness forces reflection on the relation between matter and consciousness. David Chalmers (1996) famously articulated and made significant 'The hard problem of phenomenal consciousness.' Likewise, Abhinavagupta should be celebrated for articulating, well before Sri Ramakrishna,¹ Michael Lockwood,² and Galen Strawson,³ 'The hard problem of matter'. Chalmers' focus is on the mystery of conscious, while Abhinavagupta's focus is on the mystery of matter. Biernacki explores how Abhinavagupta's

¹ See Maharaja (2019).

² See Lockwood (1989).

³ See Strawson (2016).

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view of wonder explains the liveliness of matter, as it argues that all matter is essentially and inherently sentient.

I'd like to preface this review by saying that I am agnostic about the existence of God in all traditions; thus, I am not a panentheist. I am very sympathetic to some forms of panpsychism, including Rāmānuja's theistic Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta⁴ because of its inherent subtlety and explanatory power. However, I am critical of the need to go panpsychist to solve the hard problem of consciousness or the moral grounding problem.

The book chapters

Chapter 1 is about Abhinavagupta's conception of subjectivity and how it relates to sentience. While sentience is a term most often defined as the ability to experience feelings and sensations, Biernacki argues that for Abhinavagupta, sentience is tied to subjectivity, and that the capacity an entity has for identifying the sense of 'I', as opposed to 'this', is what marks its degree of sentience. Biernacki, following Tononi and Koch, holds that sentience is what emerges in a system of a certain kind, and is not necessarily based on biology. She maintains that on Abhinavagupta's view, all of matter, including a rock, is innately sentient. Abhinavagupta says, "Everything in fact has the nature of all things." Even the lifeless [grammatical] third person, [the "it"], if it sheds its lifeless form can take on the first, and second person forms [the grammatical I and you]" (pg. 32). While I find degree theoretic, instead of digital on/off, accounts of sentience more attractive, I don't find it plausible that rocks are innately sentient; moreover, even if consciousness pervades the universe, I do not think rocks have the capacity for sentience.

Chapter 2 delineates Abhinavagupta's account of wonder, and argues that the phenomenology of it leads to the view that there is an inherent subjectivity even in mere matter. Biernacki maintains that on Abhinavagupta's view, the signal of life is when the 'I' can reflect on itself. Sentience is tied to reflexive I-thoughts. On Abhinavagupta's view of wonder, one does not transcend the world when they wonder about matter, rather their wonder leads to an alteration of their vision about matter by revealing its essentially inherent liveliness. Abhinavagupta's account could be deployed in epistemology, such as in accounts of the nature of curiosity. However, the work that Biernacki sees it doing in metaphysics and philosophy of mind, can be questioned. Does wonder focused on matter reveal its essential liveliness or does it project on to matter a liveliness that is present in us? When I gaze at a rock my attitude of wonder can alter what is revealed. Does my gaze reveal the essential liveliness of the rock, or instead does it merely project liveliness onto the rock? It is clearly Abhinavagupta's metaphysics that is doing work here: if it turns out that the substratum of the universe is not Śiva, all pervading consciousness, then only the wondering would be possible, the revelation of liveliness would be lost.

⁴ See Vaidya (2022).

Chapter 3 is about the subtle body. The subtle body is an important concept in Indian philosophy. In general, it states that the body is divided between the gross body, what we as agents feel, and a subtle body that exists in us but is mostly inaccessible to us independently of meditation. Because I lack the expertise to technically evaluate it, I forgo discussion of it.

Chapter 4 takes us back to the nature of sentience in the context of theories of consciousness, especially panpsychism. While I cannot offer all the intricacies of Abhinavagupta's view, I present some of the main aspects of it below:

- Abhinavagupta holds that *Śiva* is the substratum of all that exists. Since *Śiva* is all-pervasive, his view is similar to cosmopsychism in that consciousness is everywhere.
- Abhinavagupta is not a dualist between mind and matter or mental and physical, but between the light of consciousness, *prakāśa*, and active awareness, *vimarśa*.
- For Abhinavagupta, *prakāśa* is consciousness because it is the light that illuminates objects. It is a very thin form of consciousness that serves as the fabric or ground of reality in the sense one finds in a cosmopsychist picture where the universe as a whole is consciousness.
- For Abhinavagupta, *vimarśa* is active awareness, and as such it is where subjectivity and sentience is captured.
- The duality between *prakāśa* and *vimarśa* has several correlate features.

