

Physical Selflessness

Abstract

The previous two essays discussed selflessness from cognitive and emotional perspectives. Selflessness from both of these perspectives entails maintaining open awareness, or an awareness that is not focussed on an object. Here we discuss how those perspectives map onto objects in the world, and in particular, what it means to be selfless in terms of our physical self.

Humans relate to (physical) objects as if they had some characteristic "essence", or self. From a physical perspective, that self corresponds to our physical body. But why do we identify with the physical body when we could as easily identify with the entirety of our perception? And does it make sense to speak of selflessness if we feel and behave according to the belief that we are firmly rooted in our bodies?

Introduction

Objects seem to be single, contiguous things that are independent of other objects, and which endure through time with relatively little change. However, physical objects are not single: they are collections of smaller parts, and they are also parts of larger wholes. They are causally interdependent with respect to other objects, and they are defined in contrast to other objects. Finally, they are constantly changing (although if they change "too much", they become different objects, and we refer to them by a different name). It seems that the only things about them that are unchanging and independent are our concepts about them.

The lack of correspondence between concepts and actual objects becomes increasingly significant when our self-concept or other highly important concepts are concerned. This lack of correspondence can be felt most keenly at the boundaries of the concept. At the temporal boundaries, concepts begin and cease their application to an object at the birth (or creation) and death (or destruction) of that object: a seed turning into a sprout is a classical example of this transition. At the physical boundaries, concepts similarly change abruptly from one to another, and in fact most spatial locations are conceived of as belonging to a single (containing) object. The physical transition underlying that transition are often more gradual; for example, map boundaries often have no significant geological basis. Finally, the independent existence of objects is dubious because in characterizing any given object, we

are forced to describe and understand it in terms of other objects. An object cannot be tall without other objects which are short.

The rest of this essay explores a particular example of this correspondence between concept and object: self-identification.

Definition of Self

Both legally and for purposes of social interaction, we are most often identified with our bodies and perhaps our thoughts¹. Identification with our bodies is convenient because everyone else can see our bodies, and there is not significant disagreement about the boundaries of our physical bodies in physical space. The physical definition of one's self, or the interior of one's bodily extension in space², is understood to persist through time, constitute a single thing, and to be more or less independent of other objects.

For any point in space and time, we can readily say which object contains it.

We relate to the world in terms of objects of approximately our size, although it is equally composed of atoms. We relate to the world in terms of objects of approximately our size, although it is actually composed of planets. This dualistic tendency to decompose the universe into parts (or selves) in the particular way we do, as opposed to viewing and interacting with it in terms of its multiple potential levels of composition, is neither necessary nor productive. From the psychological point of view, the fundamental dualism between self and other is a conceptual abstraction. From the physical point of view, our self is our body: but in what sense is it ours?

The Body

Very few animals, such as monkeys, elephants and dolphins, have the concept of a bodily sense of self³. Humans learn this concept at childhood. But what exactly did we learn, and could we have learned something else?

The body that we identify with is defined at least in part by a third-person perspective. In other words, people learn to refer to their bodies as "me" by forming a concept, and that concept is largely formed by (linguistic) interaction with others. This is different from a first person perspective, which is based entirely on perception or sensation. In line with the finding that very few creatures have a concept of self, and based somewhat on the assumption that the concept of self/other is the first dualistic distinction to be learned, it seems reasonable to conclude that the subjective (first-person) perspective is non-dualistic.

If we did not know what the body was, we might define it as "the contiguous object that we can move with our will". Being able to move the body is significant because from the sensory point of view, there is no reason to single out bodily sensation from among the five senses. In other words, your arm may look very much like my arm: it is not my arm only because I cannot move it about by an act of will⁴. Ultimately, all notions of identity have some faults, since there is no perfect correspondence between concepts and objects.

The concept of self that we identify with extends beyond the boundary of the body. Emotional self-identity, which might be understood to be the collection of things which we love, extends well beyond the boundary of the body. For example, different cultures have varying degrees of "personal space" which extends beyond the boundary of body. In materialistic cultures with a sense of property ownership, one's material possessions seem to be a part of oneself, such that one might even take pride in one's possessions just as one would their body.

Definition of Selflessness

The subjective (first-person) perspective is non-dualistic, and corresponds to the intuitive mind. The objective (third-person) perspective is dualistic, and corresponds to the conceptual mind. Selflessness is a result of the combination of these two perspectives. This union results in kindness, for the instinctual and non-conceptual desire to obtain happiness and avoid suffering extends to all creatures in virtue of the lack of a narrow self-identification.

If our consciousness is truly nondualistic or selfless, but it is still knowing, then is there any sense in which a self is identified? In a sense, there is no self as a dualistic concept. This expression of selflessness was famously used by the Buddha. On the other hand, one might say that there is only self, which is expressed in various ways in the Hindu tradition. Language famously breaks down in its attempts to describe dualistic understanding, but while it is impossible to say what it is from a first-person perspective, various descriptions of it from a third-person perspective remain possible.

The World

In concrete terms, what does it mean to identify with the world, or with the limits of perception, as opposed to the body? It means not to identify exclusively with the body. The knowledge of the body is obviously not lost, for then we would be describing a state of ignorance.

If we understand our self to be coextensive with the limits of perception, then there is nothing that we are not. This may seem an abuse of language, but it may be true from a first-person perspective, or a non-dual perspective without a self-concept. In other words, while we may not literally be coextensive with the world from a third-person perspective, it may be that all of our awareness is somehow awareness of our mind⁵.

If you are not convinced that we could in fact be perceiving our minds as opposed to "directly" perceiving reality, consider the nature of dreams. When we dream, we perceive a world, despite the fact that there is no external basis for that world. This demonstrates that at the very least, we may perceive that (internal) world during waking life, even if it is caused by an external world at that point. And if we are perceiving an internal reflection of an outside world, then clearly there is validity to the statement that everything we perceive is ourself.

These statements should NOT be taken as a denial of external reality, but rather support for the thesis that there are different perspectives, a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective, both of which may be true. It may even be the case that these perspectives can both be known at the same time by a selfless consciousness.

Conclusion

This essay reaches the conclusion that selflessness is objective non-dualism. The expression of this fact is difficult, but it can be approximated by saying that there is no self, or that everything is self. In that sense, calling it objective is foolish, since there is no subjective, but there is knowledge of other, so it is not limited by subjectivity. Further, it contains the knowing of dualism, but it is not limited to a dualistic (conceptual) understanding. As a result of these things, the motivation to obtain happiness and avoid suffering for all beings manifests as unconditional love, and the openness of awareness results in great equanimity.

May this set of essays help someone to understand something, and thereby obtain some small benefit, or persist in a personal transformation, which may result in great benefit.

Ultimately, S.D.G.

¹ which are assumed to be produced by our brains, and are therefore also inside of our bodies (excluding, of course, the recent extension of our thoughts through intellectual property law)

² The term “other” can be defined as the complement of the self, or the exterior of your bodily extension in space and time.

³ This has been assessed by marking the animal on their face, and then showing them a mirror. If they investigate the mark on their face that they can see only by using the mirror, it is concluded that they have a sense that they are looking at their self in the mirror.

⁴ This notion of identity would obviously not be suitable for paralyzed people.

⁵ or perhaps awareness of our heart-mind, since it is an awareness with a loving aspect.