THE SELF

A Thematic Compilation

Avi Sion, Ph. D.

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Abstract

The Self is an inquiry into the concepts of self, soul, person, ego, consciousness, psyche and mind – ranging over phenomenology, logic, epistemology, ontology, psychology, spirituality, meditation, ethics and metaphysics. This book is a thematic compilation drawn from past works by the author.

The present, expanded edition includes an essay written in 2016 on the Buddhist five skandhas doctrine.

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1. CHAPTER ONE

Drawn from *Future Logic* (1990),
Chapter 61.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE MIND

My purpose here is to propose a consistent framework and terminology for epistemology.

1. Consciousness is a Relation

Consciousness is a specific, peculiar kind of *relation* between an entity like ourselves (called the Subject); and any 'appearance', 'phenomenon', 'thing' which presents itself to us (called the Object). One can figuratively view consciousness as a line stretching between subject and object. (Capital letters are sometimes used for these terms, to avoid confusion with the use of the same words in other contexts, note.)

Consciousness is itself, of course, a phenomenon — one very difficult to grasp and define, because it is such a fundamentally unique and distinctive part of the world. We are here merely indicating it, without presuming to know what it is much more precisely, or just how it works.

The point made here is just that it is primarily a relational phenomenon, a placid 'seeing'; it is not itself an activity, though many activities surround it. The 'effort' of

attention or the ‘state’ of being aware or the ‘activity’ of thought, are secondary aspects of this phenomenon, which depend on the relational definition for their understanding.

The reason why consciousness is best described as ‘a relation’, is that we cannot consistently claim that consciousness is ‘subjective’, because that claim is itself an event of consciousness which has pretensions of being ‘objective’. This means that *the subject and object must be related by consciousness in such a way that neither affects the other when they are so related*.

Consciousness, then, is a relation which is neither passive nor active. Consciousness cannot be said to consist of changes of or within the subject caused by the object, because such changes would not guarantee the existence of an object, let alone that the same object would always cause the same change or that different objects would never cause the same change. And consciousness cannot be said to consist in a creation by the subject of an object, because we would still have to explain how the object is apprehended once produced.

The ***Subject*** is itself also a phenomenon — again, one very difficult to grasp and define, because it is such a fundamentally unique and distinctive part of the world. We can say that it remains unaffected by consciousness or its Object. If consciousness was passive or active (as above defined), the Subject would be unable to be conscious of itself, not even hypothetically.

The ***Object*** is, note well, whatever presents itself to us, as it stands — without initial concern as to whether it is to be regarded as ‘real’ or ‘illusory’: these are later judgments about the object. The Object, likewise, remains unmoved by consciousness or by the Subject as such.

What matters here is that ultimately all consciousness is essentially observation, by someone, of something. The nature or type or source or status, of observer, consciousness, and observed, are other issues, which philosophy indeed has to discuss at length and try to resolve, but which need not concern us at this stage.

Whether the object is faced by the subject with detachment, dispassionately, objectively — or the subject is unwilling or unable to 'distance' himself from the object — these are attitudinal aspects, which pertain to reaction and do not affect the essentially 'observatory' nature of consciousness.

The existence of the object is immediately given in its appearance as a phenomenon. However we interpret what has appeared, we can be sure that *something* has appeared. If nothing had appeared, there would be nothing to discuss. The existences of subject and consciousness are not so obvious, a reflection of sorts is required to notice them.

Objects seem to be of various substance: some seem 'materially concrete' (e.g. a stone), some 'mentally concrete' (e.g. a dream); some seem 'abstract' (e.g. entropy or humaneness). Subjects are believed to be of a substance other than such material or mental entities: we view them as 'spiritual entities' or 'souls'. Consciousness also seems a very special component of the world.

We sometimes label our awareness of subject and consciousness jointly as '*self-consciousness*'. For us humans at least, that awareness seems to peripherally accompany our every cognition of other objects, if only we make a minimal effort to activate it. This direct impression is further confirmed indirectly, by observation

of other apparent people and higher animals. The extrapolation from object to consciousness and subject seems obvious to us.

We know very little about what constitutes a Subject, what gives some existents the power of cognition. Judging by their behavior, humans and higher animals have it (animists believe that all things have consciousness to some degree).

One cannot postulate that consciousness is bound to be distortive, without thereby putting one's own skeptical principle in doubt. It would not, however, be inconsistent to claim that *consciousness is occasionally distortive*. The power of our consciousness is evidently more or less limited; only G-d is viewed as omniscient.

2. Kinds of Consciousness

The term consciousness is to be understood generically. In common to all *kinds* of consciousness, is the central fact of consciousness, seemingly always one and the same Subject-Object relation.

a. Consciousness is called by different names, with reference to **the kind of phenomenon which is its object**. But this does not imply that the consciousness as such as structurally different in each of its subdivisions.

Thus, we call ***perception***, consciousness with a concrete phenomenon as its object; and ***conception*** (or ***conceptual insight***), that with an abstract phenomenon or a phenomenon mixing concrete and abstract components.

Identification is consciousness of the identities between parts of a phenomenon or between two or more

phenomena. ***Distinction*** is consciousness of the differences between parts of a phenomenon or between two or more phenomena. Since similarity and dissimilarity are in themselves abstract aspects of phenomena, such *comparisons and contrasts* are conceptual. These insights allow us to *discern* the various constituents or aspects of individual phenomena, and to *classify* several phenomena together or separately.

Understanding refers to consciousness of the causality (in the largest sense) of phenomena — the natural causes of material or mental phenomena as such, or the meanings or explanations of ideas. Understanding is primarily a consciousness of the order of things; it is conceptual, since causality is an abstract phenomenon. The reaction of fulfillment or satisfaction which follows such insight is secondary.

b. Consciousness is classified variously, with reference to **the location in space or time of object**.

Thus, we label consciousness as ***introspective*** (or inner) or ***extrospective*** (or outer), according to whether its object is placed inside or outside of us (the terms are ambiguous, depending on how much we consider as being 'us' — our minds, our bodies, or even our segment of society).

The objects of perception are ordinarily temporally located in the present. Direct perception of long past or future events seems impossible to us — though prophets are said to have this power. ***Remembering*** concrete events seems to be perception of present mental images of past events, rather than of the events themselves.

Conception, however, does not seem equally bound by time, in the sense that we can more or less ***predict*** past

events from their present effects, or future events from their present causes, or either of them from general laws. Such predictions are conceptual insights, even when they concern concrete events, in that the premises of the conclusion are abstract relations. Still, the result is a consciousness of past or future, so we are justified in saying that (predictive) conception as such transcends time: the subject and object are related by it across time.

c. Many subdivisions of 'consciousness' refer to **the attendant processes**, as well as to the location and kind of phenomenon. But that different processes lead up to an event of consciousness, does not in itself mean that their result is essentially different; once consciousness is aroused it may be one and the same.

Thus, perception mediated by activity of the sense-organs is called ***sensory*** perception (or sensation). It is called seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touch-feeling, according to whether the eye, ears, mouth, nose, or touch-organs, were involved. The perceptions of various pleasures and pains in one's own body, and of movements or stillness in or of one's own body, are also sensory, and called feelings (sentiments, if to be distinguished from touch-feelings).

Perception of mental images could be called ***'intimate'*** perception. (I adopt this label for lack of a better one; the colloquial expression 'mind's eye' might be more fitting were it not for its limiting suggestion of visual images.) It is hard to classify this as sensory perception, in that the usual sense-organs do not seem to be involved (though the brain supposedly plays an analogous role of some sort). But it is still a form of perception, insofar as its objects are as 'concrete' as material ones, though mental.

Some people claim, correctly or not, powers of ***extra-sensory*** perception (ESP). That is, the ability to perceive events which are outside one's own mind and body, and beyond the normal range of the sense-organs. We might distinguish ESP of purely material phenomena, *clairvoyance* (say), from ESP of mental phenomena or material phenomena linked to mental ones, *telepathy* (say).

I cannot personally claim to have ever experienced clairvoyance, but I have had the impression of telepathy (for example, thinking of someone and almost immediately getting a phone call from that person) often enough to discount coincidence. I remain open to the idea, without insisting on it, on the grounds that thought-transmission (awake or even in dreams) could be too fragile to withstand the stress of scientific probing. In any case, I mention ESP here, only for purposes of taxonomy.

Conceptual insight may be ***intuitive***, immediate and direct, as when we 'see' as obvious that two entities are in some way alike or that two statements are contradictory. Or it may be ***reflective***, final and indirect, occurring at the end of a long and tangled effort of thought, comprising sensory and imaginary experiences, and inductive and deductive reasonings — a complex of perceptions and conceptual insights.

The immediate and final insight are essentially the same in character; the process leading up to the latter may be regarded as only ***a preparatory positioning of self, faculties of cognition, and objects***. The process merely 'shows' us the object, presents it to us, but we still need to 'see' it.

Conception is considered less immediate, direct and spontaneous, than perception, but there is no reason to think so. Both usually involve a process, an alignment of self, faculties, and objects, plus an effort of attention. We may or not be conscious of the preliminaries. What counts is the terminal event of perception or conception as such. That singular event has a certain, specific character, whatever its own causes or the nature of its objects.

Imagination is not in itself a kind of consciousness. It is a complex of three factors: the ('voluntary' or 'spontaneous') *act* of projecting a concrete mental image or abstract mental construct, the image or construct projected as an *entity* in itself, and the eventual consciousness of that finished product. The precedent projection is merely a creative activity of the will or nervous system; only the subsequent observation of its result properly qualifies as consciousness. The source of the object is irrelevant here, just as we would not regard the making of a table as part of seeing the table.

The images formed by imagination exist without doubt; we experience them daily. Some obvious instances: our thoughts are expressed as imaginary sounds; our dreams may clearly depict people we know. Such images are, however, considered as made of *a substance distinct from common matter, which we label 'mental'*. This mental substance, like common matter, has both concrete and abstract components.

Concrete imagination, or '**perceptualization**' is projection of concrete mental images of any kind. This includes not only visualization (visual imagination), but also its equivalents in the other sense phenomena (auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactual, emotional).

Abstract imagination, or '**conceptualization**' is projection of abstract mental constructs of any kind.

The expression 'projection of images' suggests the existence of a mental *'matrix'* (let us call it) in which the images are formed or imbedded. This might be viewed as a multidimensional screen, capable of displaying visible, audible, and other phenomena. I find this idea occasionally convenient (to replace the broader word 'mind'), but it need not be taken literally, because the images might be 'holographs', of a common substance but without a substratum.

The words ***percept*** and ***concept*** may here be explicated. We often intend them in the sense of 'thought-units', but I prefer to stress their alternative sense of *objects* of perception or conception. A concrete object of perception should be called a percept, like the green we perceive; an abstract object of conception, should be called a concept, like the greenness we conceive.

A percept is always concrete (meaning, it has perceptible qualities); it may be physical (ordinarily implying sensory perception) or mental (the object of intimate perception). In the latter case, it may have been actively fashioned by us or have arisen involuntarily: perceptualization is implied. Exactly likewise, a concept is always abstract; may be physical or mental; and in the latter case, may have been willed (reflective conception) or passively experienced (intuited): conceptualization is implied.

In practice, because concrete and abstract factors are intertwined in the objects we commonly face, we sometimes broaden the word 'concept' to include percepts as well as concepts. Alternatively, we apply the word 'percept' to all physical phenomena, whether concrete or

abstract, and ‘concept’ to all mental phenomena, whether concrete or abstract: this reflects an understanding that there is no essential difference between perception and conception.

All these, however called, are in themselves objects. But besides this characterization, mental objects may additionally have a representative intent, as we saw in the previous chapter: they may make claim to some analogy to physical objects, or other mental objects. In themselves, all objects are empirical facts; the characterization as fiction only concerns claims of representation, whether the imagined object was perceptualized or conceptualized.

Lastly, note, consciousness may be ***verbal*** or ***wordless***. The role of words has been discussed in an earlier chapter. They help us to think and communicate, and play a role in remembering. Wordless consciousness is sometimes called ‘subconscious’ — we learn or imagine, decide or intend, but without comment.

But all use of words implies an underlying consciousness of the meaning intended (meaningless sounds or written symbols do not strictly qualify as ‘words’). Words in themselves are just objects; they play no role if we are not conscious of them, and if we are only conscious of them they have no meaning. They should not be confused with the underlying consciousness of what they are intended to refer to.

Words may refer to percepts as well as concepts, or to complexes of both. Words facilitate imagination, especially conceptualization. In the latter case, words are very valuable, because they are concrete, and concrete objects are easier to manipulate and hold on to than the abstract objects they are standing in for. However, even

then, for the verbal construct to have meaning, there has to have been an underlying reshuffling of abstract elements. Needless to say, the resulting fiction may or may not have a factual equivalent. Either way, it is not strictly the word combination itself which is fact or fiction, but the construction that they propose.

3. The Mind

What we call ‘the mind’ is a grab-bag of many things. It collects together: the self or **soul**; our faculties of **cognition** and **volition**, and **imagination** and **affection**; and the various states and motions of those faculties, and entities produced by or through them.

The *soul*, the spiritual entity which is our self in the deepest sense, is the unaffected Subject of consciousness and Agent of will.

The soul occupies a central position, surrounded by certain faculties. By a *faculty* we mean, the structures underlying an ability to perform a certain function. These infrastructures are specific arrangements of physical entities, which make possible the sort of event referred to. They are known to biology as the nervous system, and include our brains and sense and motor organs.

These biological faculties, then, constitute the physical conditions under which cognition and volition can operate. As earlier posited, cognition is essentially a relational phenomenon; likewise, volition. The states and motions which surround cognition and volition, and the entities these may result in, concern the underlying structures, and are not to be confused with cognition and

volition as such. Their role is merely to provide supporting services to these functions.

Different animal species and individuals have differently structured faculties, and therefore varying powers of cognition and volition. Machines and computers are assumed to lack souls, and therefore can never be Subjects or Agents which engage in cognition or volition; they are at best as passive and mechanistic as nervous systems.

The soul is viewed as substantially different from the nervous system; they are not a part of each other, though contiguous or inhabiting the same place. The soul is *in no way internally altered* by cognitive or volitional or surrounding physiological and physical events; only the nervous system undergoes alterations, whether by the soul's apprehensions and actions or by events in the rest of the body or beyond it.

However, the *sphere of influence* of the soul may be maximized or minimized, according to the structural condition, and present states and motions, of its allied nervous system. This means that the soul's previous cognitions and volitions, or even external events, may — through their alterations of the nervous system — make *more easy* (facilitate) or render *more difficult*, or even permanently arrest (in the case of irreparable damage to the nervous system), the soul's later powers of cognition and volition. It may have to go through A, B, C to get to D; or it may have D immediately available.

Thus, the soul can be said to be an 'unmoved mover', without thereby implying that its powers of cognition and volition are unlimited by physical conditions. The ethical doctrine of freedom of the human soul is simply that certain powers of cognition and volition remain

inalienable, even when much complicated, so long as life goes on and the relevant organs are undamaged.

The faculties of imagination and affection are merely tributary aspects of cognition and volition. *Affections* (ranging from love to hate), for instance, are inferred from the attitudes (positionings) and expressions (actual directions) of the will, and from the content and intensity of correlative passions — bodily pleasures and pains (sentiments), and mental ones (emotions), before or after action.

Thus, to summarize, what we call 'the mind' is a grouping of disparate things: a central soul (with Subject and Agent capabilities); surrounding faculties (biological infrastructures, organs) which enable, delimit, and assist its cognitive and volitional relations to other things; and a power of the soul and nervous system to produce the special entities we call mental images.

The mental entities we imagine are evidently such that they can be formed either 'spontaneously' by the nervous system or 'voluntarily' by the soul. These are intimate experiences we all have. I suspect that in the latter case, the soul produces mental phenomena by acting on the nervous system, rather than directly (this would be the simplest hypothesis, since it adds no extra assumptions).

The *interactive properties* of soul, matter (the nervous system and the physical world around), and mental images might, in conclusion, be described as follows (I go into such detail to show the theory's precision):

a. the soul itself cannot be altered by matter or mental phenomena, though (i) it can seemingly be pushed around space by matter, (ii) the sphere of influence of its will can

be increased or diminished by the states of matter, and (iii) it is sometimes 'incited' to acts of will by mental images;

b. the soul can, through its will, alter matter (only through the nervous system — unless we grant telekinesis), though this power of volition has precise bounds;

c. the soul can, through its will, produce mental images (the latter probably only via the nervous system), though this power of imagination has precise bounds; if we grant telepathy, a soul can transmit mental images to other souls, or be presented with mental images transmitted to it by others (it is doubtful that this would occur via matter);

d. the nervous system can directly produce mental phenomena — but other matter (and probably the soul) cannot do so, except through the nervous system;

e. as for whether mental phenomena as such can directly affect matter — I see no reason to suppose so, since indirect explanations seem sufficient: (i) in the case of imagination by the soul, the soul acts on the nervous system with that intention, but the nervous system may yield unintended side-effects in the rest of the body (and thence beyond); (ii) in the case of involuntary imagination, the nervous-system events which produced the image may simultaneously have other effects in the rest of the body (and thence beyond); (iii) alternatively, the soul's perception of (voluntary or involuntary) images may incite it to act (or act again) on the nervous system (and thereby beyond);

f. I doubt that mental phenomena can affect each other directly, in the way that physical ones do; this may be the most telling distinction between the two domains.

