

## THE NO-SELF THEORY: HUME, BUDDHISM, AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

James Giles

The problem of personal identity is often said to be one of accounting for what it is that gives persons their identity over time. However, once the problem has been construed in these terms, it is plain that too much has already been assumed. For what has been assumed is just that persons do have an identity. To the philosophers who approach the problem with this supposition already accepted, the possibility that there may be no such thing as personal identity is scarcely conceived. As a result, the more fundamental question—whether or not personal identity exists in the first place—remains unasked. Consequently, the no-self theory, that is, the rejection of the notion of personal identity altogether, is never fully considered. One of the reasons for the ignoring of the no-self theory seems to be the failure of many philosophers to distinguish between reductionism and the no-self view. The reasons for this error are perhaps understandable. For there is a sense in which the two theories are in agreement. Both theories, for example, reject the notion of a substantive self which somehow exists beyond the bounds of experience. The difference, however, is that while the reductionist accounts then go on to resurrect the self and, consequently, its identity, in terms of putative psychological relations or various theories of the body, the no-self theory lets the self lie where it has fallen. This is because the no-self theory is not a theory about the self at all. It is rather a rejection of all such theories as inherently untenable. And since reductionism is just one more theory about the self, it, too, must be untenable. In explaining the distinction between these two theories it is instructive to turn to the philosophy of mind, where we find a similar distinction being employed. Here a distinction is often drawn between reductive materialism and eliminative materialism. Both these theories are in agreement so far as they reject the existence of mental phenomena. But while the former attempts to do so by showing how the notion of the mental can be reduced to the physical—that is, that those things called minds are really just brains or states of the brain—the latter rejects the notion of the mental as fundamentally confused, and so hopes to eliminate the idea of the mental altogether. The eliminative materialist would argue that although the reductive materialist is right to reject the idea of the mental, he is wrong to think he can reconstruct the mental in terms of the physical. This is because, it is argued, discourse about things like intentionality and awareness is simply not reducible to discourse about things like neurological states. Importing this distinction into the discussion of personal identity, we could then say that the no-self theory is an eliminative rather than a reductive theory of personal identity. The no-self critique of the reductive theory of

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identity would then be that the concept of self and personal identity cannot be reduced to our ideas about psychology or bodies and, therefore, that such concepts have to be eliminated.<sup>1</sup> We must not, however, push the analogy too far. For although some eliminative materialists see the elimination of the theory of the mental as implying an elimination of mental language, an analogous implication does not hold for the no-self theory. That is, within the no-self theory we can, as I shall soon argue, eliminate the notion of the self and its identity, and yet on pragmatic grounds continue to permit the use of the language of personal identity.

A further but related point that separates reductionism from the no-self theory is that since reductionism seeks to give an account of personal identity—a notion which has its roots firmly embedded in the soil of the strict or nonreductive theory (that is, the view that personal identity is something simple and unanalyzable)—then it has already accepted a certain view into which it must now force the structure of human existence. And this, it would seem, cannot but lead to distorted accounts of how we undergo our experience. The no-self theory, on the other hand, has no such prior commitments. And in this sense it is more phenomenologically based than are the reductionist theories. To borrow Husserl's phrase, it goes back to the things themselves. That is, it starts with an examination of experience rather than with an attachment to the project of how to account for personal identity. This does not mean, of course, that the no-self theory need not face the issue of why someone might come to believe in his own identity. For if there is no such thing as personal identity, then it is essential that we can offer some other account of why someone might be led to think there is.

It is just this sort of approach to the problem of personal identity that is found in the writings of the most important no-self theorist, David Hume. Hume was the first Western philosopher to unmask the confusions attending our idea of personal identity and subsequently to reject the idea as a fiction. It will be worth our while, therefore, to start by conducting a detailed examination of his position. The problem, however, is that there is much disagreement about how we are to interpret Hume on this point. On the one hand, there are some commentators who, while agreeing that Hume does reject the idea of personal identity, go on to proclaim that his account is deeply confused and inconsistent with what he says elsewhere. On the other hand, there are those who argue that his account is quite consistent, but only because he did not really reject the notion of personal identity but only a particular version of that notion. It shall be my contention in what follows that both these accounts are wrong. The latter is wrong because it fails to accept what Hume clearly says, namely, that identity of the self is a fiction. The former is wrong because it finds confusion and inconsistency where, if we are fair to Hume, there is none. This is not to say that Hume is completely

clear and exhaustive in his treatment of personal identity, but only that within his writings we have the makings of a solution to the problem of personal identity.

What, then, is Hume's position? If we attend to the section "Of personal identity" in Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, an answer is immediately forthcoming. Hume starts by pointing out that although some philosophers believe we are continuously aware of something we call the self, when we look to our experience there is nothing to substantiate this belief. We are never, says Hume, aware of any constant invariable impression that could answer to the name of self. What we experience, rather, is a continuous flow of perceptions that replace one another in rapid succession. "When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*," says Hume, "I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception."<sup>2</sup> Within the mind, he continues, these perceptions "successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (p. 253). And there is nothing to the mind but these perceptions. There is consequently never any simplicity within the mind at one time nor identity at two different times. Nor, says Hume, do we have any idea of a self; for every real idea must be derived from some one impression: "but self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have reference" (p. 251).

With this much said against the notion of personal identity, Hume turns to the question of why we have such a proclivity to ascribe identity to our successive perceptions. Prefacing his reply to this question, Hume points out that a distinction must first be made between "personal identity as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves" (p. 253). His concern here, he says, is with the former. He then starts his answer by distinguishing between the ideas of identity and diversity. In the former case we have the idea of an object that persists, invariable and uninterrupted, through a particular span of time. It is this that comprises our idea of identity. In the case of diversity we have the "idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation" (p. 253). Now although these two ideas are plainly distinct, it is certain, says Hume, that in our "common way of thinking" we generally confound them. That is, we often claim that an object at one time is identical with an object at another time, when in fact the two are little more than a succession of different objects connected by a close relation. To justify these absurd ascriptions of identity we either come up with the notion of a substantive self by feigning the continued existence of our perceptions, or we imagine the existence of something mysterious which binds our many

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perceptions together. Even where we do not do this we at least have a propensity to do so. We can see, then, says Hume, that because we often assert the existence of such fictions, the problem of personal identity is not merely a verbal dispute. It is natural to ask, therefore, what it is that induces us mistakenly to attribute identity to something while, being a succession of objects, it is really an instance of diversity. Hume feels that the answer must lie in the workings of the imagination. The reason why we might make such an attribution, says Hume, is that "the passage of thought from the object before the change to the object after it, is so smooth and easy, that we scarce perceive the transition, and are apt to imagine, that 'tis nothing but a continu'd survey of the same object" (p. 256). This is especially true when the alteration is either relatively small or when it occurs gradually and insensibly.

