

Self-Givenness Does Not Establish Self-Grounding: Why Perspectival Aseity Dissolves to Seity

Zain Dana Harper

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Abstract

Can consciousness be the one reality that grounds itself? The question is whether it can be the single thing that owns its own existence without receiving that existence from something else. Five philosophical traditions make this claim in their strongest published forms. They are Descartes' cogito, Galen Strawson's robust phenomenal subject, the Indic doctrine of *svapṛakāśa* (self-luminosity) as developed through Dan Zahavi's account of pre-reflective self-awareness, Fichte's self-positing absolute I, and Advaita Vedānta's self-established Ātman. This paper tests each tradition against one distinction, the distinction between *self-givenness* and *self-grounding*. Self-givenness is an epistemic property. A thing is self-given when it is known from itself. Doubt of a certain kind cannot touch it. It shows itself by its own light, and its character is built in without being borrowed from relations to other things. Self-grounding is an ontological property. A thing is self-grounding when its very existence is ungenerated and depends on nothing else. A second test uses one picture. Heat is built into a flame, and the flame still depends on fuel. Having a built-in character does not prove that a thing owns its own existence. The paper argues that the first four traditions, taken at full strength, deliver self-givenness and stop short of self-grounding. On that reading they are correct about something narrower than they claim. They are instances of *seity*, which is ownerless occurrence that is self-given and still dependent. Three well-known critiques reach this result from different starting points, so the result does not rest on any single theory. They are Lichtenberg's correction of the cogito (from *ich denke*, I think, to *es denkt*, there is thinking), Kant's First Paralogism, and Candrakīrti's lamp. The fifth tradition, Advaita Vedānta, is a real and undefeated standoff at the ultimate level. Any no-aseity framework has to set that standoff aside without claiming to refute it. The paper closes by stating the exact honest limit. There is no aseity in the conferred or conventional order. Whether the ultimate ground is a self-luminous aseity is the open Advaita–Madhyamaka question, set aside and left unsettled.

Keywords: aseity, seity, self-givenness, self-luminosity, cogito, Advaita Vedānta, perspectival consciousness

In plain terms

Think about a candle flame. The flame is hot. The heat is not something added to the flame from outside. You do not need a second fire to make the flame hot. The heat is simply part of what the flame is. In that sense the heat is “self-given.” It comes with the flame and needs no outside help.

Now ask a different question. Where does the flame itself come from? The flame burns because there is fuel: wax, a wick, and air. Take the fuel away and the flame stops existing. So the flame does not own its own existence. Its existence depends on conditions outside the flame. In that sense the flame is not “self-grounding.”

Something can carry its own character, like heat that needs no outside source, and still depend on the outside world for the fact that it exists at all. Self-givenness is one property and self-grounding is another. Both feel like a kind of independence, which is why they are easy to confuse.

Now replace the flame with your own conscious experience. When you feel or think something, that experience shows up “for you” in a direct way. You do not need a second inner observer to certify that the experience is happening. You cannot be wrong, in a certain narrow way, about the fact that experiencing is going on right now. That is the self-givenness of consciousness, and it is real. This paper never denies it.

The tempting next step says that because my experience is known from itself and cannot be doubted, my conscious self must also be the one thing that grounds its own existence. That step is the mistake the paper is about. It uses the flame’s heat to prove that the flame needs no fuel.

Five great traditions take that step, each in its own way. Descartes says “I think, therefore I am,” and he treats the thinking “I” as a rock-bottom certainty. Galen Strawson defends a real, concrete subject of experience. In the Indic self-luminosity doctrine, consciousness lights itself like a lamp. For Fichte, the I posits itself absolutely, from nothing prior. Advaita Vedānta points to a witness-consciousness that cannot be denied and so must be self-established.

The paper looks hard at each one. For the first four, the same thing happens every time. The tradition proves that experience is self-given. It does not prove that the conscious subject owns its own existence. What is shown is a flame with built-in heat, and the flame still needs fuel. Three separate thinkers, working in different places and centuries, made this same correction. Lichtenberg said the honest report is “there is thinking,” and the cogito does not license “I think.” Kant showed that the bare “I think” that tags along with all my thoughts does not prove there is a self-standing soul underneath them. Candrakīrti said a lamp does not light itself, because it burns on oil.

So four of the five claims shrink, under a fair reading, from aseity down to seity. Aseity means owning your own existence. Seity is a genuine, self-given happening that still depends on conditions and has no owner behind it.