Note lastly that I do not intend the statements made here concerning the soul as dogmatically perfect and final. My concern has been to specify the logical requirements of a coherent theory of the consciousness and volition relations: what is sure is that the subject or agent must be unaffected, *within that relation*. But I do not exclude offhand the possibility that souls may undergo change as a result of other relations, or spiritual events.

It is noteworthy that religion suggests, and many believe, that souls (as well as having been created and being perhaps in some cases permanently destroyed) may be 'purified' or 'sullied' by their thoughts or actions. However, such improvement or deterioration of a soul is explained as a subtraction or addition of coatings of 'impurity' *around* the in itself clean soul, rather than as an intrinsic qualitative change. The 'impurity' interferes with clarity of insight and freedom of action; it 'weighs down' the soul, causing it to descend on the spiritual scale, and thus distancing it from God.

4. Popular Psychology

Some philosophers exclude the soul from the description of mind, arguing that the self is merely the sum total of the other elements. But that view is logically untenable, because it raises the specter of 'subjectivity'. As earlier pointed out, the Subject of consciousness must be such that it is unaltered by events of consciousness; if we equate self to the altered elements of mind, we transgress this

logical requirement. The reason why the soul-less hypothesis seems at first sight to have some credibility, is as follows.

Many people have a vague notion of the mind, regarding it as a sort of psychical organ over and above the brain, with parallel functions and mutual influence. Here, the mind is regarded as a sort of cupboard, made of some nonphysical substance, in which we store entities like 'ideas' and 'emotions'. When these are placed in the lower shelves, they are held 'unconsciously', in the middle shelves, 'subconsciously', and in the upper shelves, 'consciously'. Thought is accordingly viewed as the production, alteration and movement of such entities.

Some versions of this hypothesis explicitly or tacitly admit of a soul above, next-to, or within the 'mental cupboard', which to varying degrees experiences and to some extent manipulates ideas and emotions. Other versions effectively identify the soul with the 'mental cupboard', to admit that someone is doing the seeing, feeling, and manipulating. Still others, effectively deny the existence of a Subject and Agent, and view these events as physically-caused or relatively causeless.

However, this 'mental cupboard' postulate of popular psychology is simplistic. There is no basis for considering ideas and emotions as persisting, continuing to exist as mental entities somewhere, beyond the time when they are actually experienced. It is much simpler to regard them as merely occasional 'peri-phenomena' of the physical organs.

It is sufficient to say that to each idea or emotion there corresponds a specific chemistry in the brain cells. When the appropriate molecules are constructed and properly

positioned, the mental entity is created; when thereafter the circuit is cut off, the mental entity ceases to exist. What is stored are the molecules, not the idea or emotion; the latter is recreated every time the former is re-activated.

In that case, the ‘mental storage cupboard’ is an extraneous construct. If we postulate it, the role of the brain becomes incomprehensible. There is no point in our assuming duplicate functions; it is a needless complication. Thus, actual ideas and emotions are mental phenomena, but their potentiality is a physical phenomenon.

In conclusion, then, *there is no such thing as a mind, in the sense of a mental structure or ‘psyche’*. There is only a uniform, unchanging soul, which experiences and wills as its way of relating to other things, a nervous system serving as physical infrastructure, and *from time to time* the production by these of transient mental apparitions. This scenario is by far simpler, more logical, and more empirical.

2. CHAPTER TWO

Drawn from *Buddhist Illogic* (2002),
Chapters 11 & 12.

1. Self or Soul

Nagarjuna, together with other Buddhists, denies the existence of a real "self" in man[1], i.e. that the "I" of each person is a soul or spiritual entity distinct from his physical body. This concept, referred to as the "*atman*", was regarded in Indian (Hindu) tradition as "the feeler of sensations, thinker of thoughts, and receiver of rewards and punishments for actions good and bad", something that "persists through physical changes, exists before birth and after death, and remains from one life to the other", something "constant and eternal" and "self-subsistent", which was ultimately "ontologically identical with *Brahman*, the essential reality underlying the universe" (i.e. God). The atman, or at least the ultimate Brahman essence of every atman, was considered as the most "real" of existents, because unlike the transient phenomena of experience, it was "permanent, unchanging and independent."

a) Nagarjuna attacks this view, arguing that if to be "real" means to be "permanent, unchanging and independent", then the phenomena apparent to us

[1] For this topic, see Cheng, pp. 74-76. He there refers to MT IX, XVIII:1a,1b,6, XXVII:4-8, and to HT II.

would have to be regarded as "illusions", since they are transient, changing and dependent. It would follow that transience, change and dependence – being only manifested by phenomena – are also not "real". To Nagarjuna this seems "absurd", because "moral disciplines would lose their significance and spiritual effort would be in vain."

b) Furthermore, he asks whether or not "changing phenomena", i.e. "our bodies or physical appearances", are "characteristics of the *atman*", and if so, what the relation between the atman and its characteristics might be, are they "identical" or "different"? If they were "identical", then atman would be subject to birth and death (and so forth) like the body, in contradiction to the definition of atman. If they are "different", then the atman "would be perceived without characteristics", which "it is not", because "nothing can be perceived without characteristics". On the other hand, if the atman is "without any characteristic", it would be "in principle, indefinable and hence inconceivable".

c) Moreover, to the argument that "although the atman differs from the characteristics and cannot be perceived directly, its existence can be inferred", Nagarjuna replies that "inference and analogy are inapplicable in the case of knowing the *atman*" because they are only "applicable among directly perceivable phenomena". He therefore considers that "it is unintelligible to say that *atman* exists behind changing appearances."

Nagarjuna thus comes to the conclusion that "nothing has selfhood" and "*atman* is empty". This does not constitute a rejection on his part of a "conventional" idea of the self,

as a mere "collection of different states or characteristics" such that "the self and characteristics are mutually dependent". This artificial construct of a self, being entirely identified with the perceivable phenomena we attribute to it, is not "permanent, unchanging and independent". Allow me now to debate the issues.

Let us start with argument (a). I would agree with Nagarjuna here, that reality and illusion should not be defined as his predecessors do with reference to eternity, constancy and causal independence or their negations. As explained earlier, "reality" and "illusion" are epistemological judgments applied to "appearances". These two concepts arise first in relation to phenomena. Phenomena (perceived things) are considered, in practice and in theory, to be *prima facie* "real", and then demoted to the temporary status of "problematic" if contradictions are apparent between two of them, until either or both of these phenomena is/are dumped into the category of "illusion", on either deductive or inductive grounds. There is no concept of "reality" or "illusion" apart from appearance; they merely refer to subcategories of appearances.

At a later stage, these concepts are enlarged from perceptual appearances to conceptual and intuitive appearances. Both the latter appearances similarly have, as soon as and however vaguely they are conceived or intuited, an initial credibility, which we call the status of reality. But being less evident, more hypothetical, their effective status is closer to problematic, and they have to be immediately and repeatedly thereafter further defined, and tested for internal consistency, for consistency with empirical data, and by comparison to alternative theses. The answers to these questions determine the degree of

probability we assign to concepts or intuitions. Eventually, if they are found contrary to experience, or inconsistent with themselves or a larger conceptual context, or less credible than their alternatives, they are relegated to the status of the illusory.

For us, then, all appearances are *equally* 'real' in the primary sense that it is a fact that they exist and are objects of consciousness[2]. Moreover, as earlier explained, with reference to inductive and deductive issues, pure percepts (concrete appearances, phenomena) are always 'real'; but concepts (abstract appearances), including the conceptual admixtures in percepts, may be regarded as *to various degrees* 'real' (or inversely, 'illusory').

This analysis of reality and illusion as ontological qualifications based on epistemological considerations, shows that there is no basis for Hindu philosophy's identification of them with eternity, constancy and causal independence or their negations. The latter seems to be a poetic drift, an expression of devotion to God: the presumed common ground of all selves is hailed as the only "real" thing, in contrast to which everything else is mere "illusion". "Real" in that context means significant to the world, worthy of attention and pursuit – it is a value judgment of another sort.

If we look to the epistemological status of *the concept of* God, we would say that it is conceivable to some degree; but not to an extreme degree, because there are considerable vagueness and uncertainty in it (see the previous topic of the present essay). An appeal to

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[2] Some might say, exist *as* objects of consciousness – but even that is existence.

revelation is not a solution, because revelations to prophets are for the rest of us mere hearsay; and anyway different prophets have conflicting visions, so that even if we grant that they had the visions, we have to regard some (and therefore possibly all) of them as having misinterpreted their respective visions. Faith is always involved and required with reference to God. But even supposing God is admitted to exist, and that He is one[3], eternal, invariant and completely independent, it does not follow that this is a definition of reality. The universe, which evidently exists, is also still real, even if it is but a figment of God's imagination, even if it and all its constituents are transient, changing and dependent. A short-lived event may still be real; a flux may still have continuity, a caused event may still have occurred.

Thus, we may confidently agree with Nagarjuna's rejection of the Hindu definition of reality. We may, nevertheless, doubt *his argument* in favor of that rejection, namely that "no evil person could be transformed" if the phenomenal world were illusory in the Hindu sense. Even agreeing with him that people can morally improve, we have to consider that concepts of morality, or of good and evil, come much later in the development of knowledge than the concepts of reality and illusion, and so cannot

[3] This characteristic of God, one-ness, is not mentioned by Cheng, but philosophical Brahmanism is ultimately monotheistic, even though many Hindus are in practice polytheistic. It should be mentioned, however, that one-ness is not logically implied by eternity, invariance and independence; i.e. one could conceive two or more entities with these characteristics (certainly the first two, at least – independence would be open to debate). Perhaps Zoroastrianism is a case in point?

logically be used to define or justify them. Furthermore, concepts of morality depend for their meaning on an assumption of volition operating in a world subject to time, change and causality; morality has no meaning in a world with only determinism or chance, or in a static multiplicity or unity.

Let us move on to argument (b). The question asked here is what the relation between a soul and "its" body and other perceivable phenomena (such as imaginations and emotions) might be. In my view, and I think the view of many ordinary people and philosophers, the soul is a spiritual entity (i.e. one of some stuff other than that of the material body or of mental projections), who is at once the Subject of consciousness (i.e. the one who is cognizing phenomena and other appearances – i.e. the "feeler of sensations and thinker of thoughts" mentioned above) and the Agent of volition (i.e. the one who evaluates, who makes choices and decisions, who puts in motion acts of will, who has attitudes and tendencies, and who is within certain parameters free of determinism, though not unaffected by influences and motives – i.e. the "receiver of rewards and punishments for actions good and bad" mentioned above).

Thus, the relation of soul to other existents within the universe, according to this view, is that the soul is capable (as Subject) of cognizing to some extent concrete and abstract appearances, and (as Agent) of interfering to some extent in the course of natural events, influenced and motivated by them through his cognition of them, but still free to impose his will on some of them. To affirm powers of cognition and will to the soul does not, note well, imply such powers to be unlimited or invariable; one may be free to act within certain parameters and these parameters may

under various circumstances widen or narrow in scope. By 'influence', I mean that the events external to the soul may *facilitate* or *make more difficult* its actions, to degrees below 100% (such extreme degree being the limiting case of deterministic causality, i.e. causation). This view leaves open the issue as to whether the soul is of limited duration (i.e. bounded by the lifetime of the body, which it would be if it is an epiphenomenon of matter clustered in living cells and the complex organisms they compose), or eternal (which it would be if it is a spark of God).

Returning now to Nagarjuna's argument, we would say that soul is not "identical" with its perceptible "characteristics". The soul may inhabit or be an epiphenomenon of the body, but is in either case something other than the body. The soul perceives and conceives the body (including visceral sentiments) and matter beyond it and mental phenomena within it (i.e. imaginations), through sensory and brain processes, but these processes are not identical with its cognition of their results. The soul acts on the body (or at least, the brain), and through it on the matter beyond it and on the projection of mental images, but this action (that we call will, a power of spirit over matter[4]) is a special sort of causality neither the same as mechanical causation nor mere happenstance. The "characteristics" of the soul are thus merely perceptible *manifestations* (sensations, movements, emotions) of deeper events (consciousness,

[4] Granting the universality of law of conservation of energy, we would have to presume that spirit's will somehow releases energy locked in matter, rather than inputting new energy into it. Perhaps volition affects the wave-form of energy without affecting its magnitude.

will) occurring *at the interface of* matter and spirit and more deeply still *within* spirit.

This theory of the soul differs from the Indian, in that it does not imply that the soul is imperishable or that it does not undergo internal changes or that it is entirely causally independent. Nor does it imply that the soul is separable (though distinguishable) from the body, existing before or after or without its biological activity, in the way of a disembodied ghost. So Nagarjuna's criticism that birth and death are contradictory to a concept of soul is irrelevant to this theory; for his criticism only applies to the specific Indian definition of "atman". But even if the soul is granted to be eternal, I do not think Nagarjuna's criticism is valid; for even an eternal spiritual entity may conceivably have momentary effects – as in the case of God, as we conceive Him, creating or interfering in the world. Note that we commonly regard the human soul, too, as acting on (the rest of) the natural world, without considering it necessarily eternal.

With regard to the second alternative of Nagarjuna's argument, considering the possibility that soul be "different" from its perceivable "characteristics", our reply would be, not only that they are distinct (though related as cause and effect, remember), but that we need not accept his claim that the soul's imperceptibility implies it to be "inconceivable" and "indefinable". We agree that the soul cannot be perceived, i.e. does not itself display perceptible qualities, i.e. is not a phenomenon with sense-modalities like shape and color, sound, smell, taste or touch aspects. But we may nevertheless to a considerable extent conceive and define it. The proof is that we have just done so, above; furthermore, if Nagarjuna did not have a concept and definition, however

vague and open to doubt, of soul to work with, he would have been unable to discuss the issue at all. There is no epistemological principle that the imperceptible is inconceivable and indefinable; if there were, no concept or definition would be admissible, not even those that Nagarjuna himself uses, not even those involved in the statement of that alleged principle. Concepts are precisely tools for going beyond perception. Complex concepts are not mere summaries of percepts, but imaginative departures from and additions to perceptual knowledge, nevertheless bound to the latter by logical and adductive rules. Even simple concepts, purporting to be summaries, are in fact regulated by these same rules.

Which brings us to argument (c). Here, Nagarjuna contends that inferences and analogies from experience may be valid in specific cases, but not in the case of soul. He claims that we can for example infer fire indirectly from smoke, because we have previously seen fire directly in conjunction with smoke, whereas in the case of soul, we have never perceived it, so we cannot infer it from perceptible "characteristics". We can reply that, though fire and smoke provide a valid example of inference, this is a selective example. Many other examples can be brought to bear, where we infer something never perceived from something perceived. For example, no one has ever directly sensed a magnetic 'field of force', but if you hold two magnets opposite each other, you feel the pull or push between them; you can also see a nail moving while a magnet is held close to it without touching it. The concept of force or field is constructed in relation to an experience, but is not itself an object of experience.

Nagarjuna's discourse is itself replete with such 'indirect' concepts. For instance, consciousness is imperceptible,

perception is imperceptible, and so on. One of his favorites, namely "emptiness", is *per se* without perceptible qualities. So he is using a double standard when he denies such concepts, in support of his denial that soul is intelligible. Such concepts are constructed by imaginative analogy (e.g. I may draw a magnetic force as a line or arrow) and by verbal definitions and descriptions (using words referring to relations first conceived with reference to empirical events – for instance, "whatever *causes* this motion, call it a force" or "force equals mass times acceleration caused"). Such creative construction is merely a first stage; it does not in itself validate a concept. The proposed concept must thereafter be tested and tested again, with reference to the totality of other empirical knowledge and theory, before it can be considered as valid. Its validity is also a function of its utility, i.e. the extent to which it helps us to better understand and order our experience of the world.

I personally do not regard that the concept of soul can be entirely based on such construction from experience. It seems evident to me that consciousness implies someone who is being conscious, a Subject-soul, as well as something one is conscious of, an Object. But I am sensitive to the objections by many philosophers, including Buddhist ones, that this thought may just be a prejudice incited by grammatical habit. And, as already admitted, if one introspects and looks for phenomenal manifestations of a self being aware, one finds none. Some, including Nagarjuna, would say that the concept of consciousness is itself in doubt, that all one can empirically claim is appearance. As for the concept of volition, let alone that of soul as the Agent of will, many

doubt or deny it, in view of the difficulties in its definition and proof.

But I think it is very important to realize that all Buddhist accounts (at least all those I have encountered) of ***how an illusion of selfhood might conceivably be constructed by a non-person*** fail to avoid begging the question. A theory is required, which answers all possible questions, before such a revolutionary idea as that of denial of *real* self in man can be posited with confidence; and no theory without holes or inconsistencies has to my knowledge been proposed. We may readily admit the existence of an *illusory* self (or 'ego'), constructed and suffered by a stupid or misguided real self. But an aberration or delusion with no one constructing it or subject to it, seems like an absurd concept to me. It implies mere happenstance, determinism, without any consciousness, volition, values or responsibility.

Indeed, if you examine attempted such theories they always (overtly or covertly) describe an effective person (the pronoun 'he') constructing a false self. They never manage to escape from the sentence structure with a personal subject; typically: 'he gradually deludes himself into thinking he has a self'. They do not provide a credibly detailed and consistent scenario of how unconscious and impersonal elements and processes (Nagarjuna's "characteristics") could possibly aggregate into something that has the impression (however false) it is someone! A machine (or robot with artificial intelligence) may 'detect' things (for us) but it has no consciousness; it may 'do' things (for us) but it has no volition; it may loudly proclaim 'I' but it has no soul.

