

Rachel Paine

Was Hume a Secret Buddhist?

The Philosophers' Magazine

Issue 75, 2nd quarter 2019



No Self: Insights from Hume and Buddhism

No one would have suspected, back in 1738, at the time David Hume was fretting over the negative reception of his *A Treatise of Human Nature* that he would one day be celebrated, not only as one of the greatest philosophers in the English speaking world, but also as a secret Buddhist.

Hume's great treatise, published when he was just 27, had, in his words fallen “dead-born from the press”, but, with a self-described naturally cheerful disposition, he went straight to work on his second attempt, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, leaving those parts of his first treatise he was less than happy with on the shelf. His only complaints later on were that too many of his critics still focused on the “juvenile” work, which he had hoped would be left to gather dust in the archives.

Fortunately for us, the original treatise remains a focus in all its parts: it contains his account of the psychological functions of the human mind, his moral theories that continue to resist challenges from more cognitive accounts, and his account of personal identity, which remained, in his view, unsatisfactory, revealing contradictions in his own thinking and a lack of any resolution. In the Appendix to *The Treatise* he passes the baton on to future philosophers to see what they might make of it.

Philosophers have not been reluctant to take up the challenge. Hume's account of personal identity has led to a wide range of contemporary reappraisals, from its compatibility with neuroscience to its compatibility with Buddhism.

Interested in the latter, the philosopher Alison Gopnik has written on both her personal discovery of the value of Hume's account of the self and on the historical evidence that Hume spent several years in the Scholastic libraries at La Flèche, where he may well have learned of the work of one Ippolito Desideri, an Italian missionary who had written a book about Buddhism listed among those at the library in La Flèche. Perhaps animated discourse between Hume and the

Jesuits who knew Desideri led Hume to develop views of the self that were inspired by the missionary's work, Gopnik suggests, since there are several points of comparison between them. Gopnik is not alone. Hume's "bundle theory" is often compared to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, while the hit TV show *The Good Place*, gives its philosophy professor this view.

Could Hume, a committed empiricist, have been taken by the highly transcendental and allegorically nuanced theories of Tibetan Buddhism? Did Hume find solace, as Gopnik suggests, in such an account? I will argue here that he did not. But, despite some *false friends* and opposing claims, both accounts offer insight into the nature of the self.

Hume argued that there is no single thing that can give rise to our idea of the self. One response would be to say that my body does: I look in the mirror and there I am. I appear in reflection and in the recognition of others as the same person. But this is too quick. Personal identity is meant to refer not to a continuing body (though *Animalism* claims that this is all it is), but to a continuing *person*, a person with a memory, a set of characteristics, and the experiences of living one eventful life from birth to death. So how have we come to have this idea of the continuing self, asks Hume, if, in fact, there is no object to give us this idea? This is how he sets up the problem:

There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain... of its perfect identity and simplicity. Unluckily all those positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self, after the manner it is here explained.

For Hume, to have an idea of something we must have received it from an impression of something. If it doesn't exist we can't have that idea. If we do have an idea of something that does not exist, such as a unicorn, or a golden mountain, it is because we can put together ideas of things like horses and horns, or gold and mountains, and come up with these ideas. But Hume finds no substance that is a likely cause of the idea of the self, nor any objects that can be combined to produce it. Instead, he says:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or

pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception.

We have an experience of being a self, but it doesn't arise from the experience of a substance, an entity of some kind. Rather, there are perceptions, emotions and sensations, all of which are individual, not depending upon each other for their existence, or dependent upon some bare substance called the self as modes or experiences that it has. Hume concludes:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different.

Hume warns us off the idea that the image of the theatre can give us the self. There is no theatre in which the mind presents itself. If there were we would have to have an impression of this theatre in order to have the idea of it. It's a figure of speech, nothing more.

Hume then develops an account that runs throughout his treatise of how our minds work. He aims to establish a science of the mind, something he found lacking in his time. For Hume, the mind can be analysed as having ideas that arise from the impressions we receive from the world, and the imagination that connects our various perceptions to each other.

Hume invokes two principles he finds active in human psychology, the principles of resemblance and causation, in his explanation for how we experience perceptions as related to each other, giving rise to the feeling of a self. He then includes memory to make the connection between former and current perceptions: "...had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person." But memory is not the source of the self, as Locke had argued before Hume.

...having once acquired this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed.

Hume then gives us an insight into identity which resonates with contemporary work on this question. Hume writes:

Identity depends on the relations of ideas and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquired or lost a title to the name of identity.

Personal Identity is what we call a 'vague' term, like being "bald"... it cannot be decided precisely how "identical" one is with oneself over time: am I the same person I was ten years ago? More or less, has to be the answer.

So, is Hume a sceptic about the existence of our identity, understood as being the same thing over time? Yes, in that there isn't something which holds together our memories and perceptions, but this is not scepticism about the self, only a rejection of a particular account of it. Hume argues, instead, that the self, the identity of ourselves over time, is the product of the way the mind works, connecting our perceptions with each other, and the awareness of these over time through memory, allowing our imagination to produce a feeling of continuity and, with that, of unity.