The fifth tradition is different, and the paper is honest about it. Advaita Vedānta does not claim self-grounding for the everyday self. It agrees that the everyday self is dependent. It makes its claim only about the ultimate witness, the bare awareness that all experience shows up within. Against that claim, the flame picture does not obviously apply, because the flame picture is about particular things arising inside the world, and it does not reach the ground of all arising. The rival Buddhist Madhyamaka school pushes back and says even that ultimate awareness is empty of self-grounded existence. Neither side has beaten the other. So the paper does not pretend to. It sets that one dispute aside as open.

The result is small and stable. No conscious subject in the ordinary, conditioned world grounds its own existence. Self-givenness does not amount to self-grounding. The one place where the question stays open is the ultimate level, where a serious and undefeated debate continues.

1. Introduction

Plainly: there is a long-standing pull to treat consciousness as the one thing that grounds itself. This paper argues that what feels like self-grounding is only self-givenness.

Philosophy of mind and metaphysics carry a standing temptation. The temptation is to treat consciousness as the one exception to dependence. On this view, consciousness is the single reality that grounds itself and does not receive its being from elsewhere. The temptation is not arbitrary. First-person experience presents itself with unusual force. It cannot be doubted from the inside in the way external objects can. It seems to carry its own warrant and to be, in some sense, its own evidence. The claim shows up across many traditions. It runs from Descartes' foundational *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) through Fichte's absolute self-positing, and from the Vedāntic *sākṣin* (the witness) to the pre-reflective self-awareness studied by contemporary phenomenologists. In each case the claim takes a recognizable shape. Consciousness, or the first-person subject, is held to be the self-grounding thing, the one entity whose being does not hang on anything else, and the point reaches past mere immediacy in knowledge.

This paper calls that claim *perspectival aseity*. Aseity is a term from classical theology and metaphysics. It names the property of existing *a se*, which is Latin for “from oneself.” A thing has aseity when it exists from and through itself, ungenerated, and depending on no other entity for its existence. The claim of perspectival aseity is that the first-person perspective has exactly this property. The conscious subject, the knowing center, whatever name a given tradition uses, is said to exist from and through itself.

The paper's thesis is direct. Perspectival aseity, examined at its five strongest published points, delivers *seity* and falls short of aseity. Seity is a narrower property. It names what is left when we deny aseity to something that is still not other-determined in the plain way a stone is. Such a thing is self-given and ownerless, and it occurs. Its existence is not self-grounded. It is received or dependent, even when the dependence relation is unusual or hard to describe. The apparent perspectival aseity, once we look at it closely and stop suppressing it, turns out to be seity, an ownerless occurrence that is self-given and not self-grounded.

The argument proceeds through five traditions. Sections 3 through 7 take each in turn, at its strongest, and apply the master distinction and the master image. Section 8 presents the two-level result. At the empirical level, the apparent perspectival aseity dissolves into seity. The ultimate level is different: one tradition, Advaita Vedānta, produces a real standoff that must be set aside without being refuted. Section 9 states the honest bound with precision. Section 10 concludes.

A note on method. This paper does not argue that consciousness is unimportant, derivative, or reducible to something else. The self-givenness of experience is real and philosophically significant. By self-givenness of experience the paper means its intrinsic, first-person character, its immunity to certain forms of doubt, and its non-relational intimacy. The argument here is restricted. It says that self-givenness, however real, is a different property from self-grounding. The move from the first property to the second, which each of the five traditions makes in some form, is not warranted. The distinction matters because merging the two produces inflated conclusions about what exists from premises that are only about what we know.

2. The Master Distinction and the Flame

Plainly: self-givenness means being known from itself and self-grounding means existing from itself. A flame shows that built-in character does not prove independent existence.

The distinction that decides everything below can be stated in a few lines.

Self-givenness is an epistemic property. A property is epistemic when it concerns knowing. A thing is self-given when it is known or warranted from itself. It does not need an outside certification to count as manifest. Its presence cannot be doubted in some characteristic way. Its character is intrinsic, which means built in and not made up out of relations to other things. Several traditions describe forms of this. One form is self-luminosity in the Indic tradition, a cognition that reveals its own occurrence and needs no second cognition to reveal it. Another is immunity-to-error-through-misidentification, in Sydney Shoemaker's formulation, an analytic-philosophy version which holds that first-person reports about one's own mental states cannot go wrong in the particular way that third-person reports can. A third is the pre-reflective self-awareness that Dan Zahavi draws from Husserl and Sartre. It says experience is always already given *as mine*, present in the very structure of experiencing and not added by a later act of self-attribution. All of these are genuine phenomena. The paper does not dispute them.