There is also to consider the reverse process of *de*construction, how an ultimately impersonal artificial self (non-self) would or could go about freeing itself from illusion. Why would a non-self have any problem with remaining deluded (assuming it could be), and how if it has no personal powers would it intelligently choose to put in motion the prescribed process of liberation from delusion. A simple sentence like 'to realize you have no self, make an effort to meditate daily' is already a contradiction in terms, in my view.

2. Self-Knowledge

Let us therefore consider how we might argue in favor of a soul, consisting of a Subject and his consciousness and an Agent and his will. If I do not mention feelings much here, it is only because I consider them derivatives of the other two powers of the soul; but the soul as author of evaluations (value-judgments, choices, affections) is intended here too.

As already stated, I agree that the soul has *in itself* no perceptible (i.e. visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory or tactile) qualities, comparable to those in or around the 'body' (matter) or in mental projections (imaginations, dreams). This can be taken to simply mean that it is not made of material or mental substance, granting that "matter" (in a large sense, here, including physical and imaginary concrete phenomena) is whatever has these qualities; for this reason, let us say that soul is made of

some distinctive substance, call it spirit.[5] All we have done here is hypothesized, by analogy to the phenomenal realm, an entity (soul) of different stuff (spirit); this is logically legitimate, provided we go on and justify it further.

This concept of a soul is constructed to explain certain phenomena, on the basis of a mass of observations and theory-building. The soul is posited as the Subject of consciousness (or cognition) of, first, concrete phenomena (percepts) and, second, abstract appearances (concepts); and at a later stage as the Agent of will, the presumed *cause* (in a special sense) of certain perceptible actions of bodily organs (eye movements, speech, motions of arms and legs, and so on) as well as of intellectual organs (imagination, attention, thought processes, and so on). But if soul is reduced to such a conceptual construct, we only succeed at best in giving a *general* description of its powers and activities.

Such a theoretical approach leaves us without justification for our day-to-day propositions concerning *our own particular* thoughts and deeds at any given time. For conception cannot proceed from a single event; it is the outcome of *comparisons and contrasts* between two or more events. Whereas, statements about an individual person's present situation are not made in comparison and contrast to other persons or situations. A general proposition can serve as major premise of a syllogism, but to obtain a particular conclusion, we need a particular minor premise. Indeed, to obtain the general proposition in the first place, we need to admit some particular cases

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[5] We can leave as an open issue, parenthetically, the possibility that matter and spirit are respectively coarse and fine manifestations of one and the same substance.

of the same kind, which we can then generalize and apply to other particular cases (that is what syllogistic inference is all about).

That is, when we say, for instances, "I believe so and so" or "I choose so and so" or "I wish so and so", we are evidently not referring to phenomena *perceptible at the moment* (belief, choice, wishing, have no immediate concrete manifestations, though they may eventually have perceptible effects), and we are evidently not *conceptually inferring* such propositions from any perceptual phenomena (i.e. what these propositions refer to are not abstract appearances). Yet these propositions are significant to each of us, and can fairly be declared true or false by us. Their truth or falsehood is, to repeat, not exclusively based on experience and on rational considerations, as Buddhists suggest, but is *immediately, directly known* by introspection.

This is what I would call 'self-knowledge'; and since this type of cognition is neither perception nor conception, it deserves a special name – say, 'intuition'. My use of this term should not be taken to imply acceptance of knowledge of other people's souls, thoughts, wills or emotions (which is another issue, open to debate, solipsism not being excluded) – it is here restricted to self-intuition. I do not use the term 'introspection', because this may be used with reference to perceptible phenomena, such as one's mental imaginations or bodily feelings.

Thus, in this view, the soul is cognized by three types of cognition: directly by intuition, and indirectly by conceptualization based on the soul's perceptual effects *and* its intuited states and activities. Of course, 'cognition' is one and the same in all three cases; only *the object* of

cognition differs in each case. If we limit our consideration only to perceptual effects and concepts derived from them, we can only construct a *theoretical* 'soul' and refer to '*powers*' of soul. To obtain and claim knowledge of an *individual* soul and of its *actual* perceptions, conceptions, beliefs, intentions, acts of will, value-judgments, affections, etc., we have to admit a direct cognition other than perception, namely 'intuition'.

Thus, we could refer to soul with several terms: the 'I' of my own intuitions, the 'self' when assuming that others have an 'I' like mine (on the basis of similar perceptible effects), and the 'soul' when referring to the conceptual construct based on my 'I', your 'I' and their perceptually evident (presumed) effects. Granting all this, it is no wonder that if we seek definition or proof of the 'I' in phenomenal effects, we will not find it!

Let us now return to these intuited propositions, for a moment. Consider this well. If I say to you "I believe (or disbelieve or am unsure about) so and so" – did I infer this from anything and can you deny me? Sure, I have to mean what I say to you, be sincere. Sometimes, too, I may *lie to myself*, and claim to believe something (e.g. some complimentary claim about myself, or some religious or political claim), when in fact I do not really believe it. The human psyche has its complexities, and we can hide and not admit things even to oneself. In such cases, the truth of the statement can be verified with reference to a larger context, checking if my feelings and actions are consistent with my claimed belief. But this does not mean that all such personal claims are known by reference to perceptible side-effects, as Buddhists claim. It only means that, just as in the perceptual and conceptual fields, appearances have an initial credibility but have to be faced

off with other appearances, so in the field of intuition, an inductive process of verification goes on, through which some intuitions are found to be doubtful (due to their conflicts with other intuitions, and/or perceptible phenomena and conceptual considerations).

Furthermore, it should be stressed that not all statements of the form "I-verb-object" (object being optional) are based on intuition alone. Some have perceptual and/or conceptual basis only, or also. For example, "I am thinking that we should go there" involves perceptual factors, perhaps a mental image of our bodies (mine and yours) walking along in some direction, as well as conceptual factors, perhaps a reasoning process as to why we should go there. But some such statements are purely intuitive, e.g. "I believe so and so" is final and independent, whatever the reasoning that led up to the belief. Furthermore, such statements need not be verbalized. The words "I", "believe" etc. involved in the statement are of course products of conceptualization; but the intent of the sentence as a whole is a particular intuition, which the words verbalize.

Also to note well is that a proposition like "I believe so and so" cannot be based on a coded message from the brain, to the effect that "so and so should be declared as 'your belief' at this time", for the simple reason that we have no awareness of any *perceptible* message of this sort. Therefore, such a statement is not a translation in words of a special kind of percept (just as conceptual statements are not). Perhaps the statement "I believe so and so" *itself* is the perceptible message from the brain? If so, we would be justified in denying any intuition of soul and its states and activities. But it is evident from introspection that we know what we want to say before we put it in words. The

words merely verbalize an object already cognized; and this cognition must be 'intuition', since it is neither perception (having no perceptible qualities) nor conception (since it is particular).

It seems justified, in conclusion, to hypothesize, in addition to perception and conception, a third source of knowledge, called intuition, a direct cognition whose objects are the self (I) and its actual cognitions (I *know* what I am seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, etc., right now), volitions (I *know* what I choose, decide, want, intend, will, etc., at this moment) and affections (I *know* what I like or dislike or am indifferent to, what I hope or fear, etc., at this time). I *know* these most intimate of things – who can tell me otherwise, how would they know better than me what the imperceptible contents of my consciousness are? Soul and its presumed powers – cognition, volition, affection – cannot be conceived by comparison, since I do not see any souls other than my own; it can only be conceived by inference from perceptible and intuitive phenomena that we hypothesize to be its effects. The objects of intuition may be "empty" of perceptible qualities; but they may still have an existence of sorts, just as abstracts are not themselves perceptible but may credibly be affirmed.

Suppose, for example, I meditate, watching my breath; my random thoughts cause my attention to stray for awhile[6]; I drag my attention back to the object of my meditation, my

[6] As we meditate, countless thoughts pop up, tempting us to follow them. Eventually, one manages to hook us, grabbing our interest and hurtling us through a series of associations. Thus totally absorbed, we forget our object of meditation for a while, until we realize we have been distracted.

breath. Here, *the direction and intensity of my attention* require an act of will. The straying away of attention from the breath is *not* my will; *my* will is what makes it return to the breath. Phenomenally, the attention on the breath and the loss of this attention (or rather the breath phenomenon and the lack of it) are on an equal plane. What allows me to regard the one as mine and the other as not mine, is the awareness that I had to make *an effort* in the one case and that no effort[7] was involved in the other case. This 'effort' is the intuited volition and that it is 'mine' signals intuition of soul. I may focus on the effort alone, or by an additional act of will focus on the fact that it is mine. There is no 'reflexive act' involved in this self-consciousness, because it is one part of me watched by the rest of me.

Of course, this is all very mysterious. When we say: "I think this" or "I will that", we have no idea where this or that event came from or how it popped up. Certainly the deep source and manufacture of a thought or will of the soul is unknown to us, so we cannot claim to wholly own it. We do not have a plan of action before the thought or will, through which we consciously construct the latter. Each thought or will, finally, just is. There are no steps or stages, we just do it. But it is still not just happenstance; there is an author, ourselves. We are able to distinguish, in most cases, between thoughts or wills that just 'happen to us', and others that 'we author'; we may even identify them as voluntary or involuntary to various degrees.

All this to say that Nagarjuna's critique of soul and its powers, and of the knowability of these things, is far from

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[7] The thoughts I strayed into may have involved voluntary processes, but my straying into them was involuntary.

conclusive. Buddhists are justified in doubting and inquiring into the issues, but from a purely philosophical point of view the Madhyamika conclusion of "emptiness" may be considered too radical and extreme. It may be obviously valid from the perspective of someone who has reached some higher form of consciousness (which, *I know, I* have not), but their *rational* arguments are not decisive. Most important, as we have seen, Nagarjuna bases his denial on *one particular* theory of soul (the atman theory), and has not considered all conceivable theories. To rebut (or more precisely, to put in doubt) his arguments, it is therefore sufficient to propose one alternative theory (as above done) that he has ignored; the alternative does not need to be proved – if it is just conceivable (coherent, consistent), that is enough.

Nagarjuna does not, in my view, satisfactorily answer questions like 'who is it that perceives, thinks, desires or acts?', 'who is it that meditates in pursuit of liberation or eventually reaches it?', when he explains away the soul as a mere cluster of percepts or concepts, as something (illegitimately) inferred from perceptible phenomena by a presumed cause-effect relation.

In passing, it is worth noting that, although the doctrine of no-self is fundamental to Buddhism, not all Buddhists have interpreted it as a total rejection of soul (in some sense of the term). One Theravada school, known as the 'Personalists', dating back to about 300 BCE, whose adepts in the 7th century CE included almost one third of all Buddhist monks in India, "motivated by commonsense, maintained that in addition to impersonal events, there is still a 'person' to be reckoned with."[8] According to the

[8] According to Conze. See pp. 190 and 192-7.

Abhidharmakosha, a Mahayana work by Vasubhandu (4th century CE), the Personalists interpreted the no-self doctrine of the Buddha as signifying simply that "something which is not the true Self is mistaken for the true Self".

It is thus possible to understand the doctrine of not-self as a rejection, not of 'soul' ('real or deep self'), but rather of 'ego' ('conventional or superficial self'). The ego is a confused construct of 'selfhood' by the soul, due to the latter's *self-identification with* delusive opinions (acquired by itself and through social influences), and consequently with certain attitudes and actions it engages in, in the way of a self-protective reaction. By predefining itself and its world, the soul imprisons itself in patterns of response appropriate to that definition. It is up to the soul to rid itself of the ego-centered viewpoint, by realizing the stupidity and avoidability of it.

3. CHAPTER THREE

Drawn from *Phenomenology* (2003),
Chapters 1:3 & 5:1-3,5-6.

1. To Be or Not to Be

One notable radical difference with ordinary thinking in our place and time is the Buddhist notion that we have no self. The Buddhist outlook stems from the position of Indian philosophy that all that we can cognize are *dharmas,* that is (in a primary sense) concrete phenomena of perception, and eventually (in an enlarged sense) the abstract derivatives thereof. The 'reality' of dharmas was considered 'illusory,' since they were impermanent, without abiding characters; and all the more so, derivative notions about dharmas. The Hindu branch of Indian philosophy opted for the thesis that beyond such elusive existents there is a (more 'real' and 'permanent') spiritual existence (with individual selves or souls, and a universal Self or God). Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, forked off, denying any such additional existents (on the surface, at least, because they later admit a ground of being, which is known only on the highest level of consciousness). Moreover, some Buddhist schools effectively consider some dharmas as material, whereas others consider all as mental.

Some modern Western thinkers would agree with the no-self position, from a more mechanistic perspective, regarding man as a machine (an organic computer or

robot) devoid of soul. René Descartes (17th Century) was the first in the history of Western philosophy to raise the issue of selfhood (or raise it so explicitly and clearly). He inferred (*ergo*) existence of self (*sum*) from existence of cognition (*cogito*). More precise would be to say that we (at least partly) infer Subject and consciousness from the appearance of Object. Something appears – *to what (whom)?* a Subject! *how?* through consciousness! Some philosophers would consider such reasoning as compulsive, influenced by mere grammatical habit. But in my view, these characterizations are neither just habitual nor deductive certainties; they are inductive *hypotheses*[9] needed to settle certain logical issues.

The term 'Subject,' by the way, is used as here relative to 'Object,' in the relation called 'consciousness'[10]. In the relation of 'volition,' the same entity is called 'Agent,' versus the 'will' (the act of will or that which is willed). The term 'soul' refers to the common ground of Subject and Agent (as well as affective and other roles). The term 'self' stresses the personality of soul, as distinct from other entities, which lack consciousness, volition and affection. The term 'spirit' stresses the distinct substance of soul, compared to material or mental entities (without at the outset excluding that all three may ultimately be of uniform stuff).

In my view, the issue of self is relatively secondary in importance, in the (re)construction of knowledge from

9 Hypotheses, incidentally, made by the Subject through consciousness.

10 I use capitals for the 'Subject,' and occasionally the 'Object,' of consciousness, to avoid confusion with the subject or object of a proposition, and other ambiguities.

scratch that Descartes was pursuing here. He quite correctly saw that even apparently sensed objects may be dreamed. But he (so far as I know) missed the primary conclusion that 'whether these appearances are reality or illusion, it is at least sure that they are.' *That* ought to have been his main building block. In that case, the second inference becomes 'something appears to be (thus, exists), therefore I and my consciousness of that appearance also exist,' the reverse! But I am perhaps being picky. His '[I][11] think therefore I am' can also in fairness be read as '***things appear therefore I am here seeing them***.' Note also that the 'therefore' implies someone inferring; thus not only experience but also reason are implicit in the insight and statement.

In the present volume, we shall radically diverge from the Buddhist or Western Mechanist theses. It is indeed logical to suppose that if all we can cognize are the concrete physical and imaginary phenomena we perceive, i.e. *visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or gustatory* manifestations of being, and the abstract ideas we form in relation to those phenomena, then there is no self. For no one can claim to see or hear or touch or smell or taste the self – it has admittedly no *perceptible* qualities. However, the way out of this dilemma is to abandon the underlying dogma (about dharmas), and admit that we have another sort of cognitive relation with the self and its exclusive

11 I put the 'I' implied in 'cogito' in brackets, so as to stress the verb 'think' as primarily implied. The 'I' is grammatically required at the beginning of that sentence, but logically is intended as given in the 'sum' clause, only after an inference indicated by the 'ergo' conjunction. This remark justifies my reformulation of Descartes statement as "think (thoughts appear), therefore am (they appear to someone, call that me)".

properties (consciousness, will and valuation) – a direct self-experience that might be called ‘intuition.’

This thesis need only be taken as a hypothesis to start with. But it soon, as we shall see, becomes evident that such self-experience is needed and extremely useful in solving a variety of epistemological as well as ontological problems. For examples, how are present memories (of past sensations) distinguished from present sensations? Or how are word intentions known to be intended? Thus, it is not through some arbitrary superstition that self and its functions are established, but through the utility and gradual confirmation of the hypothesis of intuition. Theories of knowledge that ignore or exclude intuition merely seem to manage to stand without it, because they do not explicitly confront certain issues, leaving them tacit and unresolved.

2. The Self

According to our account, the ‘self’ is first noticed experientially, through a faculty of intuition. This same assumed faculty (of the self) is able to experience the self’s cognitions, volitions and affections (i.e. its ‘functions’), as well as the self itself. Neither the self nor its said immediate functions have any phenomenal characteristics, so they cannot be perceived. The fact that they cannot be perceived does not however imply that they do not exist; in their case, to repeat, another kind of experiential cognition is involved, that of ‘intuition.’ Cumulative experiences of self and its functions allow us to construct concepts of self, cognition, volition and valuation.

Additionally, we regard self and its functions as having mental and material *effects*. Imaginations and mental feelings, as well as bodily movements and sentiments, are considered (within our current world-view) as indirectly caused by the self, through its more immediate exercise of cognitive, volitional and emotional powers. What is caused by the self is not strictly speaking 'part of' the self, yet it still 'belongs to' the self in the sense of being its responsibility. This *extended* sense of self may be said to have phenomenal characteristics.