Prakāśa	Vimarśa
Light	Touch
Masculine	Feminine
Out-breath	In-breath
Knowledge	Action, doing
Transcendence	Immanence
Object	Subject
Inert, not alive (jaḍa)	Sentient, alive (ajāḍa)

- Abhinavagupta ties sentience to materiality and active awareness as opposed to the light of consciousness. The light of consciousness is usually where one locates sentience in Indian philosophy. But Abhinavagupta locates sentience in active awareness and not the light of consciousness. That is to *vimarśa* rather than *prakāśa*.
- Abhinavagupta's view is unique in that it blurs the distinction between the two aspects as opposed to keeping them strictly distinct, as one finds in Spinoza's opposition between thought and extension.
- Abhinavagupta's view is unique in that it allows for a holism that generates a multiplicity of the world that never degrades. *Śiva* who creates the multiplicity of the world, does not degrade in virtue of the creation of multiplicity.

- Abhinavagupta's view accounts for materiality by mixing matter, consciousness, and intentionality. It does not follow the dualism of Sāṃkhya where *prakṛiti* is nature and *puruṣa* is witness consciousness.
- A weakness of the theory is that it must offer an account of why a God with unlimited freedom would choose to move to a multiplicity of limited states all of which have the capacity for sentience, but only some of which manifest their sentience in the form of their being at a given time.

While I agree with Biernacki about her identification of a weakness of the theory, there is nothing here that is new from the perspective of cross-traditional philosophy of mind. The decombination problem asks: how does a unified cosmic consciousness produce individual subjects of consciousness? For over 14 centuries, Indian philosophers have offered a number of solutions to the problem, including answers to the question of how and why an all knowing, pervasive, and free God would become differentiated and ignorant and limited in its freedom through the various forms it takes. In "[Critical considerations](#)", I will elaborate on this debate in connection to Analytic philosophy.

Chapter 5 engages in cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy by creatively developing and elegantly weaving together ideas across cultures and disciplines. For example, John Wheeler's famous *it from bit* thesis is discussed in relation to Abhinavagupta's *it from cit*. Max Tegmark's proposal that a mathematical formula has consciousness is discussed in relation to Abhinavagupta's conception of consciousness in mantras. Biernacki also develops a way of thinking about consciousness as the fabric of the universe that follows Berit Brogaard's view that consciousness should be thought of as a unified field, which I will focus on here:

- Brogaard proposes to understand consciousness along the lines of a unified field. Taking consciousness to be like gravity, she postulates the existence of mentons, mental particles, which function like gravitons operating in a gravitational field. The key idea is not to treat the particles as elementary on a building block model, but rather as part of a field. Brogaard proposes this at least in the case of humans, primordial consciousness is a unified field in which informational content can enter and thereby reach awareness. In the case of a human the unified field is the information across the brain driving neuronal integration.
- Biernacki proposes to move this model from individual humans to *Śiva*, the substrate of the universe as consciousness. On this account, consciousness presents as a unified field which can unfold in a multiplicity of diverse limited beings because *Śiva* has unlimited freedom. Consciousness is information transmitted across the field as well as the field itself. Consciousness is the body of the world. The unified field unfolds into a multiplicity of things, from rocks to insects, to humans. Since it is a field and not a set of discrete entities it allows for the movement of information across what appear to be wholly distinct entities.
- What is attractive about the use of Brogaard's theory as a model for Abhinavagupta's view is that it allows for wider interactions between seemingly distinct creatures. Intentionality can exist between different species of life because mat-

ter comes from consciousness and is a unified field which allows information to move and come to subjective awareness in localized regions.

Critical considerations

Biernacki is correct to think that an interesting conversation between Abhinavagupta's view and Analytic philosophy of mind can and should occur. However, while there are connections between Analytic philosophy in the 20th century and Indian philosophy before the 20th century, there are also disconnects.

The problem of the self in panpsychism is formulated as a consequence of holding that phenomenal consciousness is in some sense fundamental, either as tiny micro-conscious atoms, as found in micropsychism, or as a unified field of cosmic consciousness, as found in cosmopsychism. The problem is articulated via the twin problems of combination and decombination. The combination problem for micropsychism asks: how can the combining of tiny conscious atoms succeed in generating a unified macro-conscious agent? The decombination problem for cosmopsychism asks: how can a unified cosmic consciousness be decombined to get independent unified macro-conscious agents?