According to Buddhism, there is no substance that gives rise to the idea of the continuing self. That we imagine there is one is not only an error, but one that costs us: the belief we have of our continuing, stable self gives rise to our sense of loss when we cannot grasp this self (since it isn't real), and causes us to suffer.

The clinging the Buddhist refers to in reference to the self is natural to humans, living in a competitive and dangerous world, where protection of ones self is always a central concern. It isn't the threat to our lives, they claim, that causes most human suffering. Rather it is the protective measures we build up against threats that cause the most suffering. For the Buddhist, clinging to an illusory self gives rise to endless fears and frustrations, since we cannot hold on to something which does not really exist. We are constantly feeling the threat of having this self interfered with, and with the threat of our being unable to direct our own fortunes. We are limited in our understanding of human nature by thinking each of us must cling to our individual life in order to live well. Releasing ourselves from the grasping nature of our daily lives, and from the fears and

disappointments associated with clinging to an illusion, we discover our more compassionate and interdependent nature, free from the constant struggle to assert our importance over others.

A good deal of Buddhist teaching relates to the Buddhist conception of the nature of the living world. Buddhism claims that we are not single objects, but emergent natures, arising from the five *skandhas*, also known as heaps, or aggregates, that constitute life:

Material form refers to the six sense organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, as well as the objects sensed through them. For Buddhists, the mind is a sense organ.

Feelings are the felt experiences arising from our experiences of the world through the six senses.

Perceptions are the conceptual recognition of objects.

Mental Formations are acts of attention, will, determination, confidence, concentration, wisdom, energy, desire, hate, ignorance, conceit, self-illusion. (these are the central 12 of the 52 listed)

Consciousness arises from the other skandhas and is our awareness of what is in the world.

Siddhartha Guatama, the Buddha, argued that when we recognise that there is no unchanging and controlling self but only these aggregates or *skandhas*, arising from (conditioned by) other things, we will no longer wish to cling to them. Giving up this clinging attitude toward these impermanent, conditioned aggregates from which our experiences arise will relieve us from the suffering such clinging causes.

It seems, therefore, on this analysis, that Hume and the Buddhists had entirely different aims and some of the confusion around their aims and suppositions turn out to be due to false friends (terms that appear to mean the same thing but turn out not to).

Hume's account is focused on providing a scientific account of the nature of the mind. Siddhartha Guatama focused on the ethical project of giving us a true ground for ending human suffering and building an ethically balanced and flourishing existence. For Hume, strict adherence to empiricist constraints on any investigation of the mind is required to arrive at the truth. In contrast, the Buddha advocated study of Buddhist principles and regular meditation, through which we would lose our belief in the illusory self and replace this with a fulfilled sense of the connectedness of all things.

Hume's "bundle theory" is the view that we are nothing over and above the perceptions we have. The Buddhist "bundle" theory is that we are constituted by *skandhas*, such that we emerge from their being brought together through the activities of life. Hume arrived at this view by

adhering to his empiricist principles. When looking for the self, fleeting and discrete perceptions are all he could claim to experience. But for the Buddhist, the *skandhas* can only be experienced by a practiced Buddhist meditator: this is a theoretical construction based upon a Buddhist conception of the unbounded and interdependent nature of ourselves and all objects in the universe.

Hume found solace in the ordinary life of social interaction, with his philosophy feeling cold and unrelated to the happiness we all wish to experience, and that our untutored experience offers us the account of ourselves we can most happily embrace. Hume writes:

...nature herself ...cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

For the Buddhist, the recognition that the self is not a continuous, stable thing, is liberating. For Hume it leads to unresolvable contradictions and a cold philosophical isolation from the warmth of human interactions. It was deeply distressing to him.

If Hume had learned his sceptical stance regarding the self from the Buddhists, the first thing he would have learned is that this understanding leads to the eradication of suffering, and increased possibilities for a flourishing and compassionate life.

Gopnik offers us an account along Buddhist lines when she writes that her own life improved immeasurably when she gave up trying to unify her experiences. Clinging to her Self as a permanent, determined nature led her to fear the loss of that Self when her life changed dramatically. She also took a page from Hume: live among your friends, and enjoy the riches of your current life; it is here, rather than in the idea of a grand design, that we experience life at its most rewarding.

There are deep insights into our human nature in both these accounts. That one is not the same as the other does not in any way limit the value of either. If reading Hume or studying and practicing Buddhism leads us to reconsider the value of experiencing life as changing and interdependent on those who make up our world, then we are the richer for it.

Perhaps, for those reasons, Hume and the Buddhist monks who shared their wisdom with an Italian missionary in La Flèche might have enjoyed a certain camaraderie, if not precisely the same view of the nature of the human self or of the remedies for our suffering.

Rachel Paine teaches philosophy with the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education and with The London School of Philosophy.

www.philosophylives.com