

Book Review

Attention, Not Self, by Jonardon Ganeri. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. x + 392.

1. Cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy is simply philosophy

Cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy is hard. It is not like comparative philosophy, which sometimes aims merely to compare thinkers from different traditions and time periods. Nor is it like fusion philosophy, which sometimes only aims to fuse together ideas from different thinkers in a manner that takes its cue from fusion chefs and musicians. Rather, it takes its inspiration from central figures of early twentieth-century Indian philosophy, such as K. C. Bhattacharya and A. C. Mukerji, who along with Daya Krishna had an important influence on the trajectory of Indian philosophical thought. For example, Mukerji turned to cross-cultural philosophy in his *Self, Thought, and Reality* because he felt that the topics in epistemology and metaphysics that he wanted to engage *could only be solved* by taking ideas from European, English, and Indian philosophy. Cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy, unlike its close cousins, reaches out to other cultures and disciplines in order to generate an account of a phenomenon or problem by synthesizing across cultures and disciplines. It does this because a proper inquiry into the phenomenon or problem *requires* epistemic humility and the resources that global philosophy provides. Jonardon Ganeri is a chief architect and pioneer of this genre of philosophy. Arguably, following Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber's *Comparative Philosophy Without Borders*, it is simply what philosophy is and should be once we recognize both the epistemic injustice that has been waged against thinkers from non-Western traditions as well as the fact that many of the ideas we find there are the same ideas we find touted in European and English philosophy as the leading ideas of the twentieth century. Cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy, or philosophy without borders, has arrived and it simply is *philosophy*, without qualification, practised as it should be: with epistemic humility.

Attention, Not Self (ANS hereafter) is an outstanding work of philosophy. It articulates and defends a theory of mind and knowledge on which *attention* plays the central role, and a much larger role than prior thinkers have given it. It is also clear that the main figure that the book aims to establish as a pathbreaking philosopher is Buddhaghosa, a Theravāda Buddhist

philosopher living in Sri Lanka who wrote in Pāli around the fifth century CE. The development of Ganeri's account of attention takes him across history and geography. He brings classical non-Western thinkers, such as Vasubandhu, Bhartṛhari, Buddhaghosa, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Vātsyāyana, and Abhivānagupta, along with their twentieth-century commentators, B. K. Matilal, Bhikku Bodhi, Ledi Sayadaw, Arindam Chakrabarti, and Mark Siderits into contact with classical Western philosophers, such as Aristotle, Locke, and Kant, as well as a large battery of twentieth-century philosophers, such as Anne Treisman, Christopher Mole, Lynn Rudder Baker, Brian O'Shaughnessy, John McDowell, Jesse Prinz, Hubert Dreyfus, Susanna Siegel, Laura Ekstrom, John Campbell, Christopher Peacocke, Jean-Paul Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Dan Zahavi. His cross-cultural philosophical engagement is supported by a rich engagement with cognitive science. One cannot but be amazed at the amount of information that Ganeri brings to the table in his comprehensive investigation into what attention is and the role it plays in epistemology. Whether or not one agrees with the story about attention that Ganeri tells, one cannot but come away with an enlarged sense of how powerful the genre of philosophy is that Ganeri has helped to advance. Along with Evan Thompson, Jay Garfield, Christian Coseru, Arindam Chakrabarti, Jaysankar Shaw, Purushottama Bilimoria, Monima Chadha, Vrinda Dalmiya, and others he is part of a collective front paving the way forward for philosophy to be written with a new sense of inclusiveness, and for the right reasons.

Those familiar with Ganeri's other works, such as *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (OUP: 2012), should expect in this work a level of difficulty that goes beyond the others. *ANS* is a much richer text, with lots of depth across Sanskrit, Pāli, cognitive science, and both phenomenological and analytical traditions of philosophy in the twentieth century. And although it is eloquently written, the work is a studied read that requires focused and sustained attention across each of its five parts. In his review of Stephen Phillips and N. S. Ramanuja Tattacharya's translation of *The Perception Chapter* of Gaṅgeśa's *Tattvacintāmaṇi*, Ganeri noted that many Western philosophers have laid down the challenge for those that advocate for non-Western philosophy to show them a work that is equivalent to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ganeri notes that we can now do so with Phillips and Tattacharya's translation of Gaṅgeśa's *Tattvacintāmaṇi*. If anyone asked me to point to an exemplary work of twenty-first-century cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy, which shows what can be accomplished, I would unhesitatingly point them to Ganeri's *ANS*. What do we find in this masterpiece?