From here Hume goes on to consider the various other ways in which we ascribe identity to objects which are variable and interrupted. This lays the ground for his account of personal identity. For the identity of the mind, like that of such changing things as plants, animals, repaired ships, rebuilt churches, and republics, says Hume, is only a fictitious identity. It must therefore be similarly explicable in terms of the workings of the imagination. Hume concludes his account with the important remark that all "nice and subtile" questions concerning personal identity are best considered as grammatical rather than philosophical difficulties. Thus, except where the notion of a fictional entity or principle is involved, all disputes about personal identity are merely verbal disputes and can never possibly be decided.

A hurried reading of this section of the *Treatise* might well lead one to conclude that Hume is confused; for there are some apparent inconsistencies. These difficulties, however, are resolved by keeping in mind the scope of Hume's project and not allowing his claims to be taken out of context. Let us start our appraisal of Hume by dealing with a criticism raised by one of his commentators. In a paper called "Hume on Personal Identity," Penelhum argues that Hume's account is an immense blunder, "an excellent example of how complex and far-reaching the consequences of a mistake in linguistic analysis or conceptual investigation can be."<sup>3</sup> According to Penelhum, Hume's fatal mistake is to think that one object cannot have many parts. This is false, claims Penelhum, because whether or not an object has parts will depend upon what sort of object it is. A melody, for example, is still one melody even though it consists of a succession of notes. A related mistake, we are told, is Hume's muddling of the distinction between the numerical and specific senses of identity. To remain the same through a period of time is to remain the same in a specific sense: to be exactly the same as one was at an earlier time. For an object to change, however, it must remain numerically the same; for it must be one and the same object which is doing the changing.

Unfortunately for Penelhum, Hume makes it quite plain that he does allow for one object to have many parts, and he even allows that the parts may undergo certain changes without affecting the identity of the whole:

Suppose any mass of matter, of which the parts are contiguous and connected, to be plac'd before us; 'tis plain we must attribute a perfect identity to this mass, provided all the parts continue uninterruptedly and invariably the same, whatever the motion or change of place we may observe either in the whole or in any of the parts. (P. 255)

What Hume does not allow is that an object can maintain its identity with a coming and going of its parts. It might seem, however, that this is all Penelhum needs to have his point go through. For what is a melody but one thing which is a succession of other things? And if this is so, then Hume would appear to be wrong in holding that a succession of objects cannot be one object.

This, however, will not sustain Penelhum's objection. For if a melody is an object, it is a different sort of object than are the objects with which Hume is concerned. A melody, by definition, is a temporal sequence of musical notes: it is something whose existence is necessarily spread out over time. It is therefore logically incapable of existing instantaneously in the specious present. But there are no such logical restrictions on the existence of trees, ships, churches, or persons. We can easily imagine a tree, for instance, which suddenly pops into existence only to disappear immediately. And we can also imagine, it would seem, a person who exists but for a second. It is true that trees and persons as a matter of fact tend to exist for varying durations of time, but I see nothing logically incoherent about their existing merely in the specious present. Indeed, it is just because our idea of a person does allow for the momentary existence of a person that we are able to ask questions about personal identity in the first place. For only when we have allowed this can we raise the question of whether a person existing at this particular instant is the same as an earlier person existing at an earlier instant. We cannot, however, ask the same question about a melody, for melodies do not exist at particular instants; only their notes do.

So Penelhum's alleged counterexample of one melody that contains several parts is quite acceptable to Hume. It is acceptable, first, because Hume never denied that one object cannot consist of several parts and, secondly, because even though a melody is a succession of parts, this is a necessary feature of a melody in a way that it is not a necessary feature of a person.

What about Hume's purported muddling of the numerical and specific senses of identity? This would be a strange error for Hume to make since, as Penelhum is aware, Hume himself draws this very distinction in the course of his argument. But, according to Penelhum, Hume has made

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this mistake just so far as he thinks that for something to remain the same it must not change. For an object to remain unchanged is for it to remain the same in the specific sense. But for an object to change through time it must remain the same in the numerical sense. Of course, says Penelhum, an object can lose its identity by changing, but only if the object is by definition an unchanging thing.

It should not be too difficult to see what is wrong here. Consider Hume's example of a ship that has its parts gradually replaced. It is possible that eventually none of the parts of the original ship remain. And yet the ship of today might be exactly similar to the earlier ship. We can express this relationship by saying the two ships have a specific identity; that is, they exactly resemble each other. It would be false, however, to say that the two ships have a numerical identity; for there is nothing about them that is *numerically* the same. In contrast to this, Penelhum argues that the only reason for saying that something has lost its identity (that is, has become another thing) is that it is by definition an unchanging thing. Since nothing in the definition of a ship seems to rule out the possibility of the ship having its parts repaired, then even though the ship of today shares not one plank or bolt in common with the earlier ship, the two are nonetheless numerically identical, that is, one and the same ship. But were we to accept this scenario we would immediately be faced with a difficulty. For how could we distinguish between the situation where a ship has persisted without changing any of its parts, and the very different situation where it has changed all of its parts? The natural way for us to mark this distinction would be to say that in the former case the ship of today is exactly one and the same as the earlier ship, while in the latter case it only resembles the earlier ship. That is, in the first case the two ships are numerically identical, but in the second case they are only specifically identical. But on Penelhum's account we cannot draw this distinction, because there is no distinction to be drawn. Both cases have equal claim to being instances of numerical identity. And yet it is obvious that there is an important distinction to be made here. In the case of the unaltered ship, what we have is a ship that is identical in the strongest sense with the earlier ship. In the case where the ship suffers a total change of its parts, it can be the same as the earlier ship only in a weaker sense. And this distinction, which is natural to make, is merely the distinction between numerical and specific identity. Hume's account of identity allows us to make this distinction; Penelhum's does not. It seems, therefore, that it is Penelhum who has muddled things.

We should not, however, be led to conclude that the distinction between numerical and specific identity is central to Hume's discussion. For Hume is not really interested in specific identity and only introduces the distinction by way of showing how we might come to ascribe (numerical) identity where there is none. One such way—and there are

other ways—is to confound the ideas of numerical and specific identity and to claim that two successive objects are numerically identical when they are only specifically identical.

This, it seems, is the mistake made by James Noxon.<sup>4</sup> Noxon tries to argue that this distinction lies at the heart of Hume's thesis and that Hume's real purpose is to show how identity terms can be meaningfully applied to persons once the numerical/specific distinction is made clear.