Self-grounding is an ontological property. A property is ontological when it concerns being or existence. A thing is self-grounding when it depends on nothing else for its existence. It is what the scholastic tradition called *causa sui* in the most literal sense, meaning cause of itself: its existence is not conferred by, derived from, or sustained by any other entity or condition. This is aseity in the strict sense. It is a strong claim. In classical theism it belongs to God alone. Spinoza's monism assigns it to the single substance. To claim it for the first-person subject, or for consciousness, is to claim something remarkable.

Confusing these two properties is the error this paper tracks. The slide from self-givenness to self-grounding is seductive, because self-givenness does look like a form of independence. It is independence from external epistemic warrant, from relational constitution, and from the kind of uncertainty that attaches to knowledge of the external world. Epistemic independence of that kind is compatible with ontological dependence. A thing can present itself from itself and still depend, for its very existence, on conditions outside itself.

The flame image makes this precise. Heat is intrinsic to a flame in a clear sense. The flame does not have heat because of any relation to something external. Heat is part of what being a flame is. The flame's heat is, one might say, self-given. It does not need to be imported from outside, and it is there in the very occurrence of the flame. The flame still depends on fuel for its existence. Take away the fuel, and the flame stops existing altogether. So the intrinsic character of the heat is compatible with the dependent existence of the flame. Having a built-in character does not prove aseity of existence.

This image recurs across the five traditions as the diagnostic test. Wherever a tradition offers a consciousness whose character is intrinsic, self-luminous, or self-given, one question follows. Does that built-in character establish non-dependence of existence? In every case except the last, the answer is no.

3. The Cogito: Self-Givenness Without a Self-Grounding I

Plainly: Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" proves that thinking is happening, and it does not prove that there is a self-standing "I" that owns the thinking.

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* is the prototype of perspectival aseity. It is the most familiar attempt to derive a self-grounding first-person from the structure of doubt. The argument is well known. One cannot doubt that one is doubting without performing a doubting. The doubting is a kind of thinking. Wherever there is thinking, so the argument runs, there is an I that thinks. Therefore *I am* cannot be overturned, and the I that thinks is established as the one indubitable reality. The apparent aseity lies in one move: the move from indubitability to existence. The I appears self-given, and it further seems to establish its own existence by the very act of being doubted away.

The decisive critique of this move came later, from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg in the late eighteenth century, in the *Sudelbücher* (the Waste Books). Lichtenberg's observation is compact and surgical. The cogito licenses *es denkt*, which is German for "there is thinking" or "it thinks." The cogito does not extend to *ich denke*, "I think." The indubitable datum is that thinking is occurring now. It does not follow that there is a subject, a substantial, persisting, self-identical I, that owns the thinking. That further inference is exactly what Descartes needs, and the cogito does not supply it. The datum of indubitability is impersonal. It registers an occurrence and no owner of the occurrence. The grammatical subject "I" in *cogito* may be nothing more than the formal requirement that German and Latin verbs take a subject. On that reading it is no more ontologically loaded than the "it" in "it is raining."

Kant reaches the same point by a different route, in the First Paralogism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A paralogism is a piece of reasoning that looks valid and is not. The First Paralogism, as Kant analyzes it, is the invalid step from the formal unity of apperception to a substantial, simple, numerically identical soul. Apperception here is the "I think" that must be able to accompany all my representations. Kant's point is that this "I think" is a logical condition on the unity of experience and does not reveal a substance. In his careful phrase, it is a *mere representation* that accompanies. It establishes that representations are mine in the formal sense of belonging to one unified apperception. It gives no self-grounding substantial entity that underlies and explains this unity. The inference to substance is precisely what Kant calls the paralogism: an argument whose middle term shifts meaning between the premises, giving it the mere appearance of validity.

Even the strongest reconstructions of the cogito's epistemic force do not overcome this diagnosis. Shoemaker's immunity-to-error-through-misidentification shows that first-person reports cannot go wrong in one specific way about whose experience is being reported. That is precisely a self-givenness claim and carries no self-grounding claim. It shows the experience is given as mine, and it does not show a self-grounding mine that generates it. Thomas Nagel's insistence on the subjective character of experience makes a related point. There is *something it is like* to be a bat. This establishes that experience has an intrinsic, perspectival character that cannot be reduced to third-person description. Again, this is a claim about the character of the experience and not about the ontological status of the experiencing subject. What is given is the thinking-now, the occurrence-from-here. The cogito does not deliver a subject that grounds that occurrence in its own being.

The cogito, then, vindicates seity and not aseity. Self-givenness is present here. The thinking-now is indubitable, intrinsically perspectival, and immune to a certain class of doubt. What is missing is self-grounding. The thinking-now is an occurrence whose existence depends on conditions that the *cogito* neither specifies nor excludes. The *es denkt* is ownerless, self-given and not self-grounded.

