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Phenomenality, Narrativity, Tulpamancy; Experience Without Subjects?, Abstract

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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Phenomenality, Narrativity, Tulpamancy; Experience Without Subjects?

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In this paper, I examine what the phenomenology of sentient imaginary companions conjured through “thoughtform” meditative practice can teach us about the collective mediation of personhood and experience – “culture” for shorts. I go on to ask whether it is ontologically and ethically honest to hang on to the notion of “the Self”. Can we really speak of experience without subjects?

In fleshing out these questions, I outline a basic cultural neurophenomenology of sociality—the tendency for humans to form cooperative groups and experience shared ways of representing, enacting, and embodying experience. I introduce the notion of interphenomenality to describe the sensory, “what it feels like” aspects of lived experience for humans who come to develop similar ways of feeling and narrativizing their selves. I argue that most of what counts as personhood for humans is shaped, induced, and automatized in ontogeny through selective processes of joint attention that are best described as hypnotic, and discuss my ethnographic and neurophenomenological study of the emerging culture of tulpamancy as a case in point to theorize these mechanisms. Tulpas (a term borrowed from Tibetan Buddhism) are sentient imaginary companions conjured through “thoughtform” meditative practice. Tulpamancy, I offer, presents a fascinating case-study to shed light on fundamentally human cultural-phenomenal mechanisms through which transient, hypnotic, asymmetrically collective, but somatically grounded experiences of personhood invariably arise—and can be altered! In the end, I return to basic onto-epistemic and ethical questions about what counts as a person, and how personhood is knowable. Are we ready to abandon our commitment to the givenness of first-personal experience as a minimal requirement for sentience and consciousness?