But this is an unfounded reading of Hume. For not only does Hume refer to the notion of specific identity only in passing, but also nowhere does he mention or even imply that the real identity of these variable and interrupted things is a specific identity. If we turn to the quotations cited as support for this view, we can see the error immediately. When Hume says that a seedling which becomes a large tree is still the same oak, and that an infant which becomes a man is still the same individual, he cannot be referring to specific identity; for it is evidently false to say that a seedling is exactly similar (that is, specifically identical) to a one-hundred-foot tree, and just as false to say that an infant is exactly similar to an adult. There may be some vague similarities in either case, but not enough to justify a claim to specific identity. Noxon seems aware of this problem and tries to avoid it by asserting that specific identifications are based on "points of resemblance evaluated in light of general knowledge of the changes which things of a certain sort undergo during a certain period of time."<sup>5</sup> But I am not even sure if I know what this means. How is the knowledge that a seedling will change into a large oak supposed to aid us in evaluating points of resemblance between the two? For, regardless of our knowledge of arboreal ontogeny, the fact remains that a sprouting acorn bears little or no resemblance to a massive oak.

Further, it seems clear that Hume, in his examples, is intent on denying similarity rather than affirming it. Not only does the tree have no particles of matter in common with the seedling, but even the "figure of its parts" is different. Likewise, the infant not only grows into an adult, but is "sometimes fat, sometimes lean." Noxon could always protest here that the tree remains exactly similar to the seedling so far as it is still an oak. But Hume says more than that the tree is still *an* oak; he says it is still the *same* oak. And this strongly suggests that he is not here using "same" in its specific sense. If he only meant that the seedling is as much an oak as the tree (a pointless thing to say), there would have been no need for the insertion of the words "the same" before "oak."

But does this not leave us with a problem? For if Hume is not here referring to the specific identity of the oak, then, we might think, he must be referring to its numerical identity; but as we have just noted, the tree is said to have not one particle in common with the seedling, which means, for Hume, that the two cannot be numerically identical. The solution to this problem is to see that Hume is not referring to the *tree's*

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identity in any sense: he is referring to *our attribution* of identity to the tree (that is, our attribution of numerical identity). This is evident from the line which immediately precedes his example of the tree. Hume remarks here “tho’ everyone must allow, that in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a *total* change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size and substance are entirely alter’d” (p. 257). The reference to the growing oak and the growing man are merely illustrative examples of a changing plant and a changing animal to which *we attribute* identity. Since, however, there can be no identity where the form, size, and substance of a thing has entirely altered, the identity which we attribute in such cases can only be a fictitious one; that is, it is the work of the imagination, not a property belonging to the object or, better, to the succession of objects to which we attribute it. And this is true not just for plants and animals but for all things which are variable and interrupted: for example, repaired ships, rebuilt churches, rivers, republics, and persons. So when Hume discusses “the identity” of such things, he is only discussing how we come to attribute identity to them, not their actual identity.

The only reason we might think that Hume is making positive statements about the actual identity of things is that we may fail to notice the structure of his overall argument and focus only on specific remarks. If we view the section “Of personal identity” as a whole, we will see that in the first four paragraphs Hume discusses the actual identity of the self and categorically rejects the notion as untenable. He does, however, feel that we have a natural propensity to ascribe identity to ourselves, and it is to an explanation of this propensity that Hume devotes the rest of his discussion. This division in the text is also attended, for the most part, by a division in the type of language that Hume uses to discuss identity. In the first part, Hume speaks in a categorical way. Thus it is claimed, for example, that “there is no impression constant and invariable” (p. 251), “there is no such idea (of the self)” (p. 252), “I always stumble on some particular perception or other” (p. 252), and, finally, “there is properly no *simplicity* in (the mind) at one time, nor *identity* in different” (p. 253). However, when we come to the second part of the discussion, the language becomes more psychological than categorical. That is, Hume’s concern here is more with how we imagine, suppose, ascribe, or attribute identity rather than with the actual identity of things. And so the second part begins by asking “What then gives us so great a propension to *ascribe* an identity to these successive perceptions, and to *suppose* ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives?” (p. 253; my emphasis). This psychological language continues, for the most part, throughout this latter half: the repaired ship “is still *consider’d* as the same; nor does the difference of the materials *hinder us* from *ascribing* an identity to it” (p. 257); although



plants and animals undergo a total change, “yet *we still attribute* identity to them” (p. 257); a man who hears an intermittent noise “*says* it is still the same noise” (p. 258); and because an earlier church is demolished before its successor appears we do not think of them as being different, “and for that reason are *less scrupulous* in *calling* them the same” (p. 258; my emphasis throughout the last four quotations). Likewise, when Hume says we can extend our identity beyond our memories, his discussion makes it plain that he is only talking about “the most *established notions* of personal identity” (p. 262; my emphasis), that is, what is commonly believed to be true about personal identity, and not about personal identity itself.

This use of psychological language to discuss the supposed identity of interrupted and variable objects should keep us alert to the fact that Hume is here discussing only the origin of our belief in such identity, and not the actual identity of what is really an instance of diversity. Once we see this we should not be worried by Hume’s occasional use of categorical statements in what is overtly a discussion of psychology. Thus, when, in the second part of the text, Hume states that a seedling which becomes a tree “is still the same oak,” all that is before this makes it plain that he can only mean that it is still *called* the same oak, or it is still *supposed* to be the same oak, or some such thing, not that it is actually still the same oak. Likewise, when he says that the infant becomes a man “without any change in his identity,” all that he can mean is “without *our attributing* any change to his identity.”

There will be those, no doubt, who will charge that I am riding roughshod over what Hume says and am twisting the text to suit my own purposes. But if this is true, then my critics must explain why Hume says that although the addition or removal of even an inconsiderable amount of a mass of matter “absolutely destroys the identity of the whole, strictly speaking; yet as we seldom think so accurately, we scruple not to pronounce a mass of matter the same, where we find so trivial an alteration” (p. 256). For in saying this Hume has not only given the reasons why growing plants and humans cannot maintain their identity over time (they are continually losing and gaining amounts of matter), but he also explains why we scruple not to pronounce them the same (we find their moment-to-moment alterations too trivial to note). Of course, over many years the alterations that a seedling has undergone will no longer be trivial, “but where the change is produc’d *gradually* and *insensibly* we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect (that is, the loss of its identity)” (p. 256).

All of this should make it clear that, contrary to what many of Hume’s interpreters would have us believe, for Hume it is an error to attribute identity to variable and interrupted things. He says in several places that the attribution of identity to instants of diversity is both a

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mistake and an absurdity (see especially pp. 254–255). But we must be careful here; for its being a mistake does not imply what Penelhum thinks it does.