4. Galen Strawson's Robust Subject: Intrinsic Character, Dependent Existence

Plainly: the strongest modern defense of a real subject of experience shows that experience has built-in character and that the subject arises and perishes, which is dependence and not aseity.

The strongest contemporary analytic case for a robust phenomenal subject comes from Galen Strawson. Strawson has argued at length against eliminativist and illusionist treatments of experience. Eliminativism denies that experience as ordinarily conceived exists at all. Under illusionism, experience only seems to have the features we attribute to it. Strawson's position has at least two components that bear directly on the question of perspectival aseity.

The first is a Russellian claim about the intrinsic nature of matter. Bertrand Russell, in *The Analysis of Matter* (1927) and *Human Knowledge* (1948), argued that physics describes only the structural and relational prop-

erties of matter and leaves its intrinsic nature unknown. Following this, Strawson argues that phenomenal experience may constitute or reveal the intrinsic nature of physical reality. On this view, the experiential is what the physical *is* from the inside, taken intrinsically, and not an extra thing sitting alongside it. This is a serious position, and its scope is limited. It establishes that the experiential character of certain physical processes is intrinsic to those processes, non-relational and not further analyzable in structural terms. This is exactly the flame's heat, a built-in character that is compatible with dependent existence. The Russellian claim about intrinsic nature establishes nothing about whether the physical substrate that experience supervenes on, or is identical with, is itself self-grounding. Physics describes a world of structured dependencies and causal relations. On this view the intrinsic nature of matter is experiential, and the matter itself, with its experiential intrinsic nature, is as causally and ontologically dependent as any physical process.

The second component of Strawson's position is his insistence on genuine, concrete subjects of experience. He calls them *SEcts* (subjects of experience) or *SESMETs* (subjects of experience that are mental entities) in various formulations. Strawson wants to resist dissolving the subject into a bundle of experiences with no owner. His SESMETs have a revealing feature. In his own treatment they are short-lived. They arise, persist briefly, and perish. This matters. A self-grounding entity, an entity with genuine aseity, is ungenerated and non-perishing. A SESMET that arises and perishes is, by that very fact, a dependent entity. It comes into being under certain conditions and passes away when those conditions change. Its existence is conditioned and not self-grounded. So the very feature of Strawson's view that most respects the reality of the subject, namely the insistence that subjects are genuine concrete entities and not logical fictions, is also what reveals them as dependent. They are generated and perishing, and *a se* existence would be neither.

Strawson thus provides, in his own work, the two elements of the flame image applied to the consciousness case. The Russellian intrinsicality gives us the heat, the non-relational, intrinsic experiential character. The SESMET ontology supplies the fuel-dependence, the arising and perishing of the subject under conditions it does not itself provide. The strongest realist subject in analytic philosophy of mind delivers the intrinsic character of a dependent existence and stops short of aseity.

The diagnostic precision here is worth noting. Strawson explicitly opposes eliminativism, illusionism, and deflationary treatments of consciousness. His work establishes beyond reasonable doubt that there is real, intrinsic, non-relational experiential character. The argument of this paper grants that. It disputes only the further step to self-grounding existence. Strawson himself does not make that step, and his own SESMET ontology rules it out.

5. Svaparakāśa and Pre-Reflective Self-Awareness: Epistemic Luminosity Without Ontological Grounding

Plainly: consciousness lighting itself, like a lamp, shows that it needs no outside certifier. It does not show that the lamp needs no oil.

The Sanskrit term *svaparakāśa* means self-luminosity. It names a doctrine held in various forms across several Indian philosophical schools. The doctrine says that consciousness illuminates itself and needs no external illumination. A lamp lights other things by its own light and does not need a second lamp to make it visible. In the same way, consciousness makes other things known and is itself known in the very act of knowing. The doctrine captures something that Western phenomenology reached from a different direction: pre-reflective self-awareness.

Dan Zahavi's phenomenological account of pre-reflective self-awareness is developed in *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (2005) and elsewhere, drawing on Husserl, Sartre, and the broader phenomenological tradition.

It holds that experience is always already given as mine. This happens in the pre-reflective structure of experiencing itself, and not through a later act of reflection or self-attribution. Jean-Paul Sartre made a version of this point in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* (1943). The pre-reflective cogito is the mode in which consciousness is present to itself, and it precedes and makes possible the reflective cogito. Experience carries an intrinsic first-personal character, a *for-me-ness*, that is not added to it from outside.

These claims are well grounded phenomenologically, and the paper grants them in full. Pre-reflective self-awareness is a real and important structure. The for-me-ness of experience is intrinsic and not relational. Consciousness is, in the relevant sense, self-luminous. Its presence does not need to be certified by anything outside it.

