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REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

JAY L. GARFIELD, *LOSING OURSELVES: LEARNING TO LIVE WITHOUT A SELF*,
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Wittgenstein in his letter to Ludwig von Ficker regarding *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* writes that the point of his book is an “ethical one”. In a similar vein, Jay L. Garfield in the preface to his book tells his readers that the main import of his work in arguing for the non-existence of self, but that of *persons* is an ethical one. In advancing his claim, he relies on the 7th C Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti and David Hume, with whom a parallel can be drawn. Garfield undertakes conceptual analysis of the notion of self in a rigorous manner through ten chapters spanning over 170 pages to convincingly show that in the end, it is not selves but persons that persist. As he points out, this, the non-existence of selves but existence of persons, has ethical bearings in our lives.

What is the self? For this question, we have to identify what self is supposed to be. Self is construed as *ātman* in the Indian context and as psyche in the Christian tradition, a unitary being, a witness (*sākṣin*) and agent, always a subject, and always persistent. Hume and Heidegger argue against self in the Western tradition, as Buddhism in the Indian tradition. Śāntideva, a mid-eighth C Buddhist monk, argues that we

think we have selves primarily because of the fear of death and that the notion of self arises in challenging situations. Instead of the self, Garfield brings in the notion of person to account for our sense of mortality and morals.

The book under review deals with the Buddhist arguments of *no self*, focusing on Candrakīrti and briefly with Hume’s analysis, and conclude with contemporary neuroscience. It also takes us swiftly to the arguments offered by Vasubandhu, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein and build the case, through four conceptual ingredients for the existence of self, namely: 1. Priority; 2. Unity; 3. Subject-object duality; 4. Agency.

The author thoroughly considers the Classical argument, both in Western and in Indian traditions, and the Transcendental argument for the existence of self. Quick argument for the existence of self is the Cartesian, familiar to us as *cogito* argument. The cogito argument, *I am thinking*, does not prove self – thought is not self. Cartesian view is based on classical metaphysics where object is construed as substance with properties. Garfield concludes that cogito argument may demonstrate that we

exist but it fails to show the existence of selves as opposed to persons.

Transcendental argument is that reality of self is needed to explain following: “(1) the *synchronic* unity of consciousness and of its objects; (2) the *diachronic* unity of personal identity; (3) the *sense of oneself* in agency and subjectivity; (4) the possibility of individuating and distinguishing obviously distinct individual persons.” (p. 49) The main premise of transcendental argument is that I recognize experiences as mine because of the reality of a same subject who has those experiences, a single consciousness which is self. Contrary to this, the premise that our experience is unified and the conclusion of existence of the singular self is invalid. Though it can be a good argument for the existence of person, it is not an argument for the existence of self that persist through time.

So, what are we if we are not selves? Garfield claims that we are persons. In Latin, *persona* means a mask which is worn in theatre, a role. To be a person means to play a role, for example, family role, role in society, among friends etc. While, self is primordial, pre-existent, unitary, transcendent of social world and independent of the body or mind, person, on the other hand, is constructed, dependent on body and mind, as well as a social context.

Does this notion of person support the idea of the *minimal self*? Fifth Chapter, the longest one, deals with the arguments for the existence of minimal self. Here Garfield engages with the minimal self or a bare subjectivity, and the *narrative self*. Arguments from philosophers like Galen Strawson, Evan Thompson, Dan Zahavi and Daniel Hutto figure in this chapter. Strawson takes the standpoint of reflexivity to defend the existence of a self-aware self. However, this is false, as these arguments do not prove the existence of self. Strawson’s arguments are transcendental in form,

presupposing the duality of subject and object as structure of experience. Garfield rejects those arguments as he sees the duality as an illusion. Next, he takes up Thompson’s argument which according to him is a development of the arguments of the classical Indian philosopher Dignāga. Thompson’s argument is quite similar to Strawson’s, though the understanding of reflexivity differs in that it is not an explicit awareness, but only an implicit sense of owning one’s self-experience.

The argument for the “minimal self” in Zahavi’s thought proceeds as follows: the object of experience of person has to be understood in relation to the subject, it “must be *owned* by subjectivity.” (p. 83) And self is that subjectivity. There is something common in different experiences of a person, subjective opposing the other, and that Zahavi calls *for-me-ness* or *mine-ness*. Garfield rejects this position too. He says that one will not have an experience first and then question whose it is. There is no property of my experience that I can differentiate that is different from the property of somebody else’s experience. And that the experience is mine again does not prove that there is self, contrary to *person*. Finally, the notion of the *narrative* or *constructed* self is taken up for analysis. Hutto argues for this kind of self, where our identity is built upon narratives that we create about ourselves as the foundation of our subjectivity. This explanation is true for the person, not for the self. Even though it looks natural to us to see oneself as a self, albeit a constructed one through narration, it is still a delusion to take ourselves to be independent subject, the agent behind all activity. To me, this resonates with the account offered by Janko Nešić with regard to the notion of “uncertain selves”. (Nešić, J.: *Self: From One to Many and Back to None*, Belgrade: Institute of Social Sciences, 2024, p. 127)