Part I is on the priority of attention to consciousness. The main goal of this part of the work is to explore a central Buddhist claim, namely, 'that the fields of action and awareness have a certain structure: roughly that there is a "space" or "frame" of awareness (*citta*) which is in fact nothing more than

a range of experiential, attentive, and agentic functions (*cetasika*) that take place within it' (p. 9). Part II is on attention and knowledge, in particular the development of Buddhaghosa's attentional epistemology. Part III is titled 'the calling of attention'. In this part we are introduced to a fundamental puzzle about attention, articulated via the tension between the view that attention is what constitutes consciousness and the view that one's attention can be called to a circumstance without being consciously directed to it. We also see a deep presentation of a theory of vision and the role of working memory in attention. Part IV moves the reader into the exciting area where Ganeri explores varieties of attention, including empathic attention. On the account he offers attention goes beyond what we normally think of when we use the word 'attention'. For example, intending to do something is a kind of attention. Finally, Part V is about attention and identity. In this part Ganeri offers an interesting account of the role of attention over that of self in giving an account of human situatedness. Ganeri aims to accomplish a lot in this book. Consider the following:

I have now demonstrated that all the processes in Buddhaghosa's pathway to consciousness [in the case of vision starting with a retinal image] are associated with functional roles that are actually realized by recognized entities in psychology and neuroscience. Thus, *āvajjana* is control of the sensorimotor system; *cakkhuvinnāna* is the iconic buffer; *sampaṭicchana* is the production of a fragile short-term pixel map; *santīraṇa*, a perspectival sketch; *votthapana* is object-modelling; and *javana* is working memory. These identifications are all *a posteriori* identities, like the discovery that water is H₂O, not known to Buddhaghosa himself. He only describes a set of functional roles; what we have done is identify the *actual* inhabitants of those roles, insofar as the contemporary state of research into vision enables us to do so. We might have found that nothing in reality inhabits the roles he describes. It is an astonishing vindication of Buddhaghosa that this is not what turned out to be the case. The relationships he maps between working memory and attention are also beginning to receive independent support. (p. 217, emphasis in the original)

For a work as involved as this, it is impossible to give a detailed examination of all its parts. As a consequence, I will attend to the attentional epistemology of Part II.

2. Attentional epistemology

The phrase 'attentional epistemology' can be used to describe the view that attention has an epistemic role in relation to justification and knowledge, which is different from the role that perception has. Ganeri sees Buddhaghosa as advancing an attentional epistemology, one that does interesting work in providing a nuanced view of the contrasting, yet equally important, insights of McDowell and Dreyfus about the role of concepts in purposive action. While McDowell emphasises the role of conceptualization in everyday experience in accounting for how perception gives us reasons for belief, Dreyfus excludes concepts from an account of our everyday absorbed coping on the

grounds that conceptualisation would get in the way of our supposed expertise. McDowell holds that conceptualization is necessary for perception to provide us with reasons for belief. Dreyfus holds that expert action cannot be explained by holding that conscious conceptualizing is part of what is going on in absorbed coping. But before we get to an account of how Buddhaghosa offers a nuanced position in this terrain, Ganeri provides us with an account of the two constitutive roles that attention can play, each of which has an epistemic pay-off.

The first role is attentional placing, the centring of attention on a single region (*ekaggatā*), or ‘one-pointed placing’. The second role is focusing on the properties or features instantiated there, ‘bringing-to-mind’ (*manasi-kāra*). There are two different roles here. One role of attention is to *drive* the mind to an object, the other is to *stabilize* the mind on an object. Conscious awareness is a function of these two roles of attention; as Ganeri says, ‘[It] is a factory floor on which two machines are running together, one responsible for experiencing, the other for cognitively accessing, their effective operation lubricated by two kinds of attention and their coordination under executive command’ (p. 96).

The two important Buddhist concepts at the heart of the story are the following:

Pāli	Cognitive Neuroscientific Description	Philosophical Gloss
<i>vedanā</i>	The phenomenal feel that is the experience machine.	Our feelings ground solicitations to approach when pleasant and solicitations to retreat when unpleasant.
<i>saññā</i>	The cognitive label that is the identification machine.	Our labels ground recognitional abilities and they have correctness conditions.

One important idea from contemporary cognitive science that Ganeri uses comes from the work of Anne Treisman. She argues for the notion of an attentional window, as opposed to the more traditional notion of an attentional spotlight. The main difference between these two metaphors concerning attention has to do with how they treat the unattended objects or features of objects. On the spotlight view, unattended objects or features are registered but not analysed through processing. On the window view, unattended objects or features are actively excluded or suppressed. As Ganeri points out, ‘[A]ttention is a window that opens on the world, its aperture fixed by processes involving the exclusion of distractors or the enhancement of

target features, rather than serial binding at each place a spotlight shines' (p. 114).