Moreover, apparently, the moment we but experience anything phenomenal, or think in abstract terms, or make choices or take action or feel emotions of any sort, a person as the grammatical subject seems logically required. That is, an 'I' doing these things seems to us implied. Every object appearing give rise to a parallel awareness of a **Subject** to whom it appears and a relation of **consciousness** between it and the object. Similarly, every act of volition or valuation, however devoid of phenomenal characteristics, arouses in us the conviction that an Agent (or author or actor) is involved. This is called 'self-consciousness,' but it is somewhat inaccurate to do so, because what is involved here is not only intuition of self, and eventual perceptual experiences, but also a logical insight, something abstract and conceptual.

We conceive the self, in its strict sense, as composed of a uniform substance that we label 'spiritual' (to distinguish it from matter and mind). We also conceive it as an entity that we call 'soul,' which underlies all events and changes

relative to the self (i.e. its functions), constituting an abiding and unifying continuity[12].

Contrary to what some people presume and some philosophers (pro or con) suggest, to assume (whether intuitively or conceptually) a soul or spiritual entity underlying cognition, volition and valuation, does *not* logically necessitate that such entity be eternal. Constancy in the midst of variation does not imply that a soul has neither beginning nor end in time (or space). Just as a material or mental entity is conceived as something permanent relative to certain transient aspects of it, and yet as a whole transient relative to the universe, so in the case of a spiritual entity, it too may well have a limited world-line in space-time.

Intuition, perception and logical insight only necessitate the existence of one self – the Subject of these acts of consciousness. Solipsism remains conceivable. Our common belief that there are many souls like our own one in the world is a conceptual construct and hypothesis, which as such is perfectly legitimate and indeed helps to explain many experiences. Also not excluded is the belief

12 The term 'self' might be defined (in a rather circular manner) as 'other than everything else that is an object of consciousness.' It of course refers to the same thing as 'soul.' The concept of soul refers to something very unitary, the ultimate Subject of cognition and Agent of valuation and volition. The concept of ego refers to a more superficial layer of the psyche, a complex of current and habitual attitudes and behaviors, bound together by certain 'ruts' of thinking. The former is relatively free and responsible; the latter functions under considerable compulsion. The ego is the passive expression of the soul's *history* of experiences, thoughts and choices, whereas the soul is the active maker of that history. (See next section.)

that there is really only one big Soul (that perhaps pervades or transcends the universe of matter and mind), underlying the apparent small soul(s) – this is the belief of monotheism. That is, belief in a soul does not prejudge the issue of *individuation*. Just as material entities may, upon reflection, be considered as all mere ripples in a universal fabric, so possibly in the case of spiritual entities.

But such ripples might be permanent or transient. There is no logical necessity to assume that upon dying the soul lives on elsewhere (in a heaven or hell), or that it remains or is reborn on earth in some form, though such possibilities are not to be excluded offhand. The difficulty with any idea of transmigration is to experientially demonstrate some sort of transfer of spirit or energy (karmic reaction) from one incarnation to the next. To imagine some such transfer, to assert it to occur, is no proof. I cannot either think of any theory for which a 'law of conservation of spirit' might be a hypothetical necessity to explain certain empirical data.

Moreover, to posit the existence of a soul does not necessarily imply that this substance, anymore than the substance of imaginations, can exist outside and independently of the material substance. The spirit may be just an *epiphenomenon* of the peculiar cluster of matter which constitutes the biological entity of a living, animal, human body, coming into being when it is born (or a few months earlier) and ceasing to be when it dies.

(Notwithstanding, we may just as well posit that matter and mind are more complex arrangements of spiritual stuff, as claim that spirit and mind are finer forms of matter; ultimately, the distinctions may be verbal rather than substantial.)

The question as to where in relation to the body the soul is located, whether somewhere in the region of the brain or throughout the body, remains moot. Also, the soul might be extended in the space of matter or a mere point in it. But such issues are for most purposes irrelevant.

Many philosophical questions arise around the concept of self, and it is legitimate to try to answer them if possible. But one should not forget the central issue: who or what if anything is the Subject of consciousness? This question arises as soon as we are conscious, and cannot be bypassed by any sleight of hand.

As already mentioned, some Buddhist philosophers deny existence to the Subject, self, soul or spirit. Insofar as their argument is based on the impossibility of pinpointing perceptible qualities of the soul, it carries some conviction. In the West, David Hume presented a similar argument. But their attempt to explain away the common impression that we have a soul by making a distinction between relative/illusory existence and independent/real existence is confused[13].

Buddhist philosophers explain our belief that we have a self as an illusion due to the overlap of innumerable perceptual events (sensations and imaginations), called *dharmas*, which we mentally integrate together by projecting a self at their center. They have an ontological theory of '**co-dependence**' or 'interdependence,' according to which not only the self but all assumed essences are mere projections arising in our minds, due to things having no existence by themselves (solitary and

13 In *Buddhist Illogic*, I criticize this idea as based on dubious generalizations and infinities.

independent) but existing only in (causal and other) relations to all other things[14].

I want to here suggest in passing how the co-dependence theory itself may have erroneously arisen. Every theory has a kernel of truth, which gives it credence; the problem with some theories is that they have a husk of falsehood, which must be separated out. In the case of this theory, the error is a confusion between ontology and epistemology. I would agree that no item *of knowledge* is true independent of all others. Any appearance has by virtue of at all appearing (as an experience or as a claim in abstract discourse) a quantum of credibility. This basic minimum does not by itself definitively suffice to make that appearance 'true.' It merely grants the appearance consideration in the overall scheme of things. Only after each and every item has been confronted and weighed against all other items, may we terminally declare those that have passed all tests 'true.' Thus, the truth of anything is not only due to the initial drop of credibility in it, but to the final combined force of all drops of credibility in all available data.

Buddhist philosophers have, by imprecise thinking, turned this methodological fact into an idea that there is 'real' universal co-dependence. Moreover, their theory is that existents are apparent only because an infinity of 'relations' crisscross. These relations are claimed 'empty'

14 In *The Logic of Causation*, I show how if everything is causally related to everything else (in the same sense of causation), then nothing is causally related to anything! For causation can only be distinguished out from the mass of appearances if some things have this relation *while others do not*. The notion of 'everything causing everything' is self-contradictory.

of terms, i.e. they are relations relating 'nothings' to each other. It is not said what sort of existents these relations themselves are, and why they are exempt of being in turn mere products of yet other relations ad infinitum. It is not said how an infinity of zeros can add up to a non-zero. By way of contrast, note that in my epistemological version each item of appearance has an initial drop of 'credibility,' and the final product has a truth value that can be equated to the sum of all such initial quanta. It is not an interdependence of zeros.

As for consciousness, Buddhists regard it as directly accessible to itself, in high meditation at least. This is what they seem to intend by expressions like 'no-mind,' or consciousness 'empty' of any content, without object other than itself. They thus seem to posit the possibility of an instance of the relation of consciousness turned on itself (as against the ordinary view of 'self-consciousness' – which is 'consciousness of consciousness of something other than consciousness'[15]). This could be interpreted as a tacit admission by them of the possibility of intuition. Observe also, they often use the terms Subject, consciousness and mind interchangeably, which gives rise to confusions and errors.

It is worth noting in passing that terms like 'no-mind' or 'emptiness' are negative – and, as earlier pointed out, negation is a rational act. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to regard these concepts as based on ideational construction. Buddhists who use them claim them to refer to a positive experience. The negative names are only

15 That is, one instance of the cognitive relation has *another* instance of the relation as its term, which in turn has something *other than* an instance of the relation as its term.

intended to stress that the content of such experience is incomparable to any other.

The phenomenological approach to the above issues is different. To begin with, it is sufficient to stress the *doctrinal* aspect of Subject and consciousness. Whether we grasp them intuitively, through perception or conceptually, what matters most is the role they play in our arrangement of knowledge, in our view of the world. If their assumption enables us to propose a *consistent and repeatedly confirmed explanation* of the appearance of phenomena, i.e. that they appear (somehow, we do not know just how) primarily through senses or using memory and imagination, to an entity with a mind and a body surrounded by a physical world, and so forth – then their worth and truth is inductively proved.

The concepts of Subject and consciousness are not loose, arbitrary inserts in the puzzle of knowledge, but interdependent items in a complex structure. They are part and parcel of the collection of concepts through which our experiences are made to seem intelligible; that is all. They need only be claimed to be hypotheses; we need not reject alternatives offhand, if any credible alternatives are proposed. Our security is based not on an anxious attachment to one more dogma, but on the track record of these concepts together with others like them in putting certain issues to rest.

The 'self' could be considered as phenomenal, *in the sense that* phenomena are perceived as modified (refracted or somewhat shifted) by some presumed presence, which is assumed to be the self of the perceiver. The self is thus phenomenal indirectly, by virtue of being *'inferable'* from phenomena. This is normal inductive procedure: some

empirical event stands out and is explained by some hypothesis or other, which is found coherent and thereafter repeatedly confirmed (unless or until specifically refuted by logic or experience).

To illustrate the thinking involved: If I look at the surface of a body of water and see that the general pattern of the waves is broken someplace, I mentally outline the area that seems affected (i.e. which has a different ripple pattern) and also propose some reason for the modification (e.g. rocks below the surface, a gust of wind, the passage of a boat, and so forth). Similarly, if I see a shadow, I assume something to be casting it (i.e. to be blocking the light); and according to the shape of the shadow, I estimate what that thing might be.

Buddhism seems to intend to interdict this thought process. It tells us not to infer anything behind the perceived 'modification' in the phenomenal field, but take it as is. For Buddhism, to speak of 'modification' is already an artificial isolation and thus a distortion of fact; it is a projection of 'form' onto content, implying extraneous activities of comparison and contrast. Moreover, to seek a 'cause' that explains the modification is merely to add another layer of projection to an already eclipsed empirical reality. This is true not only with regard to assuming things have underlying 'essences', but also regarding the assumption of a 'self' perceiving and inferring. Better, we are told, to look upon phenomenal events (the visible ripples or shadow, for instances) and see them as they are, rather than see them as indicative of other things and get lost looking for such phantasms.

This argument may seem to carry conviction, but it is not consistent. Being itself a conceptual discourse of the kind

it criticizes, it throws doubt upon itself. We may well admit the interferences involved in conceptual thought (as in the functions of isolation, projection of outline, comparison and contrast, causal reasoning, hypothesizing), without thereby having to deny its validity when properly carried out. Indeed, this is the only consistent position.

Furthermore, my own position is that our own soul (or self) is not only inferred from the appearance of phenomena, but also directly 'intuited' – or at least inferred from intuitions. Certainly, the soul's non-phenomenal functions (consciousness, volitions, preferences) have to be directly intuited, as they cannot be fully explained with reference to mental and material phenomena. Possibly, the soul is in turn inferred from these intuitions; or equally possibly, it is itself directly intuited. To my knowledge, Buddhism does not take this phenomenological thesis into consideration, nor of course refute it.

3. Factors of the "Self"

With regard to the concept of self, we need to identify the various ways we develop belief in a self, i.e. the bases for such a concept in practice, i.e. ***what we rightly or wrongly identify ourselves with***. The following are some examples to be expanded upon:

a) We personally identify with ***sensations of and in the body***, including touch and other sensations that present us with its extension and delimit its boundaries in relation to a perceived more "outside" world, as well as visceral physical sensations and sentiments. Thus, we feel and see

and hear and smell and taste our "own" body, or parts thereof, and identify with the sum of these perceptions. This is due largely to the enormous 'presence' of the body in our experience, its insistent and loud manifestation. It demands so much of our attention that we become focused on it almost exclusively.

Consider how (most) people confuse themselves (to a large extent) with their sensual urges and emotions. If they feel hunger pangs, they rush for food. If they feel a sex urge, they either grab a mate or masturbate. If they feel like alcohol, tobacco or a drug, they readily indulge. In search of sensations they engage in endless chatter, or watch movies or listen to music. People commonly think that when they feel pride or self-pity, or love or hate for someone, they are in contact with their innermost being[16]. We confuse every urge or sentimentality with ourselves, and therefore uncritically think that satisfying it is imperative to do ourselves good.

b) We identify with our ***perceptions of the world beyond*** our "own" body, the "outside" world. Although these experiences are considered external to us and transient, they serve to define us personally in that they are a specific range of actualities within the larger field of possibilities. That is, we identify with our life story, our personal context and history, our particular environment and fate. We forget that we are fallible, and ignore the role chance plays in our lives.

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16 Of course, I do not mean that feelings are unrelated to the person experiencing them, but only that they may be more superficial than they seem, or have subconscious motives other than those pretended, and so forth. For example, apparent 'love' may turn out to be mere 'infatuation,' or be motivated by convention or duty, or even unadmitted hatred.

We learn a lot about ourselves, not only by introspection while alone, but also by observing one's behavior in relation to the external world, the challenges of nature and interactions with other people. We also learn about ourselves through observing other people's behavior, and recognizing our own similar patterns of behavior in them.

c) We identify with our memories and fantasies (including anticipations of the future, our ideals and plans, idle dreams, etc.) – our ***mental projections***. We see our identities in terms of our specific past experiences and adventures, and our present desires and expectations for the future. Obviously, this aspect is not merely perceptual, but implies a ***conceptual framework***, which generates certain thoughts and emotions. Even if these are gradually changing, we identify with their evolution and direction of change, as well as with their constant elements[17].

d) We identify with our ***past and present beliefs and choices***. This aspect relates to Consciousness and the Will, which format our distinctiveness and identity, as well as our insights, thoughts, behavior, whims, values, pursuits and emotions. Implied here is what I have called the intuition of self – i.e. self-knowledge in a serious sense. We also identify with our *presumed future choices*, that is to say what we expect or intend or are resolved or plan to do.

e) Similarly, we identify with our verbal and pre-verbal ***discourse***. As evident in meditation, not all thoughts are in fact generated by ourselves. We are passive recipients to many or most of them. They just pop up in

17 This is stated to oppose the Buddhist idea that inconstancy implies that there is nothing to identify with. One may indeed identify with a changing set of things.

our minds as *non-stop* mental noise, repetitive nonsense, compulsive chatter. But most of us usually assume possession of such internal events, regard ourselves as their authors, and therefore define our selves in relation to them.

f) A very important self-identification is that with our ***mental image of oneself***, be it largely realistic or fanciful. This includes memories and fantasies – in all the sense-modalities – of our facial and bodily features and expressions, character traits, voice and handwriting, and other aspects of personality, as well as of our thoughts and actions. The memories and fantasies are based on reflections in mirrors and pictures and other visual and auditory recordings of oneself, as well as direct perceptions of parts of one's body and its movements and of one's inner world.

This self-image is what we would most readily refer to if asked to point to one's self. The important thing to note about it is that it is a construct, a mental projection – it is not to be confused with the self that cognizes, wills or values. It is an effect, not a cause. It has no power of cognition, volition or emotion, but is only an image that may influence the real self.

Egotism or self-love is having an exaggerated opinion of one's own worth (beauty, intelligence, etc.). One of the main attributes or behavior-patterns of the "ego" (in the colloquial pejorative sense) is its stupid conceit.[18]

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18 Paradoxically, narcissists, vain persons who are wont to look excessively in mirrors, or seek to be photographed or filmed, are psychologically deeply insecure about their existence and identity. Big egos are really inflated balloons, fragile to a mere pinprick.

g) In formulating our personal identity, we are also influenced positively or negatively by ***how other people see us or imagine us***. Their perceptions or conceptions about us may, of course, be true or false. We must also be aware of the distinction between: how we *know* them to see us or imagine us – and how we *imagine* that they do.

These issues are further complicated by the fact of ***social projection***: we often try to project images socially, through our discourse and behavior, in attempts to influence our own and other people's judgments about us. Thus, we may deliberately subconsciously edit our self-image for ourselves – modifying, withholding or adding information – till we lose track of realities concerning ourselves. And even when we do it just to confuse or mislead other people (in order to gain material or social benefits from them), we may end up ourselves losing track.

This factor plays an important part in social bonding and regulation, but it can also become tyrannical. So many people pass all their lives trying to influence other people into seeing them in a certain way, so as to gain their love, respect or admiration. And if they cannot in fact fit in to assumed social demands, they will pretend to fit in.[19]

h) As the Buddhists rightly point out, our ego also defines itself with reference to its alleged ***external "possessions"***. "Who am I? – I am the one who owns this

19 This was identified by Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden as a widespread affliction. They called such people, whose thoughts, values and actions are neurotically dependent on other's, "second-handers." Conformism or eccentricity, fear of loss of face and pursuit of prestige, are some of the expressions of this problem.

and that… I am the husband of this woman, the father of these children, the descendant of these ancestors, the owner of this house and these riches, the leader of a corporation, the recipient of a literary prize, the winner of a competition, etc." Note well, included here are not only material possessions, but also possession of people in whatever sense (sexual conquest, political domination, etc.) and abstract possessions (I wrote this essay, etc.).

To some extent, this identification of "me" with "mine" is an expression of the earlier listed more internal factors: "This is my shadow, *because* I have this body," "I own these things or people, *because* I have certain character traits and made certain choices, thus developing a certain history," we tell ourselves. But additionally, as Buddhists stress, it serves as territorial expansion for the ego, solidifying its existence, further anchoring it to the world.