This is a self-givenness claim. The lamp illuminates itself and other things, and the lamp depends on oil for its existence. Candrakīrti, the seventh-century Mādhyamika philosopher, pressed this point against the *svaprapakāśa* doctrine in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Entry into the Middle Way). A lamp, he argued, does not illuminate itself. What the lamp does is make things visible. The lamp itself is simply there, burning. The question of what makes the lamp's burning real is the question of what conditions sustain it. The self-luminosity doctrine, Candrakīrti argues, confuses the lamp's making-other-things-visible with some kind of self-establishing act. The lamp does not ground its own existence. It burns in dependence on conditions.

The application to consciousness is direct. Pre-reflective self-awareness, the for-me-ness of experience, the self-luminous character of cognition, establishes that consciousness does not require an external certifier or a second act of reflection in order to be given. This is self-givenness. It does not establish that the consciousness so given exists independently of conditions that lie outside it. Those conditions are neurological, evolutionary, developmental, and causal. The lamp's warmth is intrinsic and its burning is dependent. Experience shows the same shape, with an intrinsic for-me-ness and a conditioned occurrence.

Zahavi himself is careful not to overclaim. His argument is phenomenological, about the structure of experience as experienced. It is not metaphysical, and it says nothing about the ultimate ontological status of the experiencing subject. The for-me-ness he identifies is an intrinsic phenomenological character and not a metaphysical aseity. The slip from Zahavi's legitimate phenomenological conclusion to a metaphysical aseity claim requires exactly the step that Candrakīrti's lamp argument blocks.

The *svaprapakāśa* doctrine, taken at its strongest, vindicates the intrinsic self-givenness of consciousness. It does not establish that the consciousness so given is the source of its own existence.

6. Fichte's Self-Positing I: *Schlechthin* and Its Concealed Dependence

Plainly: Fichte says the I posits itself absolutely. The word "absolutely" is asserted and not earned, and his own system admits the I depends on a limit it does not supply.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794–95 is perhaps the most systematic philosophical attempt to derive the self-grounding of the I from the very structure of self-consciousness. Fichte's starting point is the *Tathandlung*, which means act-fact, the self-positing of the I. The absolute I posits itself, and this self-positing is the unconditioned foundation of all reality, and not a contingent occurrence. The adverb Fichte uses is *schlechthin*, which means absolutely, unconditionally, without remainder. The I posits itself absolutely, with no prior condition, and in doing so it posits the very structure within which anything else can appear.

The argument has philosophical power. Fichte is responding to the Kantian problem of the thing-in-itself and to the need for a non-hypothetical starting point for philosophy. If the I posits itself in the absolute sense, it would have aseity. Its existence would be grounded in nothing other than its own self-positing act.

The critical question is whether *schlechthin*, the absoluteness of the self-positing, is established or merely assumed. Dieter Henrich's well-known analysis in "Fichte's Original Insight" (1966) showed that the structure of self-consciousness cannot be explained by a pure self-positing act alone. Any account of self-consciousness that begins with a subject positing itself already presupposes that the subject is itself, which is precisely what needed to be explained. The self-positing is circular in a way that does not generate being from nothing. It presupposes a prior being that the positing merely acknowledges. Ernst Tugendhat, in *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination* (1979), pressed a related point. A consciousness that is "acquainted with itself" must be acquainted with something. That means the acquaintance relation must already be in place before any self-positing act can occur.

Under these scrutinies, what Fichte's framework delivers is a sophisticated account of the *structure* of self-positing, of what it is for there to be a self-consciousness at all. This is self-giveness made maximally explicit. The I is given to itself in an act that is not preceded by any other act and is not constituted by any external relation. The adverb *schlechthin*, which would carry the argument from self-giveness to aseity, is not earned by the argument. It is a declaration. Fichte's own system concedes this at a structural level. The absolute I requires the *Anstoß*, which means the check, the resistance, the not-I that limits the I's infinite self-positing, as a condition of any determinate empirical consciousness. The empirical I, the I that anyone can identify with, depends on the *Anstoß*, a condition that it does not provide from itself. The absolute I, meanwhile, becomes a regulative ideal and not a concrete entity. Neither the concrete version nor the ideal version achieves aseity.

The slide from self-giveness to aseity in Fichte is carried by *schlechthin*, a word that smuggles the conclusion into the premise. Remove the adverb, or require it to be earned and not merely declared, and what remains is a precise and profound account of the self-positing structure of self-consciousness. The I is self-given, given in an act that cannot be further reduced. The existence of the I that does this positing is not self-grounded by the act. "Positing is occurring" does not license "positing grounds its own occurrence."