The view that Buddhaghosa holds, Ganeri argues, is consistent with Treisman's work. And the core move that Ganeri thinks Buddhaghosa has available in the McDowell-Dreyfus debate is the following: '[It is] because attention, not concept activation, pervades experience that perceptual experience can provide reasons for judgment' (p. 118). As he says:

The 'mindedness' that pervades experience is not intrinsically conceptual or linguistic but consists rather in exclusion of distractors in a map of phenomenal features that include solicitations, and focused attention to target features that accesses the properties of objects in the selected field. These are skills possessed by non-linguistic animals even if they take the form of conceptual capabilities in human beings. Yet neither are they reducible to unminded 'motor' skills. (p. 118)

For this move to work in the context of the McDowell-Dreyfus debate there must be some way in which attention provides reasons for belief. However, this would depend in part on whether we are working with an internalist conception of attention in relation to justification or an externalist conception. For if attention is not something that I can appeal to as a reason for believing something, how does attention do epistemic work in a way that satisfies the demands of McDowell's requirement that experience provide one with reasons for belief?

In Chapter 6 we learn of connections between, on the one hand, the discussion by contemporary epistemologists such as Jim Pryor and Susanna Siegel of dogmatism about perceptual justification and, on the other hand, an account within the work of Buddhaghosa of attentional justification and attentional knowledge. Here are the three principles for comparison:

(Perceptual Justification): In the absence of defeaters, having perceptual experience as of x as F suffices to give one immediate justification for believing x is F . (p. 130)

(Attentional Justification): Absent undercutting defeaters, attending to an object – selectively placed at location c accessing identificatory type F – immediately improves one's justification for believing that the object at c is F , provided that certain further conditions are met. (p. 133)

(Attentional Knowledge): Absent undercutting defeaters, expertly attending to an object – selectively placed at location c and accessing identificatory type F – immediately suffices for knowing that the object at c is F . (p. 148)

On a first pass both Attentional Justification and Attentional Knowledge appear underspecified. For both contain within them the clause 'provided certain further conditions are met', yet nowhere do we get an idea of what those further conditions are. We need to know how these principles control for and guide when and where a subject acquires attention-based justification or knowledge. We need more detail here. In addition, in the presentation of

the attentional principles, we don't get a story about why we are focusing on undercutting defeaters as opposed to both overriding and undercutting defeaters. Notice the asymmetry with Perceptual Justification. In the case of the latter we are talking about all defeaters. More importantly, Ganeri states that attention 'provides immediate justification, that there need be no further propositions S must be justified in believing, in order for attention to justify her in believing that p' (p. 133). But *that attention* provides some justification or support for belief is not controversial. What is controversial is that attentional justification does not require that S believe anything else about her experience. So, for example, what should we say about a case in which I am *not* having an acid trip, my attention directs me to an object and I sustain my attention there, but I occurrently believe that I *am* having an acid trip? Even if my attention is both reliable and properly functioning, my occurrent belief about my condition, though in fact incorrect, would appear to defeat my justification. What we might correctly note about the theory is that one need not believe that one is not on acid to be justified. This subtle component of the view is attractive in many cases. Nevertheless, why talk about an externalist account of attention through the notion of justification when there are other options? And if we do have an externalist account of attention, and we do want to satisfy the demands of McDowell's critique, we should ask: how does it satisfy McDowell's epistemic requirements on experience, which are motivated by internalism about justification?

In addition, we might wonder what the significance of Attentional Justification is. For it simply tells us that paying attention improves justification. That seems obvious. Perhaps the argument is that Perceptual Justification and Attentional Justification are high-level axioms of perceptual and attentional theory, in the way that the symmetry of identity is a high-level truth about identity. On this view, Ganeri's argument for Attentional Justification can be seen to show that there is a correlate principle within Buddhaghosa's work that is relevant to epistemology in the way that perceptual dogmatism is already thought to be. And yet, one might have thought that the deep exploration of Buddhism and cognitive science would lend itself to more substantive findings. Here are some questions for attentional justification that remain:

- (i) If attention improves justification is there a minimum or maximum of attention? For example, is there a maximum point of saturation beyond which attention does not improve justification?
- (ii) Why is it that attention improves justification as opposed to merely entitling one to believe? Why is Buddhaghosa's attentional epistemology brought into the terminology of Western epistemology via the concept of justification, given that (a) justification can be understood in so many different ways in Western philosophy (internalism vs. externalism), and (b) 'justification' may have no clean analogue in Sanskrit or Pāli? Might it be easier to defend an

externalist account of attention through Tyler Burge's account of entitlement? On this account, we would say that a subject who is attending to an object and its features is *entitled* to believe something about that object and its features, as opposed to having an improvement in *justification*. And this account can also be applied to animals.