After noting Hume's claim that we are making a mistake in referring to a person over time as the same person, Penelhum remarks that "a little effort of imagination is enough to indicate just how much chaos would result from adopting Hume's diagnosis as the source of a prescription and using a different proper name whenever we noticed the slightest change, even in ourselves (or rather in the separate people that we would be from minute to minute)." And if this is a mistake, continues Penelhum, it is one whose correction "would require a complete overhaul of the concepts and syntax of our language."<sup>6</sup>

Yet there is no reason to think that the correct prescription for Hume's diagnosis need be using a different proper name every time we notice a change in someone or something. Indeed, Hume even says that a rebuilt church, which we only imagine to be the same as an earlier one, can still be called the same as its predecessor "without breach of the propriety of language" (p. 258). He does not, unfortunately, elaborate on this. However, at the end of the section on personal identity something is said that suggests how it might be permissible to call two things the same which in fact are only imagined to be the same. Here Hume states that all disputes about the identity of successive objects "are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts give rise to some fiction or imaginary (i.e. mysterious) principle of union" (p. 262). Thus if two persons are arguing about whether or not an earlier church is the same as its rebuilt predecessor, and neither of them is asserting the existence of a fictional entity or principle of union which somehow unites the two churches, then their dispute will be merely about how the word "same" is to be used in these circumstances. That is, they will not be disputing an actual identity but only the linguistic conventions surrounding our use of identity terms. If we imagine that our disputants finally agree that our linguistic conventions permit us to call the two churches the same (a conclusion to which Hume would give his assent), then we can see why it is permissible to call two things the same which are in fact different. This is because there are two levels at which the notion of identity can be employed: one which deals with questions about identity at the metaphysical or ultimate level, and one which deals with them at the verbal or conventional level.

It is disappointing that Hume does not have more to say about the two levels of "disputes." For it is with such an account that we are able to explain why it is acceptable for us to continue to talk in terms of selves and personal identity despite the fact that there are no such things. We can, however, arrive at a fuller understanding of what the two-level account involves by turning to another version of the no-self theory. This

is the no-self theory as propounded by the Buddha and various of his followers. The Buddhist theory can offer some insights. For at the very heart of this theory lies the doctrine of the two levels of truth. Although the different schools of Buddhist thought disagree on the exact nature of the distinction to be drawn between the two truths, there are enough similarities—at least in the early Hinayana schools—for us to give a general account. This will be useful to our project because it will allow us both to see what Hume might have been getting at and to acquire more munitions with which to fend off this attack on the no-self theory. I hasten to add, however, that I am not here attempting a scholarly exposition of Buddhist thought; for my present interests are confined to an exposition of the no-self theory of personal identity. It is just that Buddhism has some valuable contributions to make here. There are, of course, problems involved in the cross-cultural discussion of ideas; Hume and the Buddha, after all, lived their lives in very different social and historical contexts. And yet I do not think that these difficulties need detain us; for when we go to the texts where Buddhist thinkers are grappling with the problem of personal identity, we find their concerns are essentially the same as Hume's.

In the earliest texts of Buddhism, the Pali Canon (about 500 B.C.), we come across a distinction drawn between two types of discourse: that of direct meaning and that of indirect meaning. The former type of discourse is said to be one whose meaning is plain while the latter type needs to have its meaning inferred with reference to the former. In the discourses of indirect meaning, words are used which apparently refer to persisting entities such as a self or an I which, according to the Buddha, are merely “expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathagata (i.e., the Buddha) makes use of without being led astray by them.”<sup>7</sup> That is, although we may use words like “self” and “I,” we should not be led into thinking that they actually refer to something, for they are but grammatical devices. This nondenoting aspect of these expressions is something which must be inferred in light of the discourses of direct meaning. In this latter type of discourse, the nonexistence of anything permanent or enduring, such as the self or I, is asserted, and the misleading features of language—those features which lead us astray into the belief in an I—are made explicit. Here there is no need for inference, since the meaning of such discourse is plain.

As it happens, however, we are apt to confuse the two types of discourse: “there are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata. Which two? He who represents a Sutta (i.e., discourse) of indirect meaning as a Sutta of direct meaning and he who represents a Sutta of direct meaning as a Sutta of indirect meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Although the Pali Canon does not elaborate here, we can easily see what sorts of errors are being referred to. On the one hand we might think that someone who is using the

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words "self," "I," or "Buddha" (which are mere turns of speech) is in fact denoting a particular entity. Or, on the other hand, we might think that someone who is denying the existence of the self cannot really mean what he or she is saying and so we might be tempted to infer a further meaning which would still allow the existence of the self. We might, for instance, think that the person making this claim is only denying the existence of a certain type of self.

The discussion of the two types of discourse is continued in the various Buddhist commentaries on the Pali Canon, and here we are introduced to the related ideas of two levels of truth. In one commentary it is stated that all "Buddhas (i.e., enlightened beings) have two types of speech; conventional and ultimate. Thus 'being', 'man', 'person', (the proper names) 'Tissa', 'Naga' are used as conventional speech. 'Categories', 'elements', 'sense-bases' are used as ultimate speech." Because of this division in speech, we are told that the Buddha "declared two truths; the conventional and ultimate, there is no third. Words (used by) mutual agreement are true because of Worldly convention; words of ultimate meaning are true because of the existence of elements."<sup>9</sup> Although the various elements are said to be the constituents of which everything else, including what we call the self, is made, it is not because the elements are more basic than the self that the self is said ultimately not to exist. It is simply because there is nothing in the world, not even an assemblage of the elements, that can be identified with the self. Although the Buddha cites various characteristics that something must have if it is to be considered a self, the most important is that of permanence or identity over time. But when we look to our experience, there is nothing but impermanence: our bodies, feelings, and thoughts are forever coming and going. In this sense the Buddha is in complete agreement with Hume: where there is diversity there can be no identity. None of this, however, implies that statements which make use of words like "self," "I," "you," "Tissa," or "Buddha" are false or nonsensical at every level of discourse. For they can be true at the conventional level, which means that they can be true because of their being used in accordance with mutual agreement, that is, linguistic convention.

A good illustration of how this distinction is to be drawn is given in a well-known passage from the *The Questions of King Menander* (about A.D. 100).<sup>10</sup> In this dialogue, the Indo-Greek king Menander puts various questions about the nature of the self to the Buddhist monk Nagasena. At the opening of the dialogue, Menander asks "How is your Reverence known, and what is your name?" The somewhat provocative answer given to the king is "I'm known as Nagasena, your Majesty, that's what my fellow monks call me. But though my parents may have given me such a name . . . it's only a generally understood term, a practical designation. There is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use

of the word." Menander is quite astonished by this reply and eventually asks "If your fellow monks call you Nagasena, what then is Nagasena?" He asks whether Nagasena is any part of the body or the mind, or whether he is all of these things taken together, or whether he is anything apart from them. To all of this Nagasena replies merely "No, your Majesty." Menander then exclaims triumphantly "Then for all my asking I find no Nagasena. Nagasena is a mere sound! Surely what your Reverence has said is false!" But Nagasena is not to be dealt with so swiftly and, in good Socratic fashion, replies by himself asking a question: "Your Majesty, how did you come here—on foot, or in a vehicle?" "In a chariot," says Menander. Nagasena then asks what the chariot is, whether it is the pole, axle, wheels, frame, reins, or yoke, or whether it is all these taken together, or again whether it is something other than the separate parts. Menander replies in the negative. With this Nagasena fires back at the king his own reasoning: "Then for all my asking, your Majesty, I can find no chariot. The chariot is merely a sound. What then is the chariot? Surely what your Majesty has said is false! There is no chariot!" Menander protests that he has not said anything false: "It's on account of all these various components, the pole, axle, wheels, and so on, that the vehicle is called a chariot. It's just a generally understood term, a practical designation." Nagasena's rejoinder is to praise Menander for this remark and to point out that the same holds true of himself. For it is because of his various components that he is known by the practical designation "Nagasena." However, he adds, in the ultimate sense there is no person to whom the name refers.