7. Advaita's Self-Established Ātman: The Genuine Standoff

Plainly: Advaita agrees the everyday self is dependent and claims aseity only for the ultimate witness. The Buddhist reply that even that witness is empty is serious, and neither side has won.

The fifth and most serious form of perspectival aseity comes from Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta is a non-dual school of Indian philosophy. The position is articulated in Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (Commentary on the Brahma Sūtras) and elaborated by the tradition he founded. The Advaita position has two features that set it sharply apart from the four traditions already examined.

First, Advaita locates aseity explicitly at the ultimate level. This is the level of *turīya* (the fourth), the witness-consciousness (*sākṣin*), the self-luminous Ātman that is identical with Brahman. Ātman here means the self, and Brahman means ultimate reality. Advaita does not claim aseity for the empirical ego (*jīva*). It regards the empirical ego as *mithyā*, which means phenomenally real and ultimately illusory. The empirical ego belongs to the conventional order of *vyavahāra*. This everyday self arises and passes away. It is composite and conditioned. So Advaita agrees entirely with the diagnosis applied to the previous four traditions at the empirical level: the ordinary experiencing subject has no aseity. The claim of aseity is made for the ultimate witness-consciousness alone. That is the pure awareness that underlies and witnesses all empirical experience without itself being an object within experience.

Second, Śaṅkara's argument for the self-establishment of the *sākṣin* has a distinctive logical structure. The witness-consciousness cannot be denied without circularity. Any act of denial is itself an occurrence within

consciousness. The consciousness that makes the denial possible cannot itself be made the object of denial without starting a regress. Furthermore, the *sākṣin* is said to be self-luminous in a stronger sense than the lamp. The claim goes past consciousness illuminating other things. Consciousness is the ground of illumination as such. So it cannot itself be a derived or dependent entity, because then the derivation relation itself would go unexplained. Śaṅkara's move is from the ineliminability and non-objectifiability of witness-consciousness to its self-establishment. Ineliminability means it cannot be removed from the picture. Non-objectifiability is the point that it cannot be turned into an object of awareness. His reasoning uses a grounding excluded-middle: everything is either other-grounded or self-grounded. What cannot be derived from conditions and cannot be denied must, on that disjunction, be self-grounded.

This argument earns a serious form of self-giveness. The *sākṣin* is self-luminous in the strongest sense. It is the condition of the possibility of any illumination whatsoever, and so it cannot itself be illuminated by anything else. The ineliminability argument is sound. Any attempt to eliminate or derive the witness-consciousness presupposes it. The non-objectifiability is well grounded phenomenologically. One cannot make the witnessing awareness an object of awareness without a further witnessing awareness, and so on.

The argument faces its most serious challenge in one place: the move from non-derivability to self-grounding, which is the grounding excluded-middle. Śaṅkara's move assumes there are only two options. Either a thing is other-grounded, meaning derived from conditions outside it, or it is self-grounded, meaning existent *a se*. Given this exhaustive disjunction, the ineliminability and non-derivability of the *sākṣin* is enough to establish its self-grounding.

This excluded middle forecloses a third option, and Madhyamaka philosophy argues for it. Madhyamaka is the Buddhist Middle Way school. The third option is ownerless groundlessness, or what the tradition calls *śūnyatā*, which means emptiness. The Madhyamaka position, developed by Nāgārjuna and carried through Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, is that phenomena are dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpanna*) in a sense that rules out both other-grounding in any substantial sense and self-grounding. Things arise in dependence on conditions, without there being any ground, self or other, that is itself non-dependent. The series of dependently arisen phenomena does not bottom out in a self-grounding terminus. It is empty of any such terminus.

Suppose the Madhyamaka third option is coherent. A substantial body of contemporary scholarship on Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti argues that it is. Then Śaṅkara's grounding excluded-middle begs the question. The ineliminability of the *sākṣin* is compatible with the Madhyamaka conclusion that even the ultimate witnessing awareness is empty of self-grounded existence. On that reading it arises dependently, or, in the limit case of cessation (*nirvāṇa*), does not arise at all. The appearance of aseity would then be, on the Madhyamaka reading, a deep and stubborn case of *svabhāva-graha*, which means grasping at intrinsic existence, persisting even at the ultimate level of the witness-consciousness.

This is a standoff, and not a refutation of Advaita. The Madhyamaka must show that the third option, ownerless groundlessness, is coherent as applied to the ultimate witnessing awareness itself. Advaita has a powerful response here. If the Madhyamaka denies any self-grounding ground, it owes an account of what sustains the dependent arising without a terminus. A regress of dependently arisen phenomena without any ground risks an infinite regress, or an unexplained brute fact of arising. Advaita argues that this regress cannot be coherent without a self-luminous witness as its condition.