Egoism or selfishness is looking after one's own (assumed) interests, exclusively or predominantly. One of the main attributes or behavior-patterns of the "ego" (in the colloquial pejorative sense) is its arrogant grabbing, irrespective of who is harmed thereby. 'Looking after Number One,' as the saying goes.

i) The fact that each of us may be referred to by a proper ***name*** (or pronouns that temporarily replace it) also, as Buddhism stresses, serves to impose and solidify in our minds the idea that we have a distinct self. Things referred to only by means of a common name (e.g. "a man") have less identity for us.

We can include here all the *conventional aspects* of our identity: our ID card, for instance. This relates to considerations of *group membership*: membership in a family (family name, birth certificate), a nation

(naturalization certificate, passport), a social class (rich or poor, commoner or ruler, different educational levels and professions), a religious denomination, an organization or a club. All these factors add to our "identity" largely[20] by mutual agreement, as does a name.

j) The ***theoretical concept*** of self or soul is also projected onto one's self – "I am this abstract entity". Whether this concept is true or false is irrelevant here; what matters is that there is such a theoretical projection for most educated people, i.e. we do identify with the self conceived by religions, philosophies and psychologies.

For religion, the focus is on the enduring substance of the self (soul, spirituality) and on its moral responsibility and perfectibility (freedom of the will). The main feature of the philosophical self is that it is *reflexive*: it points back to the person who is conscious and willful, it is both Subject and Object, both Agent and Patient. Psychology is more focused on the existential intricacies of the self, some of which are indicated herein.

As colloquial use of these terms makes clear, the concept of ego is not identical with that of self. The ego is a creature of the self. When we feel insecure, we may seek to reassure ourselves by engaging in 'ego-trips.' This refers to comparative and competitive tendencies, such as domination, pursuit of admiration, or acquisitiveness. Power, fame and/or fortune gives us the impression of having an advantage over other people, and thus of being better able than them to cope with life. What we call our

20 Factual, as well as merely conventional aspects, may also of course be involved. Thus, family, nation or religion is usually based on one's natural parents; educational level or profession, on actual studies and practice; and so forth.

ego, then, is the petty side or product of ourselves. By giving this a name, we can distance ourselves from it, and discuss it and hopefully cure it. This field of psychology of course deserves (and gets) much study and elaboration.

4. Identification-With

The recurring term in the above treatment is "identify with" – just what does it mean and indicate? It refers to some sort of epistemic and psychological mechanism, through which each of us assumes for a while himself or herself to have a certain identity described in imagination and verbally.

With regard to the mechanism through which we identify with each of these aspects of selfhood, consider how after meeting an impressive person, or reading a book on ethics or a novel, or hearing a song or seeing a movie, one may be susceptible to identifying for a while with the person or personality-type or protagonist encountered. One may go so far as to virtually become one with this role model for a while – not by conscious artifice, role-play or imitation, but by a sort of "*personality induction*".

One's thoughts, attitudes and actions echo the model's, and one may even experience that one's body feels like his[21]. The way the latter experience occurs is that one interprets one's body sensations through the memory

21 I personally immediately block such fantasies when I become aware of them, though in my youth I would on occasion indulge in them. Many people are evidently unable, or more precisely unwilling or untrained, to control such personality induction, and end up floating hither and thither in borrowed identities.

image one has of the model. More precisely, the touch sensations coming from one's face or the rest of one's body are mentally *unified* by means of that image (instead of one's own). This integrative mechanism relates to the 'correlation of modalities,' and involves a visual projection (either internal or hallucinatory).

I[22] posit two senses of "self" – (a) the **real self**, a natural entity with some continuity while existing, perhaps a spiritual epiphenomenon emerging within living matter of some complexity, which self is the Subject of consciousness and Agent of Will; and (b) the imagined self or **ego**, a constructed presumed description of the self, which has no consciousness or will, but is itself a product of them. The former is our factual identity, the latter is what we delusively identify with, by confusing it with knowledge of our identity.

Initially, the ego is constructed as a legitimate attempt to summarize information directly or indirectly produced by the real self. But the project gets out of hand, in view of its extreme complexity and the superhuman demands of objectivity and honesty involved. So in contrast to our identity – or more precisely, knowledge of our identity – we find ourselves facing a partly or largely fanciful construct, which does not entirely correspond to the original. This falsely projected identity influences the real self negatively, causing it to lose touch with itself. The ego thus involves *some* self-awareness, plus a lot of bull. It is a half-truth, which interferes with proper cognition, volition and valuation, and so presents us with epistemological, psychological, behavioral, emotional and

22 Following Western tradition rather than the more radical Buddhist thesis, for now at least.

social problems to be solved. The best solution is regular meditation, which allows us to gradually sort out the grain from the chaff, and return to a healthy and realistic self-knowledge.

Thus, we have two concepts of self, logically distinguished as follows.

a) One concept is *ideal*, in that its object or content is the real self, the self as it really is however that be. This is a hypothetical, philosophical concept, because it points to something that we know somewhat but not really in detail; we need it to be able to say something about the assumed real self, so we have this separate, minimalist concept, which is by definition true, i.e. the receptacle of whatever happens to be true.
b) The other concept is the *practical* one, wherein we readily build up our knowledge and imagination concerning the self. This one is by definition flawed, because all knowledge is somewhat flawed since we are fallible, and all the more so knowledge of the self, because of the subjectivities and psychological and social pressures involved in its formulation. The object or content of this concept is partly the real self (basic knowledge) and largely the imagined self (some true propositions, some false). For this reason, we distinctively name the referent "ego," to stress that for most of us the concept is bound to be considerably untrue.

Thus, it is correct to say, as the Buddhists do, that the self, in the sense of ego, does not exist. For it is the object or content of a concept known to be partly untrue for most people (all except the "Enlightened", if they exist). In a strict sense, then, there is no ego, the concept is empty, has

no real referent[23] – what it intends in practice does not in fact exist, but involves projections of the imagination and verbal constructions. Nevertheless, the self, in the minimalist sense, exists. The concept of it collects only our true and sure knowledge about the self, to the exclusion of any fanciful details.

The reader may have remarked that even while valiantly fighting the Buddhist doctrine of "no-self," I remain intrigued and attracted by it[24]. Especially since that philosophy seems to claim that it is *only* by throwing off the idea that we have a self that we can achieve enlightenment and liberation. I do not want to make the proverbial mistake of throwing out the baby with the bath water. One possible interpretation of this doctrine, that would explain it while retaining the concept of soul (which to me still seems unavoidable), would be that it is intended to counteract our above described tendency to identify with some of the factors of self.

When we identify with some theoretical or fantastic idea of the self, we are *merely projecting a phenomenal self and saying: "that's me!"* A projected image is confused with the one projecting it. This is very different from *being*

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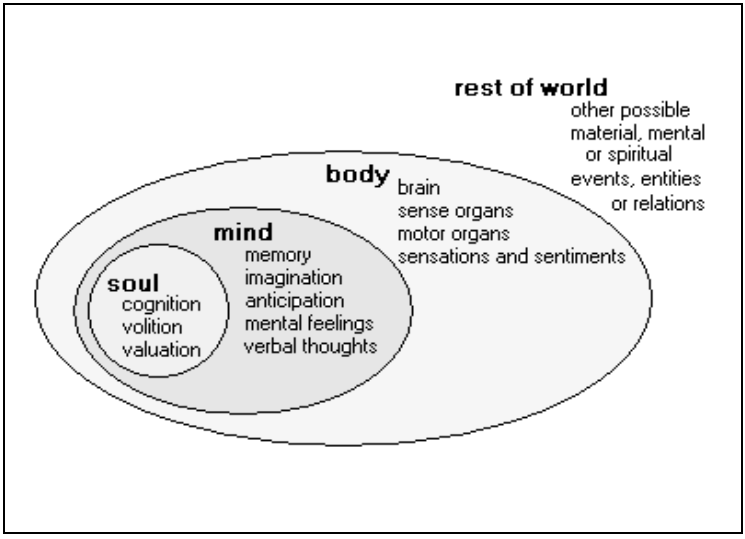
23 Just as, say, the concept of a "unicorn" has no real referent (though horses and horns are real enough, separately).

24 For me the idea that there is no self has the same fascination as the conclusion of Einstein's Relativity theory that there is no 'ether.' This concept of a substance in empty space, or of existence as such, was (I believe) originally suggested by Descartes. I personally find it difficult to grasp how the waves of field theory can be waves of nothing. Yet I am well aware that Einstein's conclusion is unavoidable, given the constancy of the speed of light whatever the observer's direction of motion. Conversely, if a no-ether is conceivable, why not a no-self?

aware of one's real self through direct intuition of it. Thus, we are effectively told, "if you want to find yourself, don't look for yourself in different concepts or images, but simply look into your soul. Rather than *thinking* of yourself or worse still thinking up a self for yourself, just *be* yourself and you will thus naturally get to know yourself." Perhaps it is that simple.

The self-ego distinction can be illustrated with reference to Figure 1.

Figure 1. Assumed material, mental and spiritual domains.



The innermost concentric circle (called soul, and including the functions of cognition, volition and valuation) symbolizes the self in the most accurate sense

of the term. This is sometimes called the real or true self, or higher or deeper self, to variously signify its relative position.

The circles labeled mind and body (including their stated functions) together constitute the ego, or 'self' in an inaccurate sense of the term. This is sometimes called the illusory or false self, or lower or shallower self, to variously signify its relative position. (To be sure, more materialistic people identify especially with their body, whereas more mental people identify especially with their mind. But mind and body are inextricably intertwined, in their sensory, motor, emotional and intellectual functions.)

The important thing to realize is that soul (the self) is of a different substance (spirit) than mind or matter (the ego). The former is the core of one's existence; the latter are mere outer shells. When we identify with the ego instead of soul, we lose touch with our actual position as observer, doer and feeler.

5. Fallacious Criticisms of Selfhood

Since writing *Buddhist Illogic*, I have been reviewing Buddhist arguments against selfhood more carefully, and I must say that – while they continue to inspire deeper awareness of philosophical issues in me – I increasingly find them unconvincing, especially with regard to logical standards.

Buddhists conceive of the self as a non-entity, an illusion produced by a set of surrounding circumstances ('causes and conditions'), like a hole in the middle of a framework (of matter or mind or whatever). But I have so far come

across no convincing detailed formulation of this curious (but interesting) thesis, no clear statement that would explain how a vacuity can seemingly have consciousness, will and values. Until such a theory is presented, I continue to accept self as an entity (call it soul) of some substance (spirit, say). Such a self is apparently individual, but might well at a deeper level turn out to be universal. The individuation of soul might be an illusion due to narrow vision, just as the individuation of material bodies seems to be.

Criticisms of the idea of self are no substitute for a positive statement. It is admittedly hard to publicly (versus introspectively) and indubitably demonstrate the existence of a soul, with personal powers of cognition, volition and affection. But this theory remains the most credible, in that the abstract categories it uses (entity, substance, property, causality) are already familiar and functional in other contexts. In contrast, the impersonal thesis remains mysterious, however open-minded we try to be. It may be useful for meditation purposes, but as a philosophical proposition it seems wanting.

Generally speaking, I observe that those who attempt to rationalize the Buddhist no-self thesis indulge in too-vague formulations, unjustified generalizations and other *non-sequiturs*. A case in point is the work *Lotus in a Stream* by Hsing Yun[25], which I have recently reread. The quotations given below as examples are from this work.

> *"Not only are all things impermanent, but they are also all devoid of self-nature. Having no self-*

25 See in particular chapters 7-9. (The author is a Chinese Buddhist monk, b. 1928.)

> *nature means that all things depend on other things for their existence. Not one of them is independent and able to exist without other things" (pp. 86-87).*

Here, the imprecision of the term "existence" or "to exist" allows for misrepresentation. Western thought would readily admit that all (or perhaps most) things *come* to be and *continue* to be and *cease* to be and *continue* to not-be as a result of the arrival, presence, departure or absence of a variety of other things. But that is very different from saying that their *being* itself is dependent: for us, facts are facts, i.e. once a thing is a past or present fact, nothing can change that fact, it is not "dependent" on anything. Yet, I contend, Buddhists seem to be trying to deny this, and cause confusion by blurring the distinction between change *over* different time and place, and change *within* identical time and place.

> *"The meaning of the word 'things' in these statements is all phenomena, both formed and formless, all events, all mental acts, all laws, and anything else you can think of."*

Here, the suggestion is that impermanence concerns not only phenomena, which strictly speaking are material or mental objects of perception, but also abstract objects. The terms "formless" and "laws" and "anything you can think of" suggest this. But of course such a statement surreptitiously slips in something we would not readily grant, though we would easily admit that phenomena are impermanent. The whole point of a "law" is that it is a constant in the midst of change, something we conceive through our rational faculty as the common character of a multitude of changing phenomenal events. The principle

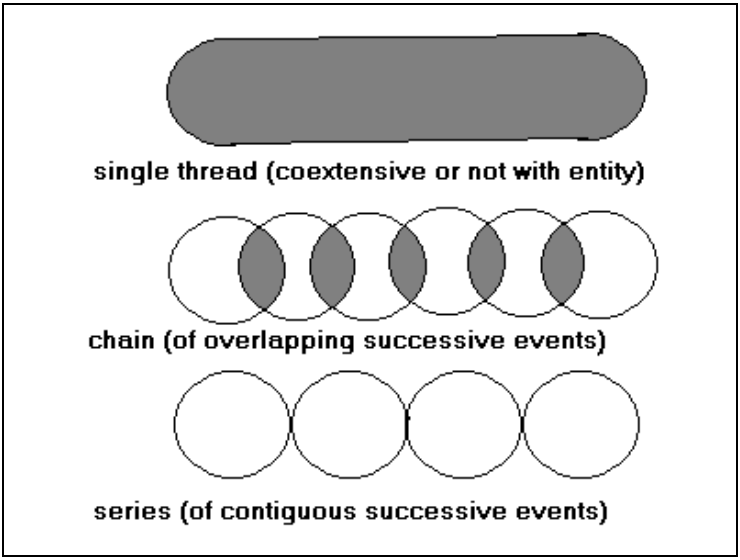
of Impermanence is not supposed to apply to abstracts. Indeed, it is itself an abstract, considered not to be impermanent!

> *"To say that nothing has a self-nature is to say that nothing has any attribute that endures over long periods of time. There is no 'nature' that always stays the same in anything anywhere. If the 'nature' of a thing cannot possibly stay the same, then how can it really be a nature? Eventually everything changes and therefore nothing can be said to have a 'nature,' much less a self-nature."*

Here, the author obscures the issue of *how long* a period of time is – or can be – involved. Even admitting that phenomena cannot possibly endure forever, it does not follow that they do not endure at all. Who then is to say that an attribute cannot last as long as the thing it is an attribute of lasts? They are both phenomena, therefore they are both impermanent – but nothing precludes them from enduring for the same amount of time. The empirical truth is: some attributes come and/or go within the life of a phenomenal thing, and some are equally extended in time. Also, rates of change vary; they are not all the same. The author is evidently trying to impose a vision of things that will comfort his extreme thesis.

We can, incidentally, conceive of different sorts of continuity of conjunctions of phenomena (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Three types of continuity.



An essential attribute of a thing would coexist fully, like an underlying *thread* of equal time length. A weaker scenario of continuity would be a *chaining* of different events, such that the first shares some time with the second, which shares some with the third, and so forth, without the first and third, second and fourth and so on having time in common. In some cases, continuity may be completely illusory, in that events *succeed* each other contiguously in time without sharing any time.

Hsing Yun goes on arguing:

> *"the body… is a delusion caused by a brief congregation of the physical and mental components of existence Just as a house is made of many parts that create an appearance, so the*

> *body… When those parts are separated, no self-nature will be found anywhere."*

That a house or human body is an aggregate of many separable elements, does not prove that when these elements are together (in a certain appropriate way, of course) they do not collectively produce something new. The whole may be more than its constituent parts, because the whole is not just the sum of the parts but an *effect* of theirs. The bricks of a house do not just add up to a house, but together become a house when placed side by side in certain ways; if placed apart (or together in the wrong way) they do not constitute a house (but at best a pile of bricks). Similarly for the atoms forming a molecule, the molecules forming a living cell, the cells causing a human organism. At each level, there is a *causal* interplay of parts, which produces something new that is more than the parts, something we call the whole, with its own distinct attributes and properties.

It is thus quite legitimate to suppose that when matter comes together in a certain way we call a live human body, it produces a new thing called the self or soul or spirit, which thing we regard as the essence of being human because we attribute to it the powers of consciousness and volition that we evidently display (and which the constituent matter in us does not, as far as we can see, separately display). That this idea of self is a hypothesis may be readily admitted; but to anyone conscious of the inductive basis of most human knowledge that does not constitute a criticism (all science develops through hypotheses). The important point to note is that Buddhist commentators like this one give arguments that do not succeed in proving what they purport to prove.

Here are some more examples, relating to the notion of "emptiness":

> *"Dependent origination means that everything is produced from conditions and that nothing has an independent existence of its own. Everything is connected to everything else and everything is conditioned by everything else. 'Emptiness' is the word used to describe the fact that nothing has an independent nature of its own" (p. 94).*

Here, the reader should notice the vagueness of terms like "connection" or "conditioning". They are here used without nuance, without remark that very many kinds and degrees of causal relation may be involved. The impression made on the reader is that everything is *equally bound* to everything else, however far or near in space and time. But that is not merely untrue – it is conceptually untenable! Concepts of causality arise with reference to a specific relation, which some things have with each other *and some things lack with each other*. If all things had *the same* causal relation to *all* other things, no concept of a causal relation would arise nor be needed. We can *very loosely* say that the cause of a cause of a thing is "causally related" to it, but causal logic teaches us that the cause of a cause of a thing is not always itself "a cause" of it in the strict sense. And even if it is, it may not be so in the same degree. It follows that Hsing Yun is here again misleading us.