It is easy to mistake this passage, as some have done, for a statement of reductionism.<sup>11</sup> But the text clearly disallows this interpretation. The reductionist view would be that the person of Nagasena can be reduced without remainder to his various impersonal constituents. But when the king asks if Nagasena is all of the parts of his body and mind taken together, Nagasena answers "No." This is because Nagasena rejects any notion of a person that exists in the ultimate sense: a person is not ultimately something other than his parts (the strict theory), nor is a person ultimately the sum of his parts (the reductionist theory). This does not mean, however, that the word "Nagasena" is a mere sound; for it is more than that: it is a generally understood term whose proper use is determined by mutual agreement concerning how, when, and where it is to be used. Or, as Nagasena says, it is because of his various components that he is known as "Nagasena," even though "Nagasena" does not refer to anything.

It is crucial to see, however, that in relegating such terms to the realms of conventional discourse, Buddhism is not proposing a conventionalist theory of personal identity. That is, for Buddhism, a person's identity is not something ultimately to be decided by convention. For to

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hold this position would be to commit the very error against which the Pali Canon warns us, that is, to represent a discourse of indirect meaning as a discourse of direct meaning. It would be to conflate the levels of truth and think that questions at the ultimate level can be answered by agreements at the conventional level.

We are now able to see why the no-self theory does not imply that our language is in need of an overhaul. For it is quite consistent with the nonexistence of the self or I that we continue to employ the words “self” and “I” in their practical everyday usage, provided we do not mistake them for denoting some particular entity at the ultimate level, or, as Hume would say, feign the existence of a fiction. This is why, contrary to what many of Hume’s critics think, Hume’s own use of the first-person pronoun does not undermine his theory. In Hume’s statement “when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception” (p. 252), the word “I” is being used at the conventional level: it is merely a generally understood term whose proper use is determined by mutual agreement. We should not, therefore, think that in using the first-person pronoun Hume has committed himself to the existence of a self at the ultimate level.

Some will no doubt find it paradoxical that we can use personal language correctly when there is nothing to which these terms ultimately refer. It was reasoning akin to this, it seems, that led Descartes to his famous proclamation “I think, therefore I am.” I must exist, reasoned Descartes, because even when I doubt that I exist there is still an I that is doing the doubting. But Descartes has become led astray by his own language, for there is no need for the “I” in “I think” or “I doubt” to refer to anything. What Descartes was aware of, as both Hume and the Buddha would agree, was just thinking, not an I that was doing the thinking. Consequently Descartes might just as well have said (and should have said if his concern was with ultimate rather than conventional truth) “there is thinking, therefore there are thoughts.” And such a deduction, if we may call it that, does not suffice to prove the existence of an I.

A possible response here would be to say that although there need be no reference to an I when we use the nounal sense of “thinking” or “thoughts,” when the verbal sense “I think” is employed, then plainly there must be some reference to a subject; for what is it that thinks? To this it can be replied that although the term “think” does require a subject, this is little more than a grammatical requirement. And so we might just as well employ a nonreferring grammatical subject rather than the misleading term “I.” This is a point that is recognized by George Christoph Lichtenberg, who says, about Descartes’ dictum, “We should say, ‘It thinks’, just as we say ‘It thunders’. Even to say *cogito* is too much if we translate it with ‘I think’. To assume the ‘I’ to postulate it, is a practical need.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, since the use of the verbal sense “thunders” also

requires the introduction of a subject, we bring in the word "it" and say "it thunders." But this does not mean that the grammatical subject "it" here refers to anything. All we are saying when we say "it thunders" is "there is thunder." Consequently, since the requirement that the word "thinks" have a subject is also a convention of grammar, or, as we might say with Lichtenberg, a practical need, we could likewise employ "it" to serve this purpose. We could say "it thinks, therefore there are thoughts," and the appearance of "it" here would no more imply a reference to an actual subject than would "it" in "it thunders."<sup>13</sup>

There remains, however, a further problem which needs our attention. It was mentioned earlier that one of the criticisms leveled at Hume is that his account of personal identity is inconsistent with what he says elsewhere. The passages which are supposed to contradict the view of the section on personal identity come from Book II of the *Treatise*, wherein Hume discusses the nature of the passions or emotions.<sup>14</sup> Because Hume refers here to the importance of the role played by the self as the object of such passions as pride and humility, some writers have been quick to accuse him of contradicting his earlier claims about the self. Thus Norman Kemp Smith cites the following passages from Book II as being incompatible with Hume's claims from Book I:

'Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that 'tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it. (P. 317)

The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea, the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person. (P. 318)<sup>15</sup>

Kemp Smith suggests that the reason why Hume so freely makes use of the idea of the self in Book II when he has just dismissed the notion in Book I is that Book II was written before Book I, and, consequently, by the time Hume had got around to writing Book I he had forgotten what he had said in Book II.<sup>16</sup> Before we accept this picture of a strangely distracted Hume, it seems we should look at what is actually being said about the self in Book II. And what we find in the opening pages of Book II is this: "'Tis evident, that pride and humility, tho' directly contrary, have yet the same object. This object is the self, or that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness." And a few lines later we are told about "that connected succession of perceptions, which we call *self*" (p. 277). These hardly seem like the words of someone who is totally incognizant of the view expressed in the section on personal identity. Indeed, by taking the time to insert these descriptions of the self in Book II, it seems that Hume is

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anxious to remind us of the conclusions reached in Book I. And so, when Hume says in Book II that an awareness of ourselves is always intimately present to us, we should understand this in terms of what was said in Book I, namely, that to enter intimately into what is called the self is just to encounter various impressions. That is, what is always intimately present to us is just those particular perceptions whose succession we call the self (the fact that Hume uses the word "intimately" in both the passages from Book I and Book II also suggests that he is intent on discussing the same notion of the self in both places).