The standoff is genuine. Neither side can claim victory in the philosophical literature. Jan Westerhoff's work on Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka epistemology gives the best contemporary account of the Madhyamaka resources. The Advaita tradition has its own sophisticated defenders. The key observation for this paper is structural. The Advaita standoff occurs entirely at the *ultimate* level, which is the level the no-aseity thesis already brackets. Advaita explicitly agrees that the empirical ego has no aseity. The dispute is about whether

the ultimate ground of all experiencing is self-established, or whether even that ground is empty of intrinsic existence. This dispute is genuine and unresolved, and the paper brackets it.

8. The Two-Level Result

Plainly: at the everyday level, all four cases collapse from aseity to seity, and three separate critiques agree on why. At the ultimate level, Advaita stands undefeated.

The five traditions yield a structured result when read together.

At the empirical level, the verdict is decisive and converging. The cogito delivers an indubitable occurrence, *es denkt*, there is thinking, and it does not deliver a self-grounding I. Galen Strawson's robust subject gives a real, intrinsic phenomenal character, the flame's heat, and it locates that character in a subject that is generated and perishable, which is the mark of dependence. The *svapraśāsa* tradition and Zahavi's pre-reflective self-awareness yield the intrinsic for-me-ness of experience, a full self-givenness, and the lamp that illuminates still depends on oil. Fichte's self-positing I provides the most systematic account of the structure of self-positing consciousness. The word *schlechthin* is not earned, and the Anstoß concedes empirical dependence.

This verdict does not come from the no-aseity thesis defending itself against attack. Three canonical critiques produce it, converging independently. They are Lichtenberg's *es denkt* (Germany, eighteenth century), Kant's First Paralogism (Germany, 1781), and Candrakīrti's lamp argument (India, seventh century). These three critiques arose in different traditions and responded to different philosophical problems. They arrive at the same diagnostic conclusion. The apparent self-grounding of the first-person subject is an appearance generated by the self-givenness of experience. The self-givenness is real, and the self-grounding is an illicit inference from it. The empirical perspectival aseity dissolves into seity.

The convergence of these three critiques across traditions is significant supporting evidence, though not, by itself, decisive. Cross-traditional convergence, where traditions share no common authority and no common method yet reach the same structural diagnosis, carries more weight than any single-tradition argument. It must be characterized honestly. It is convergence *within one domain*, the analysis of consciousness and the first-person standpoint. Agreement reached within a single problem-domain, still more within a single body of work, is not the independent confirmation that *cross-domain* convergence would supply. The diagnosis is therefore advanced at moderate-to-high confidence. It is robust across traditions, and its decisive independent corroboration would come, if at all, from convergence reached in a different domain entirely.

At the ultimate level, the result is different in kind. Advaita Vedānta's self-established *sākṣin* is not dissolved by the flame image, because Advaita explicitly makes its claim at the level where the flame image may not apply. That is the level of the ground of all arising, and not a particular arising within the empirical order. The Advaita argument cannot be refuted by pointing to the dependence of empirical experiences, because Advaita agrees that empirical experiences are dependent. The argument turns on whether the ultimate witnessing awareness is itself dependently arisen or self-grounded, and that dispute with Madhyamaka is genuine and unresolved.

What this means for the overall argument is twofold. First, the no-aseity claim cannot be maintained in the universal form "no aseity anywhere, not even at the ultimate floor." Advaita is a live and undefeated challenge to that universal claim. Second, the no-aseity claim can be maintained at the empirical and conventional level without qualification. No empirical perspectival aseity is available. The apparent self-grounding of the first-person subject dissolves into seity under scrutiny.

9. The Honest Bound

Plainly: the position can claim, with confidence, that there is no aseity in the everyday order. It must concede, as an open question, whether the ultimate ground is a self-luminous aseity.

The preceding analysis establishes a precise line between what the no-aseity position can claim and what it must concede.

What it can claim, and what this paper argues is established by the canonical critiques: *no aseity in the conferred, conventional, or empirical order*. The everyday first-person subject does not possess aseity. This is the subject of psychological description, phenomenological analysis, and ordinary linguistic reference. Its existence is conditioned by neurological processes, developmental history, ongoing causal relations, and whatever ultimate ground, or absence of ground, underlies all of this. Its self-givenness, the intrinsic, for-me character of its experience, is real and philosophically significant. Self-givenness does not amount to self-grounding, and the five strongest traditions that have argued otherwise deliver only self-givenness under careful scrutiny.