Many Indian traditions have something directly to say about the problem of the self in panpsychism. Various forms of panpsychism can be found in Indian philosophy, Abhinavagupta's view is one of them, but so are Śāṅkara's Advaita and Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita. A central problem in classical Indian philosophy concerns the relation between the self and God. This is central to the debate between Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja who offer different accounts of the self in relation to God on multiple levels. Albahari (2018, 2020) has explored how Śāṅkara's philosophy can also be applied to both the combination and decombination problem. More recently, Ganeri and Shani's (2022) special issue of the *Monist* on Indian Cosmopsychism contains three papers by Swami Medhananda, Anand Vaidya, and Monima Chadha on how to solve either the combination or the decombination problem from the perspective of different Indian traditions, such as Sri-Aurobindo, Rāmānuja, and Vasubandhu.

The hard problem of phenomenal consciousness is articulated through an argument that shows that phenomenal consciousness cannot be explained through physicalism. Phenomenal consciousness is the 'what it is like' aspect of subjective first-person experience. It is often picked out through contrasts, such as: there is something it is like to see red, that is different from what it is like to see green, which is still different from what it is like to hear C# or F#, or to taste chocolate as opposed to pickled cucumbers. According to Chalmers (1996) physicalism has a hard time offering an account of phenomenal consciousness.

Two contemporary views in Analytic philosophy of consciousness are illusionism and panpsychism. Frankish (2017) defends the view that phenomenal consciousness is not fundamental, and an illusion. Goff (2017) defends the view that phenomenal consciousness is fundamental and real. In both cases their philosophy of consciousness is focused on the target phenomenon in the debate: phenomenal consciousness. While it is true that illusionism about consciousness can be found in Indian

philosophy in the Buddhist tradition,⁵ and cosmopsychism can be found in Indian philosophy in the Vedānta tradition,⁶ neither of these are focused precisely on phenomenal consciousness. Rather, they are interested in the reality or illusoriness of consciousness and the relation it bears to the self.

Arguably, most Indian traditions have nothing directly to say about the hard problem of phenomenal consciousness. First, there is no term in Sanskrit that is the *exact* equivalent of ‘phenomenal consciousness’ as used in English in the 20th century. ‘Cit’ is the most common term that is translated as ‘consciousness’, but as Timalšina (2009) argues, it is not exactly the same as Chalmers’ notion of phenomenal consciousness. Second, the hard problem of consciousness is not a central problem in classical Indian philosophy. No text of classical Indian philosophy is directly aimed at explaining the nature of (or why we have) phenomenal consciousness. In Abhinavagupta’s view there are two features that fundamental reality has when understood as *Śiva*. *Prakāśa* is the light of consciousness. *Vimarśa* is active awareness. But there is no direct account of phenomenal consciousness. Neither the former nor the latter, nor both in combination are sufficient for the qualia of phenomenal consciousness that occur when we see red or hear C# or taste wine.

If at all, Abhinavagupta appears to address the hard problem of consciousness in Biernacki’s account via the following argument.

1. If x is sentient, x has subjective awareness.
2. If x has subjective awareness, x has phenomenal consciousness.
3. So, if x is sentient, x has phenomenal consciousness.
4. Everything is sentient.
5. So, everything is phenomenally conscious.

In Chapter 1, Biernacki argues that Abhinavagupta holds (1) and (4). (2) is either definitionally true because “subjective awareness” just means “phenomenal consciousness”, or it is false because something can have access consciousness, which is sufficient for subjective awareness, without having phenomenal consciousness.⁷ Let’s assume it is true, so we get (5). Since neither *prakaśa* nor *vimarśa* nor *Śiva* alone are phenomenal consciousness Abhinavagupta’s view must factor phenomenal consciousness across *prakaśa*, *vimarśa*, and *Śiva*. *Śiva* is everything and in everything. Thus, the light of consciousness and active awareness come together to make phenomenal consciousness. This raises the question of whether a factoring account of phenomenal consciousness is better than one that does not factor but makes phenomenal consciousness part of the fundamental nature of reality as found in Strawson’s (2006) micropsychism and Goff’s (2017) cosmopsychism. It also raises the question of how factoring can be used to generate an account of qualia in experience. What about the pure light of consciousness and pure subjective active awareness produces the qualia, red?

⁵ See Garfield (2017).

⁶ See Vaidya (2022).

⁷ See Block (1995).

The grounding problem for moral standing asks: what is it in virtue of which something has moral standing? Sentience theorists argue that sentience is the ground of moral standing. Sentience can be understood in two ways. Affective consciousness, in contrast to phenomenal consciousness, requires that a subject have feelings or emotions tied to their phenomenal states. To say that a subject has affective consciousness is to say that the subject's phenomenal states have either positive or negative valence. A thick sentience theorist, such as Peter Singer (1975), holds that both affective and phenomenal consciousness is required for sentience. A thin sentience theorist, such as Chalmers (2022), holds that phenomenal consciousness is all that is required for sentience.⁸

According to Biernacki, Abhinavagupta's account of matter allows for the following.