Still there is an apparent problem here. And this is highlighted by the fact that Hume often speaks in Book II of our idea or impression of the self as though it were something which occurs instantaneously within our awareness, a singular perception which we experience as the object of pride and humility. But, as Hume has told us, there is no impression or idea of the self; there is only the smooth and uninterrupted progress of thought within our imagination. But how is it that a smooth and uninterrupted progress of thought could appear instantaneously within awareness? The notion of an uninterrupted progress is a temporal notion; it is something that occurs over an extended period of time. Accordingly, it is difficult to see how such a train of perceptions could be an object to which we could, in an instant, direct our emotions.

I doubt, however, that this is a major difficulty. Hume himself is aware that a different account is needed to deal with those occasions, such as in certain emotional states, where we suddenly come across the object of what we call self-awareness. He says, we have noted, that in order to discover what is responsible for the tendency to believe in personal identity, a distinction must be drawn between "personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves" (p. 253). Personal identity of the first sort is his professed concern in Book I, while in Book II it is the latter sort. The problem is that Hume never explains just how we are to understand the relation between the two sorts of personal identity. He obviously wants the personal identity that concerns the passions to be basically the same as that which the imagination constructs. This is evident from the descriptions of the self given in his discussions of the passions. And yet his theory seems to require that the object of the passions be capable of appearing to awareness in a way that does not render it a succession.

The way for us to deal with this problem, and so fill out our picture of the no-self theory, is to see that when we enter a psychological or emotional state that seems to depend on an instantaneous awareness of self, what we are doing is not reflecting on a succession of related ideas (which could not be done at any one instant); rather we are latching on to a particular collection of some of these ideas which, by virtue of their



being related, can instantaneously present themselves in a condensed form to our awareness. It is with this discovery of a constructed or condensed self-image, as we shall call it, that we are brought to a central point within the no-self theory, namely, that although we may on various occasions have experiences of something that we take to be ourself, on closer examination this object of our awareness turns out to be nothing more than a collation of related images.

Even some nonreductionists, such as John McTaggart, for example, seem to be alive to the possibility that the establishment of what we call self-perception would not be enough to prove that a self exists, but only that something is perceived as being a self.<sup>17</sup> This suspicion that we might perceive something which we mistakenly believe to be ourself is borne out by an examination of our states of self-awareness. We can start by noting that although we do experience occasions of self-awareness, there are numerous instances in which it is plain that we have no awareness of anything that can be considered a self. Take, for example, my awareness in the activity of listening to music. It is often the case in listening to music that one can become immersed in the music to the point that there is no room in consciousness for the awareness of an I. Here there is just the experience of the music: the gradual unfolding of the melody or theme. And listening to music is hardly an exceptional case. Other activities, such as reading or writing, playing chess, day-dreaming, and making love, all provide instances in which one can go on being thoroughly unaware of oneself. It is, of course, possible for me to shift my awareness to a point where I am aware that I am listening to music, but then I am no longer immersed in the music. It is important to see, however, that when I am thus not immersed, then my experience of the activity is drastically altered. This is because, in entering a state of self-awareness, I undergo a "giving-up" or a "forsaking" of the activity in which I was previously engaged. My listening gets left behind as I conjure up the I to which I now direct my attention. Here the act of listening loses its sense of spontaneity; it becomes something I must struggle with, something impeded by the new awareness that it is I who am doing the listening. The act of self-awareness is thus a reflective and complicated act which involves both a stepping back from the flow of experience and the introduction of a further element (or rather collation of elements) into that experience. It is in this sense, then, that self-awareness can be called a secondary phenomenon, for the object of self-awareness is not part of the basic fabric of experience; rather it is something which experience itself fabricates and then takes as its object. It is, consequently, understandable that self-awareness, with its complicated and reflective qualities, is but an infrequent visitor to consciousness.

This view of the secondariness of self-awareness is supported, I think, by what we know about the ontogeny of consciousness. The develop-

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mental psychologist Jerome Kagan, for example, delineates a sequence of four psychological functions which lead up to but do not imply the emergence of self-awareness. According to Kagan, the first function to appear which comes close to implying the existence of consciousness is recognition memory. This makes its appearance in the first eight months of life and is displayed in the ability to discriminate between familiar and novel stimuli. A few months later there appear the functions of retrieval and inference, by which Kagan means "the retrieval of schemata without any cues in the immediate field and the generation of inferences following the relating of those schemata to present experience."<sup>18</sup> These functions are demonstrated by a child who looks persistently for a toy it just saw hidden a moment earlier. Here the child maintains a schemata of the hiding of the toy and infers that the toy must still exist somewhere. The fourth function, which emerges at about sixteen months, constitutes the child's ability to monitor, select, and control the other functions. This function is the awareness of one's potentiality for action and, for Kagan, comes closest to our notion of consciousness.

The difficulty, however, appears with the emergence of the fifth function, namely, the awareness of self as an entity with characteristics. This is a difficulty because, although the function of self-awareness seems to depend on the appearance of the earlier functions, nothing in the earlier functions implies that self-awareness need emerge: "To explain why a 30-month-old declares, laughingly, 'I'm a baby,' as she crawls on the floor and sucks on a bottle, requires more than an awareness of one's ability to act. This behaviour presupposes not only a schema for one's actions but also a schema for the self as an object with variations in attribute."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, says Kagan, some new processes must be introduced into the developmental sequence if the self-awareness function is to make its entrance. But just what this must involve Kagan cannot say; it remains, we are told, part of an ancient enigma.

However, it is not too difficult to see that an answer to this "enigma" is already contained within the account. We need only observe that Kagan's schema for the self as an object with variations is just what we have called the constructed self-image. That is, it is a collation of earlier experiences which presents itself in a condensed form to our awareness. Once we spell out the schema for the self in this way we can see that the process needed to generate it is not altogether dissimilar to the process which generates the fourth function, that is, the awareness of the potentiality for action. The child arrives at its action schema by directing its awareness toward its own abilities, that is, by monitoring, selecting, and controlling the more primitive functions of recognition memory, retrieval, and inference. Once the child has acquired the capacity thus to direct its awareness, it is but a small step then to turn this awareness toward some of the perceptions which constitute the succession of related ideas

and so arrive at a schema for the self. However, although the self schema will contain components not to be found in other schemata, the components of other schemata will nevertheless be discoverable within the self schema. This is what Kagan means, I take it, by saying that the function of self-awareness depends on the earlier functions. Thus the infant's awareness of being a baby will require more than an awareness of the ability to act, but will still involve such an awareness. This is because to have the awareness "I'm a baby" is, among other things, to be aware that one acts like a baby; and even a thirty-month old will know that crawling on the floor and sucking on a bottle are things that are (normally) only done by babies. The reason, however, why self-awareness will include more than the child's awareness of its ability to act is that, in addition to acting, the child also is acted upon by others, has an idea of its own appearance, experiences emotions, and so on—all of which are condensed into the object of self-awareness. Thus, self-awareness is a secondary phenomenon on the ontogenetic theory because it does not involve the acquisition of a new ability: it is merely the deployment of an earlier function upon a wider range of objects.