- (iii) What is the relation between Perceptual Justification and Attentional Justification? Is it that perceptual justification gives one immediate justification, and attending to the object further gets one more justification than if one were not attending to the object?

In contrast to Attentional Justification, Attentional Knowledge appears to be a substantive principle. It tells us that expert attention suffices for knowledge in certain cases. And this must mean that expertise can alter the epistemic status of attention. This is important because it gets us to a place where we can consider the role of cognitive penetration in relation to both attention and justification. Here is my reconstruction of Ganeri's overall position concerning attention, justification, and knowledge:

- (1) Suppose at t_1 S has a perceptual experience as of a as F , where S is an expert about F s;
- (2) No undercutting or overriding defeaters are present for S from $t_1 \dots t_n$;
- (3) So, at t_2 , S has immediate justification for believing that a is F (from Perceptual Justification);
- (4) Suppose at $t_2 \dots t_{n-1}$ S places and sustains attention on the F -ness of a ;
- (5) So, S improves her justification for believing that a is F (from Attentional Justification);
- (6) Suppose at t_n S's justification moves beyond the *good enough* threshold that marks the difference between justification and knowledge (p. 150);
- (7) So, at t_n S knows that a is F .

Important to this story are two ideas, which I will call (CP) for cognitive penetration, and (NE) for non-error inducing:

- (CP) Expertise in F recognition can cognitively penetrate S's attention;
- (NE) When expertise penetrates it does so without inducing error and is epistemically beneficial.

Ganeri, borrowing from Siegel (2012, p. 205), gives us an important case to consider:

You and a moth expert X take a walk in the forest, looking for moths on tree bark. You look at the same piece of bark. X sees moths where you see none. That's

because her familiarity with the exact shapes of moths lets her fixate more easily on moth-shaped pieces of bark ... In this example, expertise influences fixation of the window of attention. The patterns and contours of bark present many 'illusory conjunctions', and what expertise consists in is a refinement of the processes of distractor-exclusion. The window of attention, now moth shaped, falls only to 'real-bindings', and for the experts the moth just pops out against the background. (p. 148)

As I see it this useful example, which supposedly shows us the way in which attention facilitates knowledge, is underspecified. On the one hand, the claim is that expertise cognitively penetrates one's attention and as a consequence the window of attention falls onto 'real bindings' and not 'illusory conjunctions', but this seems only to give us the view that when expertise penetrates attention there is an improvement in reliability. We are more reliable when we have expertise and we are paying attention. But typically, both in Western and Indian philosophy, knowledge is taken to be factive. And reliability does not entail factivity. So, it is consistent with this account that you are less reliable than X with respect to moth identification, but that none of the things that X picks out in virtue of their expertise are moths, since they are all false positives. (Think barn façade county for moths.) On the other hand, noting that expertise can penetrate vision in the detection of moths leaves open an important issue: is penetration something that happens only with one kind of expertise? For example, suppose that X is both a moth expert and a butterfly expert. How do her two areas of expertise relate to one another in her attention? Does it switch between them as she switches between the tasks of moth and butterfly selection? Is it possible that two types of expertise, closely related to one another, can cross in attention so that they undermine each other in terms of an improvement in justification? Are there cases where we might say, because X is an expert concerning *F*s and *G*s, she is unlikely to be good at detecting either in an environment where both are present? Ganeri is aware of the common complaint that cognitive penetration can lead to a reduction in reliability, and he is correct to use expertise to show how cognitive penetration in attention can lead to knowledge. But there is more work that needs to be done to show how different kinds of expertise interact with each other in specifying the window of attention. Perhaps what we have here is the beginning of attentional epistemology, which might allow for the generation and rewriting of traditional Western epistemology within the framework of attention.

