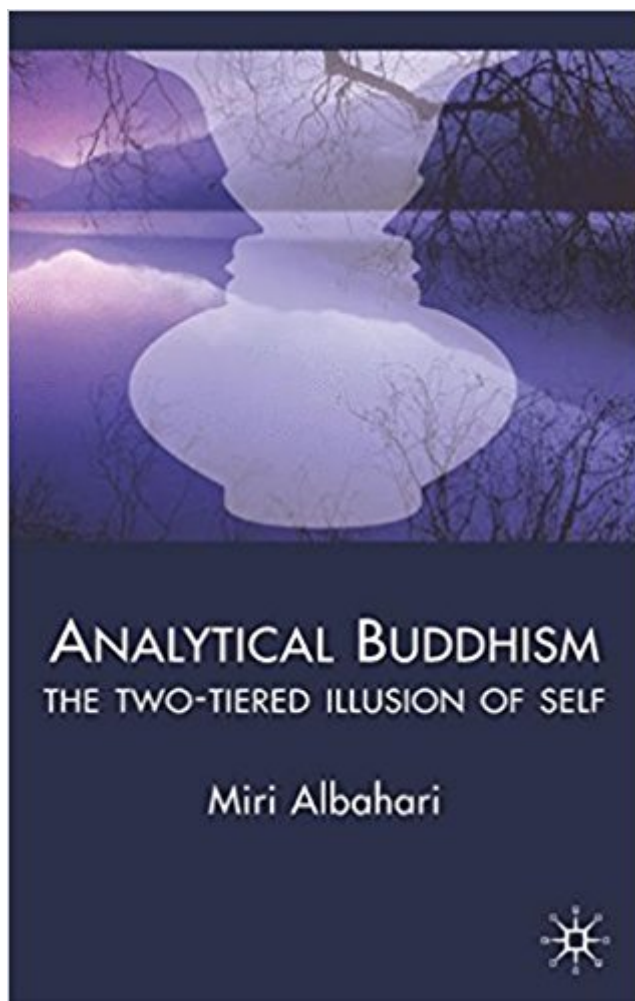


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Analytical Buddhism: The Two-tiered Illusion Of Self



Synopsis

Does the self - a unified, separate, persisting thinker/owner/agent - exist? Drawing on Western philosophy, neurology and Theravadin Buddhism, this book argues that the self is an illusion created by a tier of non-illusory consciousness and a tier of desire-driven thought and emotion, and that separateness underpins the self's illusory status.

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Customer Reviews

'This is an extraordinary book. It pursues Buddhist thought as a live philosophy, not as an already set belief system. By developing insights from the Buddhist tradition with the analytic tools of modern philosophy, Albahari produces an account of self and self-awareness that is at once continuous with mainstream philosophy of mind and refreshingly original. The result is a novel brand of eliminativism about the self, one that is phenomenologically rather than scientifically inspired.' - Uriah Kriegel, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Arizona, US

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It has been said sometimes that western philosophy is a philosophy of the waking state. All other states of mind (e.g., oniric sleep, deep sleep) are almost ignored. In this sense, eastern philosophies seem to be more comprehensive. Exploring some powerful eastern philosophies (advaita vedanta and, specially, madhyamaka buddhism) Miri Albahari finds an underlying feature: the denying of the

self as unconstructed; that is to say, that the self is a mental construct, or, as it is usually encapsulated in those traditions, that the self is illusory. But this feature has also been highlighted by at least some western philosophers. Al Bahari mentions Hume, James, Flanagan, Dennett and Damasio (I also recall Thomas Metzinger and Galen Strawson). Of course, an initial problem with the self is precisely the (dis)agreement about what the self is. But Al Bahari sets just from the beginning what concept of self she is talking about, defining it accurately in accordance with Theravada Buddhism (P.81). She also establishes carefully the concepts she will use when analyzing this self (e.g., construct or illusion). Next, she will argue, with admirable rigor, that the self will be an illusion if and only if it is a construct. And she will try to show that the self is an illusion contributed by two tiers: -The naturally unified consciousness (itself non-illusory). -The thoughts (emotions, moods, perceptions, ruminations, etc) belief and desire driven, that while illusorily seeming to arise from a self, in fact help build and think such self. The elimination of that type of self (were it possible as Buddhism holds) would not erase awareness (or native consciousness, or consciousness without-sense-of-self) but would leave it intact. One of the theories Al Bahari examines more in detail and finds closer to her insights, is the one by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. On Damasio's theory, 'core consciousness' involves awareness coupled with a basic sense of self, though he never alludes to the 'awareness component' as a separate factor. In Al Bahari's words, "awareness sans-sense-of-self is not, it would seem, a mere conceptual possibility. It is plausible to suppose that newborn infants and more primitive animals" (and arahants, she will add later on) "will also harbor awareness without a sense of huddled self". (Arahants, in Buddhism, are individuals who have realized nibbana: brought an end to their suffering) Though, as Al Bahari recognizes, "investigation into such a description would have to face the hurdle of showing that it is this awareness, this consciousness simpliciter, which carries the most basic cognitive capacities that are needed to survive in the world". But at this point it seems that the most deeply rooted intuitions collide. It reminds me of a passage from William James, somehow resonating with that idea: "only newborn babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, blows or illnesses, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a 'that' which is not a definite 'what'", suggesting, perhaps, that only a deficient or underdeveloped consciousness can actually 'have' a pure experience. It would seem, then, that at this point James (expressing perhaps the ordinary intuition) and Eastern philosophy diverge. Awareness, or 'pure experience', would be for James a sort of immature or malfunctioning consciousness, whereas it would be for some Eastern philosophies the real foundation of consciousness. Some Eastern thought, thus, discovers, underlying all states of human 'conscious' life (e.g., waking, dreaming, slumber), and not only human by the way, a more basic,

raw 'awareness' experience. But, what is this 'awareness'? Can we know and say something about it or just remain silent (a la Wittgenstein)? How to 'dive' into it without being fooled by our own constructed cognitive consciousness? I really hope that Miri Albahari keeps on exploring these issues, and sharing her insights in a way as brilliant and enlightening as this book.

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