Having established that self-awareness is both a complicated and rare occurrence, we can now move on to the phenomenology of the constructed self-image. For in laying bare its structure we will see that although it is the object of what we call self-awareness, it is constituted by nothing more than a collection of transient images.

One of the central features of the constructed self-image is that it is a condensation of related experiences. It is this feature that helps it to masquerade as being a self; for, being a condensation of our experience, it appears both as a singular thing (although, as we shall see, this need not be so) and, at the same time, as something which contains our experiences. Since the experiences of which it is composed may be taken from the different times of our life, we can also see how the constructed self-image might, in an instant, convey something of the notion of identity over time; that is, present itself as something that has persisted throughout our lives.

The psychological process of condensing several experiences into a single image or idea is not unique to the structure of self-awareness. On the contrary, it is a process commonplace in much of our psychology. Thus, when I call up an image of my friend Mary, I am not presented with a single portrait, as it were, of Mary. What I find is several different images of Mary which have been collated and superimposed upon one another. I may, for example, have an image of her hair in the wind, which at the same time incorporates the movement of her dress. This composition may be further blended with an image of her face which is at once a frontal view and a profile, and this in turn may allow the blueness of her eyes to merge with the turquoise of her earrings. In the same instant this

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will all be bathed in emotional qualities that will reveal the feelings I have for Mary. Such images are, of course, transient, with certain of their parts being introduced, expelled, and replaced in an instant. However, as long as I dwell on the image of Mary, there will continue to be an indistinct network of constituent images, the older of which are forever dying away while new relations take their place. A similar process of condensation also seems to take place in the construction of dream images, and here, because of what Freud has called primary process or the unrestrained character of hypnagogic cognition, the resultant complex may incorporate numerous diverse elements that are held together by only the remotest of connections.<sup>20</sup> We may, for example, encounter someone in our dreams who displays the characteristics of several different people at once: in one way he is our childhood playmate, in another way he is our old schoolteacher, while in yet a third way he is someone whom we saw only yesterday. It is as if we were looking at one of those anatomy textbooks which depicts the different organ systems on a series of overlapping transparent pages. On the bottom page is the skeletal system, on the next page is the nervous system, and then comes the circulatory system, and so on. The end result is a single image of the human body in which the different organ systems are nevertheless discernable.

The constructed self-image is put together in much the same way as other condensed images. When I enter a state of self-awareness, the I that is summoned before my consciousness is not a simple entity that infixes itself changelessly in my mind. It is rather a composite of various fading images which will have some reference to how I see and feel about myself. I may, for example, have an image of my face as it appeared to me in the mirror this morning which is nevertheless infused with features of previous images of my face. Thus, although my eyes and lips might appear to me as they did today, my cheeks and the shape of my face might seem more like those of myself of twelve years ago. Or again it might include features of how I would imagine myself to look in twenty years. This composite image of my face might itself be superimposed on some familiar scene, say, the beach where I often go for walks. Here the sand dunes might be incorporated into the cheeks and the rising of the waves into the forming of a smile. And all of this will be presented in a suffusion of affective tones which will exhibit the emotional evaluations I have of myself. Like other of our condensed images, the self-image will have but an ephemeral existence; the constituent images, continuously dissolving as new associations, make their way into the complex. Just what the constituents of the constructed self-image are will naturally be different for each person, since each person will see herself in a different way. While for one person it may consist mainly of idealized images of her physical appearance, for another it may be a mixture of certain sensations or emotions, while for a third it may be

images of how others respond to her. To verify that this is so one need only ask different persons to describe what it is they are aware of when they are aware of themselves. It will then be seen that such images vary quite markedly. Further, it also seems to be that although some people have a relatively consistent image of themselves over time (they have always seen themselves as a whirling complex of emotions), others do not (they now see themselves as more of a physical entity than they did five years ago).

I said above that the constructed self-image need not exist as a singular thing; that is, at any one moment it is possible for a person to have more than one constructed self-image. And this much seems to follow both from what has been said about the possible inconsistencies in the self-image over time, and from the nature of the psychological mechanism of condensation. For, in the first place, if one can construct two or more different images of oneself at different times, then the stage is set for the possibility of constructing as many different self-images at the same time. It might be objected that consciousness could not operate in this divided way, but various other phenomena, such as the findings of research on brain bisection, give us sufficient grounds to question such an assumption.<sup>21</sup>

Further, because the constructed self-image is a condensation of related ideas, it seems likely that certain of our ideas which normally appear when we think of ourselves are such that they bear little relation to other ideas that also appear in the same instant. Consequently, any attempt at condensing these ideas into a composite idea will tend to fail. Now in most cases the solution to this dilemma will be somehow to repress one of the inconsistent experiences or at least deny it entry into the constructed self-image, that is, not allow it to be an element in the state of self-awareness. The problem, however, is that some of these offending experiences may present themselves as too salient or meaningful to accept banishment from the self-image. What we have, then, is an experience or group of experiences that is at once pulled into and yet expelled from the self-image. Under these conditions it is quite conceivable that the exiled experiences might set up their own camp in which they, too, could fly the flag of the self-image. There would then exist two or more groupings of experience, each of which would present itself as the appropriate object of self-awareness. To enter a state of self-awareness in these circumstances would be to have one's awareness divide itself between two objects competing for the same phenomenological status. In understanding how this could occur in consciousness we must not think of the constructed self-image as an object to which I direct my attention in the same way that I might direct a beam of light upon a plane in the sky. For if we use this analogy we will be tempted to see the constructed self-image and my consciousness of it as if they were

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two separate entities, the latter of which somehow engulfs the former. We will then imagine that to have two or more simultaneous self-images will involve little more than having one instant of consciousness which simultaneously engulfs more than one thing, much as one beam of light might illuminate two planes. But, in reality, the constructed self-image just *is* an instant of consciousness. For when I enter into a state of self-awareness, what happens is this: my consciousness throws itself into a certain configuration that is structured in the form of a condensed self-image which permeates or diffuses over my world at that instant. In this situation we can begin to see how parts of my experience, which are neither assimilable nor repressible, might fissure themselves off to become a separate sphere of consciousness.

A person in this state might then begin to experience himself as two distinct persons. Something like this could well play a role in the genesis of the type of dissociative condition known as multiple personality. Here the problem of having more than one self-image would be dealt with by producing a schism in awareness which would subsequently be attended by the appearance of two or more personalities, each of which would be matched to the appropriate self-image. I am not saying, of course, that the constructed self-image is to be identified with the personality, but only that whatever sort of image we have of ourselves will tend to relate both to the way we behave and to the way we think, and that, as a consequence, having two or more radically distinct self-images will tend to correlate with having two or more radically distinct personalities.

