

Nyāya Arguments for the Self

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1. Plan

- *The Self*. The self is the referent of the first-person pronoun “I” such that (i) it is the subject of conscious mental states, and (ii) plays the role of an agent with respect to actions, and (iii) it persists through time.
- *The Nyāya Conception*. The Nyāya philosophers not only think that there is a substantially real self, but also that it has two additional features.
 - **DISTINCTNESS**. The self is distinct from the body and its parts (e.g., the senses) as well as from conscious mental states;
 - **PERMANENCE**. The self is unproduced and indestructible.
- *Our Plan*. I’ll do three things.
 - I’ll explain how Vātsyāyana, the 4th or 5th century author of the commentary (*bhāṣya*) on the *Nyāya-sūtra* (henceforth, NS), defends a substantially real self.
 - Then, I’ll consider an objection from Vasubandhu, and see how Uddyotakara, the 6th century author of *The Gloss* (*vārttika*) on Vātsyāyana’s commentary, responds to it.
 - Then, I’ll say how Vātsyāyana, Uddyotakara, and another later Naiyāyika, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa (9th century CE), defend **DISTINCTNESS** and **PERMANENCE**.

This, in turn, is inspired by a view of the self found in the Upaniṣads. See, e.g., Chāndogya Upaniṣad VI.7-12. For discussion of this view, see Matthew Kapstein, “Indra’s Search for the Self and the Beginnings of Philosophical Perplexity in India,” *Religious Studies* 24 (2) (1988):239-256.

2. Vātsyāyana’s Argument for the Self

- *An Observation*. Start with an example.

Durian. You’ve tasted durian on your last trip to Singapore, and found it disgusting. Now, you’re visiting your friend in Shanghai. Your friend loves durian, so she slices up a freshly bought durian and serves it to you. You want to leave the room. You try to get up. But then you recall how close you are to your friend. So, for the sake of your friendship, you sit down and take a bite. Immediately, you feel queasy.

Your aversion for the durian before you, your desire to leave the room, your trying to leave the room, your desire to sit down, your attempt to take a bite, and the pain you feel as a result—all this can only be possible if you are able to recall and recognise things that you've experienced in the past.

- *The Argument.* In his commentary on NS 1.1.10, Vātsyāyana observes that memory and recognition of this sort provide evidence for the self.

- P1. Ordinary mental states—desire, aversion, etc.—occur.
- P2. Such mental states can occur only if memory and recognition occur.
- P3. Memory and recognition occur only if there is a substantially real subject who persists through time and who undergoes various conscious experiences and thoughts at different times.
- P4. Such a subject is nothing other than the substantially real self.
- C. There is a substantially real self.

Motivation for P3: if P3 were false, what is perceived by one person could be remembered by another.

- *Vasubandhu's Response.* P3 is false.
 - The self is nothing other than a causally connected stream of aggregates (*skandha*), i.e., psycho-physical elements. This stream is substantially unreal. For nothing that is a collection or temporally extended is substantially real.
 - We can explain memory and recognition simply by appealing to the causal connections between different time-slices of this stream.

[Question:] If there is no self anywhere, how can there be any memory of a previously experienced object, or its recognition, in momentary minds (*citta*)?

[Reply:] From a distinctive mind that is connected to and involves the discrimination of an object.

[Question:] What is that distinctive mind, immediately after which there is a memory?

[Reply:] It is one (a) which possesses, amongst other things, a resemblance to an enjoyment of an object and an act of discrimination that is connected to that, and (b) the power of which is not weakened by the peculiarities of the body, grief, distraction, etc. For even though it may resemble that object, a distinctive mind which is not connected to it is incapable of producing a memory of it. And even if it is connected to it, a mind which resembles another object is incapable of producing a memory of the original object. When it is both, it is so capable, so there is a memory. Such capacity is not perceived anywhere else.

NS 1.1.10. Desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain, and awareness are the signs of the self.

The relevant passage is in P. Pradhan *Abhidharma-kośabhāṣya of Vasubandhu* (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1975), 472. Vasubandhu goes on to explain why the motivation for P3 fails: “[Question:] How, now, is that which is perceived by one mental event is remembered by another? For, on your view, what was perceived by Devadatta's mental event might be remembered by Yajñadatta.

[Reply:] Not so, owing to a lack of connection. For those two have no connection as do two mental events belonging to the same continuum, because they are not related as cause and effect. Moreover, we do not say, “what was seen by one mental event is remembered by another.” But rather that the other mental event which remembers comes into being from the mental event which perceives, as has been said, through the transformation of the continuum. What fault is there here? Furthermore, recognition occurs only owing to memory.”