> *"Emptiness does not mean nothingness… all things have being because they all do exist interdependently" (p.97).*

Here, the image communicated to us is that each thing, although in itself empty of substance, acquires existence

through its infinity of relations (dependencies) to all other things, each of which is itself empty of substance. We must ask, is this theoretical scenario credible? Does an infinity of zeros add up to a non-zero? What are those "relations" between "things"? Are they not also "things"? Are they not also empty, in which case what gives *them* existence? The concept of relation implies the pre-existence of things being related (terms); if all that exists are relations, is the concept still meaningful?

Furthermore, what does interdependence (a.k.a. co-dependence) mean, exactly? Is an embrace in mid-air between two or more people equivalent to a mutual support? If I cannot support myself, can I support you? The notion is unconscionable.

> *"Nothing is unchangeable or unchanging. All phenomena exist in succession. They are always changing, being born, and dying."*

Here, the author has simply dropped out the (previously acknowledged) and very relevant fact of *enduring*. To convince us that the world is nothing but flux, he mentions birth, change and death – but eclipses the fact of living, if only for a little while! The phrase "they are always" does not necessarily mean "each of them in every moment."

> *"A cause (seed) becomes an effect (fruit), which itself contains the cause (seed) for another effect, and so on. The entire phenomenal world works just like this" (p. 98).*

Here, we are hastily dragged into a doubtful generalization. The description of the cycle of life, with procreation from generation to generation, does not necessarily fit other causal successions. Causation in the

world of inanimate matter obeys its own laws, like Newton's Laws of Motion for example. There is nothing truly equivalent to reproduction in it, to my memory. To convince us, the author would have to be much more precise in his analogies. Philosophers have no literary license.

> *"If we were to break a body down into its constituent parts, the body would no longer exist as a body."*

So what? Is that meant to explain or prove "emptiness"? If you kill an animal and cut it up, of course you will not find the life in it, or the consciousness it had, or its "animal nature". It does not follow that when the animal is alive and well, it lacks these things!

> *"The meanings of the words 'above' and 'below' depend on where we are. They do not have absolute meanings, It is like this with all words and all relationships between things" (p. 99).*

Again, a hasty generalization – from specifically relative terms to all words. Every grammarian knows that relative terms are just one type of term among others. That the former exist does not imply that the latter have the same character or properties. Similarly, Hsing Yun argues that the relativity of a word like "brightness" (our characterization of the brightness of a light is subjective and variable) exemplifies the relativity of all terms. But here again, he is passing from an obvious case to all cases, although many qualifications are based on stricter, scientific measurement. Moreover, describing how a piece of cloth may have various uses, as a shirt or as a skirt, he argues:

> *"It is the same piece of cloth in all cases, but since it is used differently, we have different names for it. All words are like this; their meanings depend on how and where they are used."*

This is supposed to convince us that words are "false and wavering" and help us to better understand emptiness. But the truthfulness and accuracy of language are clearly not at stake here, so the implied negative conclusion is unwarranted. The proof is that we all understand precisely his description of the changing practical role of the piece of cloth. "Cloth can be used as shirt or as skirt" is a perfectly legitimate sentence involving the natural modality "can" and two predicates in disjunction for a single subject (A can be B or C). Of course, if one starts with the idea that language can only consist of sentences with two terms and one modality (A is B), then one will be confused by more complex situations. But if one's understanding of human thought is more developed, one does not fall into foolish conclusions.

Lastly, Hsing Yun refers to "the relative natures of our perceptions" to justify the idea of emptiness. He describes two people watching a snowfall, one is a poet sitting in his warm house, the other a homeless man shivering outdoors. The first hopes the snow will continue to fall, so he can enjoy watching it; the second fears that if the snow continues to fall, he may freeze to death. The author concludes:

> *"Both are seeing the same scenery, but since their conditions are different they perceive it very differently."*

Thus, perceptions are "false" and emptiness "underlies" them. Here again, his interpretation of the situation is

tendentious, designed to buttress his preconceived doctrines. To be precise, the two people correctly perceive the (more or less) same snowy scene; what differs is their evaluation of *the biological consequences* of what they are perceiving (or more precisely still, what they anticipate to further experience). There is no relativity of perception involved! We have two quite legitimate sentences, which are both probably true "I'll enjoy further snow" and "I'll be killed by further snow". "I" being the poet in one case and the poor man in the other case, there is no contradiction between them.

By arguments like those we have analyzed, Hsing Yun arrives at the overall conclusion that:

> *"The universe can only exist because all phenomena are empty. If phenomena were not empty, nothing could change or come into being. Being and emptiness are two sides of the same thing" (p. 100).*

But none of his premises or arguments permits us to infer or explicate such conclusion. It is a truism that if your cup is full, you cannot add to it; or if you have no room to move into, you cannot move. But this is not what the author is here talking about; the proposed thesis is of course much more radical, though still largely obscure. All we are offered are dogmatic statements, which repeat on and on what the Buddha is claimed to have said.

I am personally still quite willing to believe that the Buddha did say something enlightening about interdependence, impermanence, selflessness and emptiness, but the words used were apparently not very clear. I just hope that his difficulty was merely in finding the right words to express his insights, and that the

reasoning behind those words was not as faulty as that I have encountered in the work of commentators so far!

Still, sentences like the following from the *Flower Garland Sutra* are deliciously pregnant with meaning, challenging us to keep digging[26]:

> *"When wind moves through emptiness, nothing really moves."*

6. What "Emptiness" Might Be

The following is an attempt to eclectically merge the Western and Indian idea of a 'soul' with aspects of the Buddhist idea that we are "empty" of any such substance. What might the 'soul' be, what its place in 'the world', what its 'mechanics'? Can we interpret and clarify the notion of "emptiness" intellectually?

The Buddhist notion of "emptiness" (in its more extremist versions) is, as far as I am concerned to date, unconvincing. If anything is empty, it is the very concept of emptiness as used by them – for they never *clearly* define it or explain it. Philosophy cannot judge ideas that remain forever vague and Kafkaesque accusations. The onus is on the philosophers of emptiness to learn to express their ideas more verbally.

a. Imagine the soul as an entity in the manifold, of (say) spiritual substance, a very fine energy form somewhat distinct from the substances of the mental domain (that of imaginations) and of the material domain

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26 For instance, is there a state of consciousness in which one experiences space-time as a static whole?

(that of physical phenomena, regarded as one's body and the world beyond one's body).[27]

b. While solipsism is a logically acceptable proposition, equally conceivable is the notion that the soul may be one among many in a large population of souls scattered in the sea of existence, which includes also the coarser mental and material energies. These spiritual entities may well have common natures and behavior tendencies, and be able to impact on each other and become aware of each other.

Those many souls may conceivably be expressions of one and the same single Soul, and indeed mind and matter may also be expressions of that one Soul, which might perhaps be identified with (a rather Hindu viewpoint) or be a small emanation of (a more Jewish view) what we call God. Alternatively, the many souls may be interrelated more in the way of a network.

The latter view could be earmarked as more Buddhist, if we focus on its doctrine of "interdependence." However, we can also consider Buddhism compatible with the idea of a collective or root Soul, if we focus on its doctrine of an "original, common ground of mind." This refers to a mental ocean, whence all thoughts splash up momentarily (as seemingly evident in meditation). At first individual and psychological, this original substance is eventually regarded as universal and metaphysical, on the basis of a positivistic argument[28] that since even material sensations are known only through mind, we can only suppose that

27 Note that animists regard even plants and stones as spiritual.

28 As I make clear elsewhere, I am not personally convinced by this extreme argument.

everything is mind. Thus, not only 'thoughts,' but all 'things' are mere turbulences in this primordial magma. Even individual 'selves' are merely drops of this mental sea water that momentarily have the illusion of separateness and personal identity.

c. For each individual soul (as for the greater Soul as a whole), the mind, the body, and the world beyond, of more matter, mind and spirit energies, may all be just projected 'images' (a viewpoint close to Bishop Berkeley's in the West or Yogachara philosophers in Buddhism). This is not an affirmation by me, I am merely trying to demystify this theory and take it into consideration, note well.

The term image, here, does not signify image *of* anything else. Such images are perhaps media of self-expression and discourse of the soul (or Soul). That is, the 'world around me' may be a language the soul creates and uses to express itself and communicate with itself (and with other eventual souls).

Granting there are objectively are many souls, we can observe that these souls have many (perhaps most) of their images *in common*. This raises an important question, often asked in relation to such Idealism. *If our worlds (including the physical aspects) are personal imaginations, how come so much of their contents agree, and how is it that they seem to be subject to the same 'laws of nature'?*

One possible answer is to assume the many souls to be emanations of a central Soul (animal, human or Divine). In that case, it is no wonder that they share experiences and laws.

Alternatively, we could answer that like images just happen to be (or are by force of their nature and habits) repeatedly projected by the many souls. In this way, they seemingly share a world (in part, at least), even though it is an imaginary one. Having delusions in common, they have perceptions in common. They can thus interact in regular ways in a single apparent 'natural environment,' and develop collective knowledge, society, culture, technology, ethics, politics and history. Thus, we are not forced to assume one common, objective world. It may well be that each soul projects for itself certain images that other souls likewise project for themselves, and these projected images happen to be the same upon comparison.

d. Viewed as a ball of subtle energy, the soul can well have its own spiritual 'mechanics' – its outer and inner shapes and motions, the creases and stirrings within it and at the interface with the mental and material (and spiritual) energies around it, the mathematics of the waves which traverse it and its environment, like a creature floating in the midst of the sea.

Consciousness and will, here viewed as different powers of projection, are the ways the soul interacts with itself and its supposed surrounds.

These wave-motion capacities of the soul, are naturally subject to some 'laws' – although the individual soul has some considerable leeway, it is not free to operate just any way it pleases, but tends to remain under most circumstances in certain fixed or repeated patterns. These (spiritual, psychological) 'laws' are often shared with other souls; but each of them may also have distinct constraints or habits – which gives each its individuality. Such common and individual 'laws' are their real

underlying natures, as distinct from the image of 'nature' they may project.

In the event that the plurality of souls is explained by a single great Soul, there is even less difficulty in understanding how they may be subject to common laws. On the other hand, the individualities of the fragmentary souls require explanation. Here, we must suppose either an intentional, voluntary relinquishment of power on the part of the great Soul (so that little souls have some ignorance and some freedom of action) or an involuntary sleep or weakness (which latter thesis is less acceptable if we identify the larger soul with God).

With regard to the great Soul as a whole, it may either be subject to limitations and forces in its consciousness and volition – or it may be independent of any such natural restrictions or determinations, totally open and free. Our concept of God opts for the latter version, of course – whence the characterizations of omniscient and omnipotent (and all-good, granting that evil is an aberration due to ignorance and impotence).

e. The motive and end result of theses like the above is ethical. They aim and serve to convince people that the individual soul can find liberation from the constraints or habits it is subject to, by realizing its unity with other individual souls. 'Realizing' here means transcending one's individuality by *becoming aware of, identifying oneself with and espousing the cause of*, other entities of the same substance, or the collective or root Soul. Thus, enlightenment and liberation are one and the same. Ultimately, the individuals are to abandon individuation and merge with all existence, melting back into the original source.

This doctrine presupposes that the individual soul self-constructs, and constructs the world around, in the sense that it defines (and thus effectively divides) itself out from the totality. This illusion of individuation is the sum of its creativity and activity, and also its crucial error. The individual soul does not of course create the world (which is its source); but it produces the virtual world of its particular world-view, which is its own prison and the basis of all its suffering, its "*samsara*."

Realizing the emptiness of self would be full awareness in practice that the limited self is an expression of the ignorance and stupidity that the limited self is locked into because of various beliefs and acts. Realizing the emptiness of other entities (material, mental and spiritual) around one, would be full awareness in practice that they are projections of the limited self, in the sense that such projection fragments a whole into parts. Ultimately, too, the soul is advised to realize that Soul, souls and their respective projections are one continuum.

Those who make the above-implied promises of enlightenment and liberation claim justification through personal meditative experiences or prophetic revelations. I have no such first-hand experience or authority, but here merely try to report and elucidate such doctrines, to check their conceivability and understand them. To me, no one making philosophical utterances can claim special privileges; all philosophers are equally required to present clear ideas and convincing arguments.

f. The way to such realization is through meditation, as well as altruistic and sane action.

In the framework of the above-mentioned Buddhist philosophy of "original ground" (also called "Buddha

mind"), meditation may be viewed as an attempt to return to that profound, natural, eternal calm. Those who attain this level of awareness are said to be in "*nirvana*." The illusion of (particular, individual) selfhood arises from disturbances[29], and ceases with their quieting. The doctrine that the illusory self is "empty," means that we must not identify with any superficial flashes of material or mental excitement, but remain grounded in the Buddha mind.

For example, the Tibetan work *The Summary of Philosophical Systems*[30] warns against the self being either differentiated from or identified with "the psycho-physical constituents." I interpret this statement (deliberately ignoring its paradoxical intent[31]) to mean that there is nothing more to the illusory self than these phenomenal manifestations, and therefore that they cannot be the real self. Dogmatic Buddhists provocatively[32] insist that no

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29 It is not clear to me how these disturbances are supposed by this theory to arise in the beginning. But this issue is not limited to Buddhism: for philosophers in general, the question is *how did the one become many*; for physicists, it is *what started the Big Bang*; for monotheists, it is *why did God suddenly decide to create the universe*? A deeper question still is *how did the existence arise in the first place*, or in Buddhism, *where did the original ground come from*?

30 See Guenther, p. 67.

31 Having dealt with the fallacy of the tetralemma in my *Buddhist Illogic.*

32 Looking at the history of Indian philosophy, one cannot but notice the *one-upmanship* involved in its development. The concept of samsara (which I believe was originally intended as one of totality, albeit a cyclical one) was trumped by that of nirvana (again a totality, though beyond cycles), which was then in turn surpassed by that of "neither samsara nor nirvana, nor

real self exists, but moderates do seem to admit it as equivalent to the universal, original ground.

Buddhist philosophers generally admit of perception and conception, but ignore or deny direct self-awareness. Consistently enough, they reject any claim to a soul (spiritual substance), since they consider that we have no real experience thereof. For them, the "psycho-physical constituents" are all we ordinarily experience or think about, so that soul must be "empty" (of anything but these constituents) and illusory (since these are not enough to constitute a soul). But this theory does not specify or explain the type of consciousness involved in the Buddha mind, or through which "emptiness" is known!

Another way to view things is to admit that there are *three* sources of knowledge, the perceptual (which gives us material and mental phenomena, concrete manifestations), the conceptual (which gives us abstracts), and thirdly the intuitive (which gives us self-knowledge, apperception of the self and its particular cognitions, volitions and valuations). Accordingly, we ought to acknowledge in addition to material and mental substances, a spiritual substance (of which souls are made, or the ultimate Soul). The latter mode of consciousness may explain not only our everyday intuitions of self, but perhaps also the higher levels of meditation.

What we ordinarily consider our "self" is, as we have seen earlier, an impression or concept, based on perception and conception, as well as on intuitive experience. In this perspective, so long as we are too absorbed in the

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both" (the Middle Way version). Similarly, the concept of no-self is intended to outdo that of Self.

perceptual and conceptual fields (physical sensations, imaginations, feelings and emotions, words and thoughts, etc.), we are confused and identify with an illusory self. To make contact with our real (individual, or eventually universal) self, we must concentrate more fully on the intuitive field. With patience, if we allow the more sensational and exciting presentations to pass away, we begin to become aware of the finer, spiritual aspects of experience. That is meditation.

4. CHAPTER FOUR

Drawn from *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (2004), Chapter 7.

THE WORKINGS OF VOLITION

1. Cultural Context and Epist. Considerations

My purpose here is to propose a theory of volition; or more precisely, a theory of the locations and sequences of its operation, because at this stage a formal definition of volition as a causal relation is still not ripe. It is always useful to at least broadly conceive a scenario, even if some crucial details may be missing. It need not even be immediately sufficiently clear to be decisively tested.

My approach in this research ought to be clarified. The issue of volition is an ages-old philosophical problem. It is so, not through the invention of philosophers, but because philosophers understood the need to reconcile two givens: one being the inner certainty most people have that they possess some powers of choice and responsibility for their actions, and the other given being the extreme difficulty in putting this concept of will into words and justifying it somehow. Furthermore, the issue of volition is not idly speculative, but has enormous practical consequences – psychological, moral, spiritual, social, legal and political ones – for every human being.

Over time, many solutions to the problem have been proposed, ranging from outright denial of volition (mechanism, behaviorism), through very pessimistic and very optimistic lyrical appraisals of human potential which made various claims without addressing the formal issues, to metaphysical and mystical beliefs that could perhaps be accused of overkill.

My own approach to philosophical problems has always been to try my best to justify ordinary beliefs, but in a critical manner, without naivety. As a product of the 20th Century, I am inclined to pay due respect to science and avoid metaphysical flights of fancy. Nevertheless, I am far from being a pure materialist, and keep an open mind with regard to mystical traditions. My philosophical policy is to try to include rather than exclude, to find the common ground of opposite doctrines so far as possible, to remain moderate and down to earth.