We now have to ask what it is that leads someone into perceiving the constructed self-image as being a self. And here again the work of Buddhist philosophers is most helpful. According to Buddhist theory, what we call a person is really just an aggregation of the five *khandhas* or elements. These are: physical form, perceptions, feelings, motives, and consciousness. But none of these elements, whether considered separately or in combination, can rightly be identified with the self, for they lack the various qualities which we attribute to the self.<sup>22</sup> This, however, does not stop one from mistakenly identifying oneself with one or another of the elements, and indeed this is a ubiquitous confusion from which Buddhism hopes to set us free. But what is it that leads a person to this mistaken identification? To answer this we need to refer back to our previous discussion of the conventional and ultimate levels of truth. There we saw that although personal names and personal pronouns do not at the ultimate level refer to anything, at the conventional level it is quite acceptable to use such expressions for pragmatic reasons. Thus the Buddha uses the language of the self as convenient designations without being led astray by them. The problem is that, unlike the Buddha, many of us do get led astray by the expressions we use; that is, in failing to notice that we are using language at the level of convention, we end up

thinking that there must be something to which the words “I” or “self” refer. And so we turn our gaze inward (because this is where the self is supposed to exist) and, coming upon one or another of the elements, or a collection of the elements, hasten to identify it with our self. Buddhism underlines the importance that language plays here by making a didactic use of the Pali word *ahamkara*, which can mean both “the utterance of ‘I’” and “I-make.”<sup>23</sup> That the same word has both meanings helps to suggest a connection between the two meanings: not only that the language of the self leads to the fabrication of a self but also that a fabricated self leads to a misconstrual of the language of the self. Here, then, we see the cyclical nature of the trap in which the straying language user is caught. In uttering “I” one is led to misidentify an element in one’s experiences as the self. Having affected this delusory identification, one then goes on to make similar utterances firm in the belief that these utterances ultimately refer to oneself. For Buddhism, it is thus that we come to weave the first threads of an ever-expanding veil of delusion. For in believing that we have a self, we are easily led to other experiences which depend on this illusory self. Pride and humility, for example, can only get their foothold if there is something which we perceive to be the self and to which we can relate the causes of our pride or humility. I cannot be proud of my successes or humiliated by my failures unless I believe there is an I to whom these successes and failures belong. This is why, on Buddhist theory, the giving up of the belief in the self—which we must do if we are to be free from delusion—is also attended by the cessation of pride, humility, embarrassment, envy, and other self-oriented (and hence delusive) emotions.

The Buddhist method for overcoming the delusion of self is to engage in meditation, a practice which may be described as pure internal analysis or sustained inward gazing. Through this technique, the supposed internal self comes to be seen for what it is: a mere collection of transient elements. This realization loosens the grip of the belief in self and so dissolves the constructed self-image back into the elements from which it came. In one Pali text, the *Visuddhimagga Sutta* or *The Path of Purification*, we are told that through the contemplation of voidness or, what is the same thing, not-self, “the misinterpreting (insisting) that ‘a self exists’ is abandoned.” This abandoning occurs “because it has been clearly seen that there is no core of permanence and no core of self.”<sup>24</sup> The insight thus acquired, the *Sutta* tells us, is “the death of formations”; the formation that we took for a permanent self dies before our very eyes.

Here at last we are in a position to see how Hume’s idea of personal identity as it regards the imagination is related to the notion of the constructed self-image, or personal identity as it regards the passions. When I come to believe that I am the same person I was twelve years ago, it is because of the smooth and uninterrupted progress of thought

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that is produced in my imagination when I reflect on the succession of related ideas. This is the imaginary self which is contemplated over time and whose identity is fictitious. When, on the other hand, I believe that I am perceiving my self in an instant of self-awareness, such as when I experience a self-oriented emotion, what is happening is that my awareness is being directed to an object which is merely a condensed version of extracts from the succession of related ideas. This is the constructed self-image, which is a rare and secondary aspect of consciousness. In either case, what I come upon is merely a collection of experiences: in either case, there is no self to be found.

## NOTES

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1. – For a discussion of how the bodily version of reductionism misconstrues the nature of the body, see my “Bodily Theory and Theory of the Body,” *Philosophy* 66, no. 257 (July 1991): 339–347.
- 2 – David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. J. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 525. Further references are to this edition and are indicated in the text. Unless stated otherwise, all italics within this and subsequent quotes are Hume’s.
- 3 – Terence Penelhum, “Hume on Personal Identity,” *The Philosophical Review* 64 (1955): 571.
- 4 – James Noxon, “Senses of Identity in Hume’s Treatise,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 8 (1969): 367–384.
- 5 – *Ibid.*, pp. 372–373.
- 6 – Penelhum, “Hume,” p. 578.
- 7 – Trans. K. N. Jayatilleke in *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 319.
- 8 – *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- 9 – Trans. Steven Collins in *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 154.



- 10 – In *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), vol. 1, pp. 103–105. The following translation comes mainly from this edition. However, the editor omits the important final remark made by Nagasena. This line, which I have included, can be found in *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, vol. 23, *Milinda's Questions*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac, 1963), bk. 1, pp. 37–38.
- 11 – For example, Derek Parfit, in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 273. Parfit is one of those who fail to distinguish between the eliminative no-self theory and reductionism. Consequently, he mistakenly thinks that the Buddhist position supports his reductionism.
- 12 – Trans. J. P. Stern in *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), p. 270.
- 13 – Stern does not seem to me to be aware of this point in his discussion of Lichtenberg. See *ibid.*, p. 270.
- 14 – There are also the so-called “second thoughts” in the Appendix to the *Treatise* (pp. 633–636), where Hume seems to express doubts about the truth of his account of personal identity. Here, however, I follow Norman Kemp Smith in thinking that the passage in question is in fact a reaffirmation of his principles and that his only doubts are with his theory's ability to account for states of self-awareness. This, as will be seen, is not a difficulty for a more expanded version of Hume's account. For Kemp Smith's remarks on the Appendix, see his *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 553–560.
- 15 – Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 171.
- 16 – *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- 17 – John McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), vol. 2, chap. 36.
- 18 – Jerome Kagan, *The Second Year: The Emergence of Self-Awareness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 148–149.
19. – *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 20 – For a discussion of primary process, see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 5, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), pp. 599–609.
- 21 – See Thomas Nagel's “Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness,” in *Personal Identity*, ed. John Perry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

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- 22 – For the Dialogue in which this argument is given, see *The Collection of the Middle-Length Suttas (Majjhima Nikaya)*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Pali Text Society, 1957), vol. 1, sec. 233.
- 23 – See J.A.B. van Buitenen, “Studies in Samkhya II,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77 (1957): 15–25.
- 24 – Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, 2d ed., trans. Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (Columbo: A. Semage, 1964), p. 815.