- *Uddyotakara's Rejoinder from Instability and a Lack of Relation.* To get the result that the stream of aggregates is substantially unreal, the Buddhist needs:

DOCTRINE OF MOMENTARINESS. For any two distinct times t and t^* , there is no substantially real entity that is present at both t and t^* .

If this is true, then it's hard for the Buddhist to explain how memory is possible.

- Consider an example:

Disappearing Hammers. I am angry at my enemy, so I want to take it out on his car. I have many hammers; I want to use one of those to leave a dent on his car. But, unbeknownst to me, my hammers have two curious properties: some of them simply pop out of existence when my enemy has a car, and the others simply melt when brought to close to the car's surface. Can I use these hammers to leave a dent in my enemy's car?

The answer is "No." This motivates:

UDDYOTAKARA'S PRINCIPLE. For any two entities x, y , if x is to immediately causally affect y , then there must be some time t such that (i) x and y are present at t and (ii) x stands in an appropriate relation to y at t so as to causally affect it.

- Now, compare:

Disappearing Awareness. I am just a mind-body stream composed of momentary mental and physical elements. Suppose I am now tasting a durian in Singapore. In order to remember it later, this experience must leave a trace or an impression in my mind. But, on the Buddhist view, my experience has a curious property: it can't affect a mind (*citta*) that already exists (since it's already produced and about to be destroyed), and whenever a later mind that could carry its impression comes into existence, the experience pops out of existence. Can my experience leave an impression?

The answer is "No."

- *The Argument.*

P1. A conscious experience or thought can produce a later recollective awareness only if it leaves a memory trace (*vāsana*) in a present or future mind.

P2. A conscious experience or thought can leave a trace in a present or future mind only if there is a time at which the experience or thought occurs together with the present or future mind, and is appropriately related to it so as to causally impact it.

P3. If the DOCTRINE OF MOMENTARINESS is true, there is no such time.

C. If the DOCTRINE OF MOMENTARINESS is true, a conscious experience or thought cannot produce a later recollective awareness.

Anantalal Thakur, *Nyāyabhāṣyavārttika of Bhāradvāja Uddyotakara* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1997), 60-1: "This is not right, because of the instability (*asthira*) of awareness-events. For that which is impressed with what leaves a trace is seen to be stable, and there is no stability among awareness-events. And because of the absence of a relation. For that which is impressed with what leaves a trace is seen to be related to it, but among awareness-events there can be no relation with what leaves a trace."

3. Distinctness and Permanence

According to Cārvāka materialists, the human person (*puruṣa*) is just a living body that instantiates both physical and mental properties.

- If the self (i.e., the referent of the first-person pronoun “I”) is a constituent of the human being, then it must either be identical to the living body, or a component of the living body, e.g, the senses.
- If this is true, then neither DISTINCTNESS NOR PERMANENCE can be true.

Vātsyāyana offers several arguments against this materialist view.

3.1 Arguments for Distinctness

- *The Argument from Cross-Modal Reidentification.* The first argument is offered in NS 3.1.1-3, and explained by Vātsyāyana in his commentary.

P1. It is possible for an agent to cross-modally reidentify the same object, e.g., in the judgement, “I now touch the same table that I saw.”

P2. If the self were any individual bodily part, e.g., a sense, or an aggregate of such bodily parts, then such reidentification would be impossible.

C. Therefore, the self is distinct from any individual bodily part or an aggregate of bodily parts.

Objection. The argument at best shows that the different body parts involved in visual and haptic perception, or distinct sensory awareness-events, cannot be the self. Why can’t we say that it’s the brain that cross-modally reidentifies things?

- *The Argument from Karmic Continuity.* The first argument is offered in NS 3.1.4, and explained by Vātsyāyana in his commentary.

P1. According to the law of karmic continuity, every wrong action gives rise to future suffering for the relevant person.

P2. If the person is just the living body, then that law of moral or karmic continuity doesn’t hold.

P3. That law does hold.

C. Therefore, the self cannot be the living body or a set of momentary bodily aggregates.

Objection. What about P3? Surely, the Cārvāka materialist, who is often portrayed as a staunch empiricist, will deny that there is a law of karmic continuity.

- *The Argument from Lack of Consciousness.* This argument is discussed under NS 3.2.47.

Motivation for P2.

- Individual senses, e.g., the haptic sense and the visual sense, cannot grasp both the contents of haptic and visual perception, and therefore, cannot unify such contents to make cross-modal identification of objects possible.
- A mere aggregate of body parts also couldn’t be subject who cross-modally identifies objects. In judgements of the form, “I now touch the same table that I saw,” the subject appears as a unitary entity, not as an aggregate of body parts.