What it must concede: *whether the ultimate ground of all experiencing is a self-luminous aseity is an open question that is bracketed and unsettled*. Advaita Vedānta has argued, with philosophical rigor and a continuous tradition of sophisticated defense, that the ultimate witnessing awareness is self-established and cannot coherently be denied. The Madhyamaka has argued that even this ground is empty of intrinsic existence. Neither has defeated the other. A no-aseity position that claims universal scope, meaning no aseity anywhere, including at the ultimate metaphysical floor, must either engage and defeat the Advaita argument on its own terms or bracket the claim. This paper takes the second route, because the first has not been accomplished.

The bracketing is the honest epistemic situation, and not a retreat. Philosophy at its best works by conjecture and refutation. You make the strongest case and press it against the strongest opposition. Then you report the verdict honestly, including the verdicts that go against you. The verdict here has two parts. The empirical dissolution is decisive (high confidence). The ultimate standoff is genuine (the no-aseity position cannot claim victory here, and Advaita stands undefeated at the floor).

This two-level structure also clarifies how the paper's argument relates to several live debates in philosophy of mind and metaphysics. The argument does not support eliminativism or illusionism about consciousness, because the self-givenness and intrinsic character of experience are affirmed throughout. It does not support bundle theory or no-self in any naive form. The seity that remains after the dissolution of perspectival aseity is not nothing. It is an ownerless occurrence, a self-given event without a self-grounding owner. The argument also leaves the significance of the hard problem of consciousness intact. The intrinsic, perspectival character of experience, the fact that there is something it is like, is compatible with the self-givenness that the argument affirms, and the argument presupposes it.

Keith Frankish's illusionism (2016) holds that phenomenal consciousness as ordinarily conceived is an introspective illusion. This differs from the paper's position. This paper treats the for-me-ness of experience as real, and it argues that the ontological conclusions some philosophers draw from that for-me-ness are unwarranted. The self-givenness is real, and the self-grounding is the unwarranted inference.

John Perry's work on the essential indexical (1979, 2001) illuminates the self-givenness side of the distinction from a different angle. First-person indexical reference cannot be reduced to third-person description, and this captures the intrinsic perspectival character of the first-person standpoint. This irreducibility is a feature of the *givenness* of the first-person perspective and not of its *grounding*. Perry's essential indexical establishes that the first-person standpoint cannot be eliminated in favor of objective descriptions. That is a self-givenness result, compatible with the dependent existence of the perspective so given.

10. Conclusion

Plainly: a thing known from itself is not thereby a thing that grounds itself. That holds everywhere in the everyday order, and the one open exception is honestly named.

The question was whether consciousness is the one self-grounding reality: whether the first-person perspective possesses its existence from and through itself, ungenerated and non-dependent. The paper has argued that the five strongest philosophical traditions pressing this claim all deliver, at the empirical level, something real and significant that differs from what they claim. They deliver self-givenness and stop short of self-grounding.

The master distinction is simple and consequential. A thing known from itself is not thereby a thing that grounds itself. The flame's heat is intrinsic to the flame, and the flame depends on fuel. First-person experience has an intrinsic, non-relational, for-me character that is not conferred from outside and does not require external certification, and this is real. The occurrence of the experiencing, the arising of the perspective, and the existence of the subject depend on conditions that the self-givenness of experience neither provides nor excludes.

Three canonical critiques converge across traditions on this diagnosis. They are Lichtenberg's correction of the cogito from *ich denke* to *es denkt*, Kant's First Paralogism showing that the formal unity of apperception does not license inference to a self-grounding substance, and Candrakīrti's lamp argument showing that self-luminosity does not establish independence from conditions. The convergence of these three critiques, arising independently in the German Enlightenment and in seventh-century Mādhyamika Buddhism, is the cross-traditional evidence that the dissolution of empirical perspectival aseity is a structural finding about the relationship between self-givenness and self-grounding, and not a parochial result.

At the ultimate level, the paper concedes what honesty requires. The Advaita Vedānta position, as developed in Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* and the tradition it founded, is a real and undefeated philosophical standoff. The self-established *sākṣin*, the witness-consciousness that cannot be denied without circularity and cannot be derived without a further witnessing, is a serious argument for ultimate perspectival aseity that the Mādhyamaka has contested and not demonstrably refuted. The appropriate response is to bracket it precisely, and not to suppress it in the interest of a clean universal conclusion. No aseity holds in the conferred and conventional order. Whether the ultimate ground is a self-luminous aseity is the open Advaita–Mādhyamaka question, left as what it is.

The stable result is this: *self-givenness does not amount to self-grounding*. The apparent perspectival aseity, illuminated at its five strongest points, is seity, an ownerless occurrence that is self-given and not self-grounded. The one exception is the ultimate level. There the question stays in the bracket, undefeated and unrefuted, and philosophy of mind and comparative metaphysics have to keep pressing it.

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