Having thus distinguished the idea of “self” and “person,” the next chapter portrays the “selfless spontaneity and skillful living,” (p. 101) in which there is no self. There is deep connection between what we take ourselves to be subjects, and between how we understand our experience in the subject-object duality. When we see ourselves as subject, we see ourselves as standing *against* the world, and not as *Being-in-the-world* (a la Heidegger). From the understanding of subject-object duality arises the notion of agency. All these separations are denied as we do not stand in opposition to the world, but we are *immersed* in it. Garfield suggests, as any proper Buddhist will, that through skillful practice immersion happens. The difference is not psychological, but phenomenological – how we experience: when one is a novice, learning new skill, and when one is expert.

The non-existence of self has a positive outcome in as it helps one to abandon egoism. It is egoism that prompts us to see ourselves as the center of the landscape. Our cognitive relation to the world defines our ethical relation to the world. The alternative is to take ourselves as persons, together with other persons in the world, always already relational. Referring to Sāntideva, author brings out another dimension of moral implications for the notion of self as an enduring substance, independently standing outside of causation. Self with its free will is not influenced by the causal chain. However, the embodied person is subjected to causation. As interdependent persons it gives us healthier moral responses than merely blaming the other self for any moral wrongs.

There are many levels of personhood from the bottom up - biological, psychological, and finally social. This is known as *supervenience*. But Garfield is claiming, rightly, that this is not the right order to understand ourselves. Actually, it is the opposite. “We are an ultrasocial

species.” (p. 137) Our language shapes our understanding. Our political context can condition our social failure or success, and so on. We cannot understand our psychology without understanding who we are socially. The persona, the role one is playing in social life, cannot be understood if the context is not understood. To understand a person, we must take multidimensional perspective and the interaction of those levels.

How we emerge as a person is through the recognition of a second person. Infant communicates with nonlinguistic actions and those are *interpreted* by caregivers. Those actions are *dialogical*. Language has a crucial role in differentiating humans from animals and is possible because of linguistic rules. Customs and conventions that are also important as far as norms and laws are concerned. To be *normative* is one of the deepest aspects of our nature.

Ninth chapter starts with analogy of the bee and the bee hive explaining how one can understand persons. One does not understand a bee by observing one bee in isolation, but the whole bee hive. Similarly, we understand persons only in connection with the world, understanding different roles and context in which persons are. And in this, the self does not find its place. As pointed out earlier, we develop our subjectivity through second-person interactions and this is how we differentiate ourselves from others. Thus, subjectivity is based on intersubjectivity, it is not private. With accepting norms and acting responsibly, taking ourselves to be persons, we take others to be persons too. We are *collective*. Here, we are brought back to the narrative self, where our identity is really narrative, but for the person, not for the self. Narratives can be positive but they can also be destructive. And, just as Hamlet does not exist outside of the story, we are also constructed within the role we are. There is no reality outside of the narrative that is

created and that is why we are *persons*, not *selves*. We are *embedded*, *embodied* and *enactive*.

If we take seriously that we are persons, interrelated, interpreting one another, and interpreting ourselves, then division between oneself and other stops to exist, together with the illusion of a private, inner world. To allow others to be recognized, to be addressed is to recognize them as members of the same community, being together with them in the world. As pointed out in the beginning, what matters to Garfield ultimately is ethics and values. Understanding us as persons, relational, interdependent, in the world, together with others, brings the ethical way of our possible existence. Taking Śāntideva, he concludes that when we are able to see ourselves as being in others' shoes, when we regard others as our closest friends, or mothers, and recognize interdependence with them, then we will see that suffering is bad in itself, not because it is mine or yours. This points towards universal care and true moral concern.

What strikes in this book is that there are many stories, analogies and

examples, so one can get a very clear view and understanding what the writer so passionately tries to prove.

Jay L. Garfield, in this interesting book persuasively argues that there is no self, that self is an illusion, and what exists is a person. We are persons, first of all, social organism, playing social roles in the world, interacting causally with others. Realizing that we are no psyche or *ātman* may feel scary and disturbing, and can feel we are less worthy. However, Garfield convincingly shows that the truth is it's opposite. The self, what we were taught we are, is limiting us, making us separated from others, as well from the context in which we exist, and it reduces the quality of our life. The strength of the book lies in its strong articulation of cross-cultural philosophy of (no)self. *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* is valuable addition to the works like *Attention, Not Self* by Jonardon Ganeri. This way of doing philosophy has gain acceptance in recent times, finally recognizing the value of non-western philosophies in advancing out understanding and enhancing knowledge.