To ensure a mature and sane approach, we must first and always be attentive to methodological issues: *never to claim an item of knowledge without at the same time considering how such claim itself is to be justified*. I favor a phenomenological approach, which is at all times aware of the amount and nature of experiential content in any conceptual construct. This must be backed up by repeated logical review, based on inductive as well as deductive principles, including the said reflexive self-revaluation.

Thus, with regard to the problem of volition, we must first try and formulate a minimalist thesis, as close as possible to the belief system of ordinary people and to the materialistic science culture of the day, before opting for more far-fetched theoretical constructs. It is a principle of adduction that the simple is always preferable to the

complex. The primary issue in volition is just *to conceive* some coherent, plausible theory. Just to imagine some scenario, pictorially and in words, is hard enough. Secondly, of course, such conceivable thesis must be empirically tested so as to gradually reduce its speculative status.

With regard to methodological standards, it should first be pointed out that all concepts, however speculative, are based on some experience. Without some sort of experience, however subtle and frail, no conception or conceptualization is at all possible. Under the heading of 'experience', we must however include not only physical experiences (sensory data of any sort), but any phenomenological content – including mental projections (images, sounds, memories, imaginations, anticipations) and last but not least intuitive introspections (personal cognitions, valuations, volitions, intentions, meanings). To limit admitted evidence to physical sensations, arbitrarily omitting all introspective data, is misleading.

Secondly, it is important to realize that every theory, however confirmed in experience, is still to some extent speculative. Those who claim that only their extreme materialism is scientifically acceptable, and who accuse all mental or spiritual doctrines of being mere speculation, are just pretentious. What gives a theory 'scientific status' (in the large, correct sense) is its adherence to all known and cogent rules of inductive and deductive logic. What makes a theory preferred at any time is not its materialistic content, but its being the most consistent and confirmed available hypothesis. Science is not a prejudice, or the reserve of some modern equivalent of an established priestly caste. It is open, flexible and democratic, in the

power of those most experiential and logical in their approach to knowledge at a given time.

As we shall see, a common error in aetiology today is to confuse the concept of *natural* causation with the narrower concept of *physical* causation. Logical analysis of the concept of causation makes it a purely formal issue of presences and absences of possible things in conjunction and separation. Thus, the paradigm of natural causation, its strongest determination, is definable as "if X, then Y; and if notX, then notY" (or "X and notY is impossible; and notX and Y is impossible") – where X, Y, notX and notY are various potential things[33]. The "things" involved need not specifically be concrete physical objects, but may be abstracts from such, or again mental phenomena and their abstracts, or even things intuited within oneself. *This form has no intrinsic limitation to physical terms*, note well. So, there is no logical basis for the insistence by some that natural causation is exclusive to physical events, and refers to a physical law.

All the defensive remarks above are addressed preemptively to certain categories of philosophers. As we proceed with our theory of volition, the reader will see that our approach is balanced and fair. We will try to satisfy all legitimate concerns of the modern mind, while however allowing whatever concepts are necessary (mind, soul) to avoid throwing the baby (volition) out with the bathwater (metaphysics). We will try to be transparent, and evaluate

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[33] Thusly, in the natural mode of causation. But we may also count as "natural", in a larger sense, similar relations with extensional modality, although the latter are in some respects also akin to logical causation. See my *Future Logic* and *The Logic of Causation* for full presentation of these concepts. I shall keep things simple here.

the justification of any idea presented, but keep in mind that in some cases a scenario has to be laid out before its validity can be discussed.

2. Theoretical Context

I must, to start with, remind the reader of certain aspects of my world-view and terminology, developed in previous works[34].

I acknowledge three domains of existence, called the physical (or material), the mental (or imaginary) and the spiritual domain (or soul sphere). These correspond to three categories of experience, namely sensory perceptions (through 'bodily' sense organs, including visceral emotions), corresponding mental projections (images and sounds perceived 'in one's mind', including memories, dreams and daytime fancies, and anticipations), and intuitions of self (inner knowledge of events without phenomenal attributes, such as one's cognitions, valuations, volitions). Conception refers to abstraction from such data, involving comparisons of measurement. And conceptualization, proposition, inference, thought are further derivatives of all the preceding.

All these items of experience and conceptual knowledge are to be regarded phenomenologically to start with. That is, they need merely be taken as neutral appearances, leaving aside definite judgment as to their reality or illusion till a thorough process of logical evaluation has been carried out. More precisely, appearances are to be considered real, until and unless reason is found to

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34 Notably, my *Phenomenology*.

consider them illusory; for the concepts of reality and illusion have no meaning other than with reference to appearance.

Colloquial use of the term “mind”, note, would include within it both the individual soul and mental content, because most people have not made a clear distinction between inner perceptions and intuitions. I prefer using the term “psyche” to refer to this soul-mind complex. Also note, to most people the term “spiritual” connotes disembodied ghosts, or mystical out-of-this-world chimeras. But in my writing these terms are more limited: when I use the term “spiritual”, I just mean “pertaining to the soul” and when I use the term “mind” I usually mean “the sum total of mental phenomena”. “Subjective” is another term I usually use very specifically, to mean “in or of the subject”, i.e. with reference to the soul. Note this well to avoid confusion.

My understanding of the “soul” is that it corresponds to the self, the entity apparently at the center of all cognitions (soul as subject) and volitions (soul as agent), as well as valuations (which involve both cognitions and volitions, and also mediate between them). Its substance seems distinct from that of material and mental phenomena, so it is distinctively labeled as spiritual. This appellation, spirit, also serves to stress the experiential difference of soul and its said functions, namely that it has per se no phenomenal qualities (color, brightness, shape, sounds, etc.), so that it cannot be perceived but only intuited. All phenomenal qualities seemingly in it are to be distinguished as projections in the mental domain, note. Even so, the soul cannot logically be a mere abstraction from physical and/or mental events perceived, because that would not explain how individual events within it are known (i.e.

what I am now experiencing, believing, preferring, doing, etc.).

> We may ask the question: Do consciousness and will exist? The answer to that is: *Both consciousness and will are self-evident in the question being asked and understood.* Without them, there would be no research and no meaning to its results.
>
> Granting they exist, the next question concerning them would be: What are they? *Since we cannot perceive them, either in matter or in mind, they have no phenomenal qualities; they must therefore either be intuited or conceived, or both.* They are certainly conceivable: we may logically construct hypotheses as to what they might be, and see how such theories work out in the long run in the light of all experience. The theory that seems inductively most fitting is that they might be events or *relations, between subject and object, agent and act.*
>
> The role of subject/agent is not to be filled by matter/body or by mental-stuff/mind, because the latter are too varied and changing. A postulate of soul, as an entity of some third substance called spirit, allied with mind and body, is therefore put forward, instead, to fill that role. However, conception is not enough, because it only yields general abstractions, and cannot explain our common daily experience of *particular* events of consciousness and will. The latter can only be explained by supposing non-perceptual experiences, i.e. intuitions.

From one's own soul (the center of cognition and volition), and its apparent interrelations with one's own body (the closest segment of matter), and the existence of other similar, bodies with comparable behavior, one may infer the existence of other souls by analogy. The simplest theory of soul is that it is an "epiphenomenon" of matter – i.e. when matter comes together in certain specific combinations (organic molecules, living cells, animal organisms of some complexity) a soul is generated over and above such matter; the justification of this theory being that such soul needs be assumed to explain certain observations. This is the interpretation of soul most acceptable to modern predispositions, the closest to materialism, and we may here accept it as a working hypothesis.

There are other theories of soul worth mentioning. The religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, considerably influenced by Neoplatonism, seem to favor an idea of soul as an individual entity temporarily residing in, or associated with, a material body and its mental prolongations, but potentially surviving physical death and capable of disembodied existence for spans of time. Religions originating in India wax more mystical, and conceive of a universal soul of which all particular souls are fractions (*atman*, in Hinduism), or at least of a universal ground of being or mind from which individuated selves crystallize by a trick of illusion (*anatman*, in Buddhism). But in fact, the present analysis of volition does not require us to opt for any particular doctrine of soul.

A very important insight:

With regard to the identification of the self with an illusion of consciousness, which is found in some Buddhist texts and becoming more popular in the West today, it seems to me that a misuse of the term 'consciousness' is involved. Consciousness is not, as they seem to suggest, a sort of stuff, which can become 'delusive'. The substance of 'mind' (in a large sense, i.e. all of the psyche) is two-fold, in my view, comprising the stuff of soul (spirit) and that of mental projections (memories, imaginations, and the like – the 'mind' in a more restricted sense). As for consciousness, it is *a relation*, between two terms, one called the subject (any soul) and the other called the object (be it spirit, mind or matter).

Consciousness has no consciousness of its own. The relation it constitutes is unequal, involving at one end something cognized and at the other end something cognizing. The former exists at least as appearance; the latter 'apprehends' or 'comprehends' this appearance as an 'experience' or an 'abstraction from experience'. Consciousness is never the subject of the relation of consciousness; it is usually the relation, and occasionally (in the case 'self-consciousness', which is a misnomer[35]) additionally the object. Consciousness or awareness is a function of the soul (subject), and not identical with it.

[35] Because it is the soul that is conscious of its consciousness; i.e. one instance of consciousness by the soul turned on another instance of consciousness by the soul.

> Consciousness may have as its object contents of mind, but that does not make the two the same.
>
> Buddhist philosophers and their modern imitators tend to blur the distinction between the three terms: soul, consciousness and mind. This tacit equation or ambiguity serves to give certain of their pronouncements a semblance of psychological and philosophical depth and consistency. For it allows us to assume one meaning or the other as convenient to the context, without having to systematically harmonize the different meanings[36]. Such a 'fuzzy logic' approach is lazy (if not dishonest), and in the long run obstructs knowledge development in this field. We must admit that three terms are used because we are dealing with three distinct objects. It is not arbitrary hair-splitting, but objective precision.

Although I tend to draw it as a circle in explanatory diagrams (as in the figure further on), the soul should not be confused with such material or mental images standing in for it. It is important to remain aware that since the soul is intuited and not perceived, it has no concrete phenomenal qualities – and therefore *no shape, no size, no extension, no location* in material or mental space. If our body and mind seem to be the habitat of our soul (and we have the impression that our soul is centered behind our eyes though coterminous with all our body), it is due to the fact that our experiences *of body and mind* are the most

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[36] From a formal logic point of view, this is a common expedient to conceal *a breach of syllogistic rules* – in particular the 'fallacy of four terms'. Thanks to an ambiguity, predicates applicable to one subject are illicitly passed over to another.

proximate in our perspective, and not due to our soul being experienced in a place. The soul may however have time limitations, since these are not phenomenal per se. Once we grasp that the soul is without phenomenal boundaries, the various views about it mentioned above seem more easily reconciled.

Another preliminary clarification worth making concerns the relation of souls, mind and matter. It is conceivable that mental projections occur directly from soul, but I tend to assume – so as to remain as materialist-friendly as possible – the minimalist thesis that mental projections always occur via matter. That is to say, the soul signals to its underlying brain what it wants it to mentally project, and the brain cells more or less obediently do the job of projection, after which the soul "sees (or hears)" with its "mind's eye (or ear)" the projection. The advantage of this assumption is that we can explain why mental projections are not always quite voluntary or exactly as we wanted them. The brain seemingly can and often does make mental projections of its own.

> Nevertheless, we can remain in principle open to the idea of *telepathy*. Without wishing to definitely advocate it, I must at least consider its conceivability, since I sometimes seem to experience it. We could minimally claim that telepathy occurs through some yet undiscovered material medium, perhaps electromagnetic waves; and thus that telepathy operates through the nervous system like any other object of sensation. Or we could more radically suppose that souls can project images into each other's mental domains; this would imply that mental domains stretch across or transcend space. Or we could more

> radically still opt for a spiritual explanation, adhering to the metaphysics that all souls are ultimately one. This is said in passing, to be exhaustive, without intending to definitely affirm any doctrine.

I tend to anyway think that mental phenomena are a peculiar product of, if not kind of, matter, since the phenomenal qualities composing both are the same (or at least all those of the mental domain are to be found in the material domain, though it may be that some in the material domain are absent in the mental domain). What seems evident is that the sights and sounds we mentally project are recombinations of sights and sounds earlier absorbed through our physical senses.

Furthermore, the mental and material domains seem to share space (unlike soul) as well as time. Mental projections are usually thought of as occurring in an inner space; but if we consider hallucination (e.g. seeing your glasses on your nose after you have taken them off), it is clear that they can seemingly extend into the outer space that matter inhabits. Indeed, this power of apparent outward projection of mental images is a fundamental cognitive tool, making it possible for us to "mentally" dissect and bound phenomena for the purpose of selecting discrete percepts from which concepts are constructed.

Considering all this, it is often more appropriate to treat mind as matter, in an enlarged sense of the latter term. Certainly, the "laws of thought" (identity, non-contradiction, and exclusion of the middle) apply in the mental domain as in all others. We may well imagine both "a thing" and "its contradictory" coexisting in the same field, but in truth the two items mentally co-existing are

distinct images or verbal symbols intended to refer to the former. As regards the latter phenomena as such, each of them is indeed *present and not absent* in a certain time and place, in perfect accord with the said laws.

But even so, we should note that mental phenomena do not seem to interact among themselves as material ones do. It does not seem like mental phenomena directly produce other mental phenomena. Rather, if two or more mental phenomena display constancies of conjunction or separation, we tend to regard the superficial causation as more deeply due to the soul's repeated choices, or to physical laws operating in the brain making it project such regularity. We do not consider mental projections as having the necessary continuous existence, much as we would not consider the light and sound events in a movie as really having any causative relation to each other.

The explanation of the peculiarity of the mental domain should not however be viewed as due to a flaw in our formal definition of causation, as in the preceding suggestion that regularities may be "only superficial". There are two reasons we believe that causative relations may be discounted in the domain of imagination even when temporary and local regularities appear. One reason is our lifetime experience of the great variety of imagination: *anything can be imagined in combination with anything else* (e.g. a 'giraffe' shape may have the shape of 'wings' added to its back and be blue all over); this does not offend the laws of thought, as already explained. The other reason is our personal intuition that we have some degree of control over mental phenomena*: in this domain, if we will some image, it appears; and if we will its absence, it disappears*.

Because mental phenomena are not as heavily "substantial" as material ones, we tend to associate them more with the soul. Such association is reinforced due to mental projections seeming directly accessible to perception by the soul, and seeming for the most part under the soul's power to manipulate. Furthermore, at least thus far in human history, mental phenomena are a private spectacle to a given soul, not something publicly accessible. In those respects, mind is regarded as an aspect, or at least a property, of soul. To conclude, it is very doubtful that the mental domain can exist apart from soul and body.

It is worth focusing for a moment on the *utility* of the mental domain. The soul (the subject of cognition and agent of volition) and the brain (the presumed physical apparatus underlying thought and action) both use the mind or mental 'matrix', let us call it, as a screen on which to project visual and auditory images (and possibly 'images' in the other phenomenal modalities: smell, taste, touch, emotions).

People use their mind as a *medium of communication* with themselves, first and foremost; more broadly, with other people or animals, alive or dead, and even with God (the latter practices, when they go beyond mere rehearsal of future material dialogue, imply a belief in telepathy of sorts, i.e. in the ability to send thoughts across space and time). Monologue is thus dialogue, and dialogue is often monologue. The mind serves as a sort of versatile, erasable drawing and sounding board, facilitating speculation, imagination of alternatives, and so forth.

The mind is also used as a medium of 'communication' between soul and brain. When the soul, via the brain,

projects images, the brain incidentally records (in machine language, as it were) what has been projected. I see no reason to locate memory storage anywhere but in the brain; memories are not kept in the soul or mind. Moreover, the brain provides information for cognition by the soul through the mental matrix. This may be mere recall (memory of past sensations, emotions, imaginations, verbal thoughts), or it may be reshuffled memory that signals present sensations or emotions by associations and symbols.

That is to say, what appears in the mental matrix is not necessarily voluntarily produced by the soul, but may come in part or in whole from the body via the brain. And in the latter case, the brain does not simply bring up relevant or irrelevant data from its memory stores as is; it often 'manipulates' this data, supposedly as a way of informing the soul. Dreams are often so understood; but the same applies to daytime fantasies. In meditation, one sees how much of such involuntary chatter and fictional image projection is going on, of which we are ordinarily barely aware, but which has considerable influence on us.

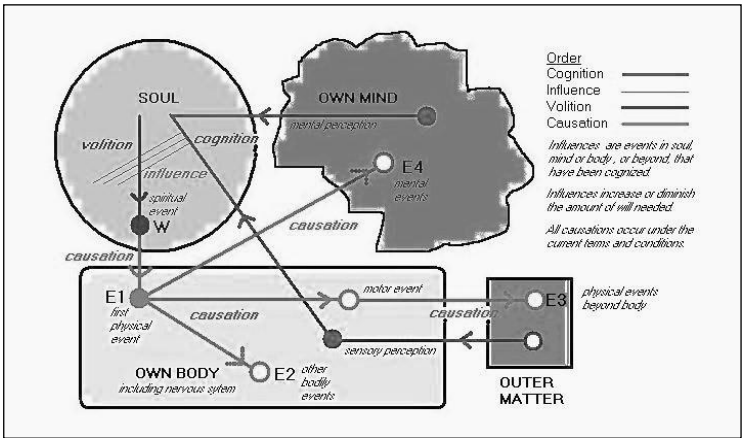
3. Stages in the Process of Volition

Our present proposal is ***to locate the act of volition proper entirely within the soul performing such act***. The reader is now referred to Figure 3, below, which is a schematic presentation or map of the process of volition.

a. It is proposed, then, that the soul spontaneously generates within itself some modification labeled W. The primary event W does not spontaneously arise in the sense of a chance natural event – it is 'produced by' and the

'responsibility of' the soul concerned (i.e. the agent), these terms being here understood intuitively and with reference to our various clarifications of volition thus far and further on. The event W is thus, note well, a purely spiritual event (the term spiritual being intended to mean 'pertaining to the soul', conceived as having a distinctive substance labeled 'spiritual'). Note that the event W may be supposed transient – it need not permanently mark the soul.