Motivation for P2. Often, a bad person is seen to live a relatively painless life. For the law of karmic continuity to be true, the bad person must suffer in the afterlife. This can only if the bad person (or a constituent of her) is able to survive death. However, if the person is just the living body, then this cannot happen.

P1. If consciousness were a property of the (living) body or its parts, then there would be an observable (physical) difference between a (living) body that possesses consciousness and a (living) body that doesn't.

P2. There may not be any observable (physical) difference between a (living) body that possesses consciousness and a (living) body that doesn't.

P3. Consciousness is a property of the self.

C. The self is distinct from the living body or its parts.

Objection. Vātsyāyana doesn't give any concrete case to support P2.

- Surely, the concrete case cannot be one where the living body is in deep sleep (and therefore lacks consciousness), because, arguably, there is a physical difference between such a living body and a living body that is undergoing conscious experiences.
- A better example might that of a zombie, i.e., a being that instantiates all the same physical states as a person with conscious experiences, but whatever representational states it undergoes lack the phenomenal character that conscious experiences have.
- *The Argument from Persistence.* The 9th century Naiyāyika, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, gives another argument.

First, the body is not the locus of desire, etc. For it is different corresponding to different stages, e.g., childhood, youth, and old age...

[The Opponent:] Only each stage is different. The nature of the body that occupies these stages is the same. This is apprehended in virtue of the status of recognition as knowledge. It is not the case that this recognition is explained otherwise as in the case of the hair and nails that have been clipped off but have grown back. For no destruction is apprehended. In the case of a pillar, etc., it is by means of recognition that one rejects momentariness. Here, also, the recognition is of the same kind.

[Reply:] That is unreasonable. For no cause for distinctness is apprehended in the pillar, etc. In contrast, here, since distinctness with respect to form, transformation, arrangement, etc. is perceived, this recognition based on similarity is just an error. Indeed, in a child's body, in the body of a youth, and in the body of an old man, the same transformations, etc. are apprehended.

The argument can be formalised as follows.

P1. If the self were identical to (living) body or its parts, then the self must also change with any change in the living body or its parts.

P2. A person's self remains the same through large chunks of their lives, even though they have different bodies in childhood, youth, etc.

C. The self is distinct from the living body or its parts.

All premises seem plausible. What do you think?

Motivation for the Premises.

1. P1. Since the living body is just an assemblage of physical elements, any difference in properties between two living bodies must depend differences in observable physical properties. In other words, necessarily, if two living bodies have the same observable physical properties, then they have all the same properties.
2. P2. For any living body that seems conscious, we can find a living body that is physically the same but lacks consciousness.

K. S. Varadacharya, *Nyāyamañjarī of Jayantabhaṭṭa*, Volume II (Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1983), 284-5.

3.2 The Argument for Immortality

Let's say we have an argument for the claim that the self is distinct from the body. That doesn't give us PERMANENCE. In his commentary on NS 3.1.18, Vātsyāyana in fact gives an argument for the immortality of the self.

P1. A newborn infant performs goal-oriented actions instinctively, and undergoes experiences of pleasure, pain, and fear, with respect to various objects.

P2. Such experiences and actions are possible only if the infant had experienced the objects before.

P3. It is possible for the infant to have experienced the objects before only if it had a previous life.

C. Therefore, whatever the infant is, it is able to survive death.

Objection. An objector at this juncture points out that these states and actions are simply explained by innate dispositions that the infant is born with. Vātsyāyana's response (under NS 3.1.21): the infant's instinctive actions and reactions have a kind of specificity that cannot simply be explained by innate dispositions. How convincing is this?

P1 and P3 are plausible. Uddyotakara motivates P3 as follows: "Perceptual experiences that the infant undergoes after its birth cannot explain these states and actions. They must be explained by appeal to memories. Under normal conditions, desire, aversion, happiness, fear, and unhappiness function as follows. Desire can only arise through memory. Happiness involves the satisfaction of desires. Fear is a response to the fact that something unwanted is going to happen. Unhappiness arises from the realization that the possibility of a desire being satisfied is closed off."

4. Conclusion

Let's take stock. We have seen two things.

- There are some plausible arguments in favour of the existence of a substantially real self, and its distinctness from the body, its parts, and conscious mental states.
- However, it's difficult to show that the self truly is unproduced and indestructible.

So, the Nyāya conception of the self, though partially supported, hasn't been defended persuasively.