Finally, Ganeri goes on to articulate an account of knowledge on behalf of Pāli Buddhism:

(Knowledge): A factor (*dhamma*) *s* with content *p* constitutes knowledge (*paññā*) that *p* if and only if (1) *p* is true (*yathābhūta*); (2) *s* is a cognition (*ñāṇa*); and (3) delusion (*sammoha*) with respect to *p* is dispelled. (p. 152)

He explains it as follows: '[O]ne knows in case one is right and could not easily have been mistaken. An ordinary observer may easily be mistaken

about patterns on the bark while a moth expert will, as a result of practise, be mistaken much less so' (p. 153). For contemporary epistemologists who worry that they won't find powerful ideas that mirror or compete with the best ideas being developed and explored in current philosophy, we can see within Ganeri's presentation much sophistication. It should be noted that there are always going to be questions about interpretation and semantic range. Do the concepts in Pāli really mean what Ganeri claims they mean? For example, I am sceptical that the counterfactual notion of safety, that is developed within possible worlds semantics and modal epistemology, is something that classical Indian philosophers would have accepted or thought of. But, they likely had their own notion, which was similar though different. In fact, in Ganeri's (2018) *Epistemology from a Sanskrit Point of View* he offers a gloss on some of Śrīharṣa's Gettier-like cases, such as the Gambler and the Deducer. In that work he characterizes a safety-like notion which he terms 'fragility'. He suggests that from the exchanges between Gaṅgeśa and Śrīharṣa we can arrive at a useful conception of *fragile knowledge*. Perhaps the dispositional notion of fragility can be applied to knowledge here as well. In general, one can ask about meaning, and questions concerning meaning should be debated. But what is important is Ganeri's bringing important aspects of Buddhist epistemology to our attention. This has been done before by others, but the breadth and depth of scholarship here deserve our attention and should not go unrecognized simply because we can debate the translations he uses, or because others have gone down this road before. The point here is that this is only the beginning of building epistemology from a cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary perspective.

3. Empathic attention

Attentional epistemology is but one contribution of Ganeri's work. Another standout feature, which actually extends attentional epistemology, is the way in which he leads us from the view that attention is an important feature of mindedness in the world to the view that attention is central to our understanding of human situatedness. He does this in part by arguing for *varieties of attention*, which go beyond the classical cases of selective attention and sustaining attention. In Chapter 13 Ganeri presents us with a developed account of one variety of attention, empathic attention, based primarily on the work of Buddhaghosa.

For Ganeri, empathy 'relates to a person's ability to comprehend the intentions, emotions, and other states of mind of another, to assume what can be called a "second-personal" view in which others appear not merely as bodies but as embodied "you"s' (p. 269). It is distinct from sympathy which involves the ability to have concern for another. But the relation between the two is key. One can only care for another if one can be aware of their mental states. Thus clarifying the relation between empathy and attention is central to grounding the role of sympathy and compassion in the

moral realm. We need to cultivate empathy in order to cultivate sympathy and compassion.

Ganeri aims to deliver an *attentionalist account* of empathy. One way to see how the account works is to set it against a more familiar account deriving from the work of the phenomenologist Max Scheler. According to Scheler, one of the central components of giving a perceptual-skill view of empathy is taking account of expressive phenomena in general, which are states of bodily comportment that have embedded in them a component of the mental state. Through the consideration of expressive phenomena it can be argued that empathy *consists* in, for example, the ability to see a blush *as* shame or hear laughter *as* joy. Empathy involves the skill of *seeing as*. By contrast, the attentionalist account holds that one attends to the other's mental state through their bodily comportment: I attend empathically to your shame through the causal medium of your blush. Thus empathy is other-directed attention: my attention is placed on you and focused on your states of mind. (You are the object selected, and your mental states are the properties accessed.) The attentionalist lays claim to the fact that the body is a prop for accessing the mental states of the other. Rather than holding that the body is seen *as* having a mental state as a quality, the attentionalist maintains that the body is the prop through which the mental state is seen.

One of the key claims of Ganeri's work in this area is that empathy does not require joint attention, and that one important contribution that comes from Buddhaghosa is his concept of intimation (*viññatti*: 'making-known'). He says, 'The idea is that there is a way in which a conscious being disposes itself which serves to "intimate" the mental state within ... One does not just see the intimation in another's posture and movement, one notices the other's intentions through the embodied intimation' (p. 273). Intimations are also available to creatures that cannot make rational inferences. Intimations aim to display intentions.

One of the key upshots of the attentionalist account of empathy is that it keeps clear the distinction between empathy and sympathy without forcing one to accept an account according to which empathy is inferential.

4. The next step

ANS is a great choice for teaching cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary philosophy. But in saying that, I want to reiterate what I said at the outset of this review. To say that it is a great work of that genre is just to say that it is a great choice for teaching philosophy. The next step for philosophers is to embrace the role of synthesizer of information across cultures and disciplines with an eye toward presenting a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or an analytical exploration of a solution to a problem. This work provides a great account of attention that can be challenged, defended, and expanded upon, but it is also a wonderful source of inspiration for those seeking to

bring about philosophical inquiry that is more inclusive, because inclusivity puts us in a better epistemic situation for generating, analysing, debating, and teaching philosophy.

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