If we see in objects, even in clay jars, the sentience that is really there at the core, then we allow ourselves to rise teleologically to a subjectivity that does not see the world as different from ourselves, as mere object. At the same time, we allow them the space to actually step into their own true liveliness, their innate sentience. Their life is, after all, just covered over, hidden. (p. 43)

Biernacki thinks that one selling point of Abhinavagupta's view for contemporary philosophy is that it has a moral upshot through its account of sentience. For Abhinavagupta everything is potentially sentient. And since sentience, thin or thick, is the ground of moral standing, we are forced to see everything as potentially an object of moral consideration and in possession of moral standing. This further forces us to have a reorientation towards matter and the natural world. The implications for moral philosophy and environmentalism are deep. However, one can challenge the whole paradigm of using sentience as the ground of moral standing.

In my (2023a, 2023b) on Chalmers and Schneider, I articulated, argued for, and explored the idea that phenomenal consciousness is not the ground of moral standing. Rather, some form of goal-directed intelligence tied to a capacity for preferences that pertain to the survival and well-being of a creature or system is necessary. Like others, I have grown skeptical as to whether phenomenal consciousness is morally significant. Bradford (2022) questions how and why being imbued with the glow of phenomenal consciousness makes something a welfare subject. For example, according to objective list theories of value, something can be thought of as being better or worse off in terms of satisfying criteria on an objective list. Satisfying criteria on the list doesn't require that a creature or entity is phenomenally conscious. Both Kammerer (2022) and Shepard (2023) wonder how phenomenal consciousness could matter if materialism about consciousness is true. For example, if Frankish's (2017) strong illusionism is true, and sentience theory is true, then moral

⁸ See Chalmers discussion of vulcans, zombies, and humans in relation to the trolley problem. While Chalmers doesn't use the phrase sentience but rather the claim that phenomenal consciousness and not affective consciousness is necessary for morality, I use here the distinction between thin and thick notions of sentience, because sentience theory is always tied to some account of consciousness.

standing rests on an illusion because phenomenal consciousness is an illusion. That result should strike most of us as odd, if not implausible. Simply put, if phenomenal consciousness is about the glow of mental life in some creatures, why is it morally significant that something glows? Can't an artificial agent have moral standing even though it does not have the glow of phenomenal consciousness? Sentience might simply be a marker for why something has more moral standing than something else. However, it is not needed to ground moral standing.⁹

Goal-directed intelligence tied to preferences, rather than sentience, offers a better approach to the ground of moral standing. One can hold that anything that has goal-directed intelligence tied to preferences, be it an amoeba or an AI, deserves moral consideration, albeit in a graded way. Most, if not all, organisms and artificial systems exhibit some kind of goal directed intelligence that is tied to preferences. Biernacki, herself, offers as evidence for their consciousness, the signals that lima beans give off to insects. However, this could instead be taken as evidence of goal-directed intelligence tied to preferences, rather than phenomenal or affective consciousness.

If we use goal-directed intelligence as the ground of moral standing, then amoebas and goal-directed silicon-chip based computer systems would fall within the moral sphere, while rocks and clay jars would not, as rocks and clay jars do not exhibit goal directed behavior. Moral standing and evaluation can be linked to maximizing preferences across species and systems.

Abhinavagupta's account of sentience is stronger than Singer's. Singer doesn't think rocks are potentially sentient, and thus not candidates for moral status. However, for Abhinavagupta, everything has moral standing because everything is potentially sentient. The problem is that morality seems to apply to only some things. Thus, the fact that an account of moral standing and phenomenal consciousness entail that everything has moral standing is a mark against the theory.

Conclusion

Biernacki draws attention to Abhinavagupta, a philosopher who is worthy of further study. This deep and broad work is forward looking, and instructive for those who want to build theories across traditions and disciplines through creative engagement that is historically and analytically informed.

⁹ On August 26, 2023, at *The Conference on Moral Status* at Trinity College Dublin organized by Kenneth Silver, Bob Fischer argued that phenomenal consciousness might not even be able to account for a grade of moral status because phenomenal consciousness as understood under global workspace theory and higher-order thought theory, lacks certain explanatory capacities. His arguments went beyond the Gwen Bradford's arguments against phenomenal consciousness being the ground of moral standing based on objective list theories and desire satisfaction theories, because he challenged the idea that even under hedonism phenomenal consciousness lacks certain explanatory resources for explaining why something is a welfare subject.

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