Figure 3. Mapping the process of volition



Once it has so emerged from the act of volition proper, ***the spiritual event***, W, ***in turn causatively gives rise to some first physical event***, E1, ***which may in turn causatively give rise to other physical or mental events***, E2, E3, E4, etc.

Note well that, strictly speaking, in this theory, the first physical event is not a product of volition *but of causation*.

It is nevertheless an exceptional causative transaction, in that it has a spiritual event as cause and a physical event as effect. Still, as we have earlier explained, the causative relation as we have formally defined it (as conjunction or separation of certain presences or absences) does not specify *what 'substance'* the terms related may have. Nothing a priori excludes the spiritual, mental and physical domains from interacting causatively every which way. For example, as we shall suggest further on, a physical event may cause a mental one.

The position that will as such occurs entirely within the soul is here taken in an attempt to mitigate the concept of volition in the eyes of materialist critics, by relegating the issues involved to a distinct domain, that of the spirit. Such isolation allows physicists to continue going about their business, formulating principles concerning natural causations and natural spontaneities, without having to reflect on the problem of volition.

However, note that we could equally well consider that the first act of volition has the first physical event (E1) as its *direct* result. The advantage of this position would be to eliminate the spiritual event (W), which could be construed as contradicting the essential *unity of the soul*, which seems necessary to personalize it (the soul). However, such a doctrine of extreme uniformity or homogeneity of the soul is (in my opinion) impracticable, because we have to suppose that all sorts of complicated events do happen within the soul, in cognition, valuation and volition.

It suffices, I think, to consider the soul as not permanently marked by its will or other episodes (influences or conditions); it remains essentially itself come what may, it

retains its original purity and identity. I tend to visualize spiritual events (like W) as creases or more dynamically as undulations in the soul – i.e. I take the term '*stirring*' we often use in volitional contexts literally. Spiritual events are particular, temporary stirrings in or of the soul.

But anyway, it could be argued that the said alternative position, placing the first effect of volition outside the soul, would not greatly affect our view of nature. For we must admit that the first physical event, whether it in fact arises from volition indirectly or directly, will appear to an observer of the material domain alone as a causeless event – i.e. as naturally spontaneous – since such observer would be unable to discern any *physical causative* for the event. Our theory here is, however, that such first physical events, if we could pinpoint just where to look for them, are not truly causeless, but caused either directly or indirectly by volition. Thus, the theoretical issue as to how soon the first physical event arises can be left open.

With regard to *the location of the first physical event* after volition, we can safely predict that it occurs in *specialized* neural cells or combinations of cells[37], most probably in the brain (though perhaps sometimes in the rest of nervous system). For we may readily assume that *telekinesis*, the volition of physical events at a distance, is impossible. Most people (myself included) make no claim to telekinesis and have no incontrovertible vicarious experience of it. Some parapsychologists do claim evidence for it, but their experiments so far are (to my knowledge) regarded as technically flawed by the majority

[37] Such cells might be referred to as physical 'receptors' of volition. They have to form part of a living organism, needless to say.

of scientists[38]. Thus, it seems likely that volition cannot act on the world beyond our own body except causatively through that body; and even within our own body, volition cannot act directly on all organs, but only on some, after which causation takes over.

Concerning *mental* phenomena, it is suggested in our above diagram that they emerge from physical ones, whether the latter had their source in volition or emerged entirely from physical causatives. While it is not unthinkable that soul can will mental events directly, without passing through physical events, I tend to favor the more materialist position on the basis of arguments already put forward.

Thus, the phenomenal aspects of thought (which involves imagination of visual and auditory phenomena, including inner words) and speech (producing outer words – gestures, sounds or writings, symbolizing meanings), as well as perceptible action (other physical products, which may impact on nature or on other souls, or even reflexively on one's own soul), are all products of will external to the soul, occurring via physical events (in the central and peripheral nervous system, including the motor system). But the intentions of thoughts, speeches and actions lie in the soul, influencing the latter to will them into being.

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[38] If such assumption against telekinesis turns out to be empirically wrong, we can readily adapt our theory of volition accordingly. It is not a central issue in the present discussion. I make a reasonable assumption, based on my knowledge context. My method is to stick close to generally accepted fact, and not engage in speculations that might seem like flights of fancy.

In the light of the present presentation of volitional processes, we could distinguish four levels of volition, involving a progressively diminishing personal control of events. The deepest level is volition within the soul: that is pure volition, which is free. The second level is volition of the 'first physical event': this already involves causation, if only in that the terms and conditions must be right for such event (e.g. a functioning brain). The third level is volition of further mental and bodily events: here, the admixture of causation is much larger (as more and more terms and conditions have to be appropriate). The fourth level is volition of external physical events and social events that ensue: here the measure of personal control of events is least.

b. Let us now consider ***the issue of influence***, with reference to our earlier definition of this causal relation. The *area of operation of influence*, i.e. where influences influence, the place in the volitional process where influence is operative, is between the source of the volitional act within the soul (agent) and the primary result of the volitional act (event W, in our scenario). Within this 'space' in the soul, influence either makes it possible for the agent's will to succeed with relatively less effort (positive influence) or increases the internal resistance his willpower must overcome by increased effort (negative influence). We can picture this space of influence as analogous to a field of force.

But this area of operation of influence is only the last stage in the process of influence. As we have seen, the things that are influential may be internal to the soul (spiritual events, such as prior attitudes) or external to it, being mental events (such as memories or imaginations) or bodily events (such as sensations or visceral emotions) or

events occurring beyond the body's boundaries (be they natural or artificial). Whatever their nature, these things must be *cognized* to be influential – whether such cognition be perceptual (of mental or material phenomena) intuitive (subjective) or conceptual (abstract).

Thus, to trace the whole process of influence, we must consider the cognition that gave rise to the internal forces aiding or opposing volition, and prior to that the objects of that cognition. It is important to emphasize that the power of influence depends on *belief* only. It does not matter whether a volition is based on true knowledge or false opinion; it suffices that we believe what we have cognized is real enough. Superstitions may be as influential as scientific facts; indeed more so, since the former unlike the latter will not be readily abandoned if experientially or logically refuted.

Thus, the cognition involved may be realistic or illusory, logical or irrational, correct or incorrect, knowledge or opinion, certain or unsure – its epistemological status is irrelevant to its force of influence, so long as it is believed in. But additionally, the *degree* of belief obviously plays a role (e.g. if I am unsure about the efficacy of a certain course of action, my will is likely to wobble). Inversely, objects that are not cognized cannot be counted as influences.

Influences, then, subjectively produce a sort of field of force in the soul, emanating from the place of their cognition into the space where volition erupts, facilitating or hindering the latter's aimed at result.

With regard to *effort*, certain clarifications are worth making, here. The emotion of effort, perceived during

physical or intellectual work, should not be confused with the more abstract concept of 'effort' we have introduced in relation to our analysis of volition and influence. The latter is only called effort by analogy[39], referring more precisely to degree or intensity of will applied in the presence of positive or negative influences. Emotions of effort are concrete phenomena, felt in the body or inside the head. Being perceived, they may and do *influence* volition; but they are not the same as the subsequent 'effort' in will. The latter is non-phenomenal, known intuitively by the self, and occurring within the soul; it is an aspect of a spiritual event, viz. willing.

c. Closer inspection reveals that there are often ***preliminaries to volition***, in the way of subjective self-positioning. Volition might be supposed to sometimes occur without particular motive or intention, as pure whim; but even then, the agent may not be totally blind to context, and aim his whim in a particular direction, leaving it indefinite only in some respects. In any case, normally some preparation is involved before launching one's principal act of will. This may be quick and easy or require much time and effort. Furthermore, an act of volition may be temporarily interrupted while some unanticipated side issues are resolved.

There is a prior activity of *reconnaissance*, researching and gathering data of potential relevance to action. This newly-cognized or recalled data (be it practical or theoretical) will of course influence the direction and

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[39] In the same way, Isaac Newton developed the mechanics concepts of force and work by analogy to the emotion of effort attending pushing and pulling, lifting and lowering, and environmental changes they cause.

intensity of volition. But the way it does so is not so direct: an *evaluation* is needed first. The latter is itself no simple act, but involves *conceiving alternative scenarios*, which implies mental projection. Once the possible or anticipated courses of events have been visualized, and comparatively evaluated, a *choice* is made as to which one of them will be pursued.

Moreover, having clarified the *purposes or goals* of one's action, one will *investigate and deliberate on the means* to achieve them. This stage is itself complex and gradual, as more information may need to be sought and experiments may need to be made, with tentative steps and repeated adjustments all along. Finally, a *decision* is made, and *effort* begins to be applied in the direction intended. As such effort encounters the help or obstruction of influences, it is reduced or intensified. Unless a new decision intervenes, the will is repeatedly reaffirmed and reoriented, until the intended result is achieved.

Preparation and execution of volition may be *variously efficient*. One may be reluctant or lazy to act, or eager and energetic. One may be always alert and proactive, or forget some things and fail to anticipate others. One may take the unexpected in stride, or allow oneself to be perturbed by every little obstacle. One may be quick to adapt to changing conditions, or negligent in taking appropriate action. All these betray one's attitudes – whether one is in earnest or half-hearted about one's will – and they of course affect one's performance.

Each stage in a volitional process may involve *subsidiary acts of will*. Will is often 'empirical', a trial and error process, since we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Attempts are made, which may fail. With perseverance,

other attempts replace them, which may succeed. The way is never absolutely certain, except in very limited segments of will. The (direct or indirect) volition of an external (physical or mental) event is usually the end-result of a great many *subjective* acts of volition, of which we are conscious to varying degrees. But moreover, a given externally oriented volition may have to be preceded by numerous *other external* volitions.

The concept of influence is designed to account for *the residues in consciousness* of all such prior inner and outer volitions, in a given volition. That is, the field of influence as it were stores the significant history of the volitional process, comprising all that has cumulatively informed the agent into certain directions of will necessitating certain donations of effort.

d. Concerning the role of ***emotion*** in volition, it should not be overestimated. Within the soul itself, there is a basic function called valuation. This is an inner expression of self, necessary for an entity with freewill, which must choose between alternative potential courses of action. Valuation is thus a primary inner act of volition. Emotion, on the other hand, usually (except when it is confused with valuation) refers to something passive, occurring in the physical and/or mental domains. Valuation is a spiritual (i.e. in the soul) event known by intuition, self-knowledge; whereas emotion is a concrete physical and/or mental phenomenon, known by sensory or 'mind's eye' perception. Included under this heading are not just pleasure and pain, but the full range of possible nuances in feeling.

Emotions have various degrees of effect on volition, but in fact can never determine it. Being essentially 'external

objects' relative to the soul, they cannot condition it, except in the way of influences. That is, emotions are perceived and such perception in turn makes volition easier or harder for the soul. Emotions, of course, are often consequences of volitional acts; not directly, but through causation by the 'first physical event' emerging from volition. For this reason, our emotions are often eventual outcomes of our valuations; and this is why we equate them. But such equation is not always justified, for a given emotion is not inevitably and invariably indicative of a certain valuation, since physical intermediaries must be taken into account.

It follows that people who generally identify themselves with their emotions are wrong to do so; their judgment is often distorted. This applies to *feelings* of desire, aversion, love, hatred, hope, fear, certainty, doubt, it is beautiful, it is ugly, etc., as distinct from the *valuations* with the same names. That may sound like a rather cold doctrine to some people, but it seems consistent with all our observations and theorizing in the present work. Its intent is not to dehumanize, but to strengthen people. It is the feelings that are 'objective' (i.e. objects outside the soul) and the valuations that are 'subjective' (i.e. acts of the soul), rather than the other way around as people believe!

In practice, of course, people have so much going on inside them, in the way of both inputs and outputs, that it is no wonder the fine distinctions we have drawn here, such as that between soul and phenomenal personality, and in particular between valuation and emotion, are remote and laughable to them. They are too busy, too weighed down. It is only through meditation, when one steps back and lets things calm down considerably, that one can begin to sort things out and observe their order.

4. The Scope of Freewill

Concerning *freedom of the will*, our pictorial representation provides some further clarifications. But let me first stress that when looking at the diagram above, the reader should not take it too literally. The soul is not extended, with cognition and volition happening in different places, and influence as something in between, that volition flows through, ending in an event. All these things happen together, in the same spot and simultaneously. They have been separated schematically, for purposes of analysis; but they are in fact *all one* event. It is one and the same self that cognizes, is influenced by cognition, and wills something, all together, in one and the same movement.

It is obvious that even the first physical event emerging from volition is *subject to natural terms and conditions*. We have suggested specialized organs in the nervous system are probably necessary for such events[40]; and such organs would naturally depend on neurological, biological, chemical and physical laws[41]. If such organs are absent or damaged, or when inappropriate conditions prevail in them, they are inoperative. *The soul is not free to will whatever it wants wherever it wants to into its*

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[40] This concerns humans and animals. With regard to the will of God, we would have to suppose such a restriction to be inapplicable. Obviously, the Creator of matter must have a will independent of matter. It follows that His providential acts in the ongoing life of the universe do not require special material receptors.

[41] Signals within the nervous system are electrical and chemical.

physical environment, but only certain possibilities 'allowed' by natural law. This *principle of due process* is the philosophical assumption of most people, except perhaps lunatics [42]

On the other hand, the soul has considerable freedom of will *within itself*. It can manifestly (as introspection and internal experiment shows) do a lot 'at will' there, though much of what we call 'will' is not immediate will but a cumulative result of smaller immediate wills that *adapt to changing conditions* (adaptation implying consciousness, note). Thus, volition is not unaffected, but influenced by cognized external as well as internal events. This influence (which is finally something internal) *can never generate or block will*, but only accelerate or decelerate a particular direction of will, because will (the inner movement of soul) is a function of the agent only. Cognitions cannot in themselves move soul or stop it from moving.

All the more so, *external conditions* be they mental or physical, be they natural or artificial products of the will of some other soul(s), which might be construed to impinge upon the agent directly (i.e. not as influences, via his cognition of them), are apparently incapable of doing so. We may at least postulate such incapacity, as a further principle of freewill. This position is quite conceivable, if we express it as an *independence of the spiritual domain from the mental and physical domains*. It is conceivable that whereas the physical and mental domains can be modified, directly or indirectly, *within specific terms and conditions*, by the spiritual domain (in our context,

[42] Even believers in shamanism and magical powers allow for 'due process'. Only, the processes they regard as possible seem obscure or ineffective to the rest of us.

through certain acts of volition by souls), the reverse is not possible. It is not inconceivable that Nature includes this limitation, this one-way street between its domains.[43]

It is worth noting that causal pathways between the mental domain and the spiritual and physical ones seem to have precise directions. According to our theory here, the soul projects mental phenomena only indirectly via its volition of physical events in the nervous system (so that memory in the brain of a mental projection *precedes* the actual appearance to the soul of the imaginations projected by it). Also, whereas the physical domain can after volition, or even without prior volition, affect the mental domain, the reverse is not true. The mental domain does not seem to directly affect the physical domain, but does so only through its cognition by the soul, which thereafter affects the physical domain under influence of such cognition.

To repeat our freewill thesis: the physical and mental domains condition the spiritual domain through consciousness of their contents (this is influence); but they do not condition it directly, without consciousness (in the way of ordinary conditioning). This concerns the internal workings of soul, implying one aspect of freedom of the will.

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[43] It does not follow that the spiritual cannot control the spiritual. Thus, we may assume that God can dominate the human or animal soul anytime He chooses to. This would be a theological limitation to our freewill. It is a privilege however that God mostly chooses not to exercise, since it is His will that humans, and to a lesser extent animals, have freewill. He gracefully relinquishes some of his power, *de facto* though not *de jure*, so that we may exist “in His image and after His likeness” (to quote *Genesis* 1:26).

On the other hand, soul has the privilege of being able to make changes in the physical or mental domains. However, this capacity is *not infinite, but subject to natural law*. This restriction is especially evident in the physical domain, which sets finite terms and conditions to the volitions of the soul on it. Thus, volition may not operate just anywhere in it, but only in circumscribed locations (such as special living cells, probably). Subsequent limitations may occur in the body (e.g. a man's muscles may be too weak for some job); or further out, beyond the body (e.g. he may be imprisoned by impassable walls).

Once a volitional act has inscribed its 'first physical event', material nature takes its course. Some physical reactions may follow inevitably, some conditionally, and some may be impossible come what may. Reactions may occur in the body (e.g. a man's arm and hand move), or onward outside it (e.g. he may break down a wall). In these senses only, i.e. with reference to all *physical limitations and reactions* to volition, volition may be said to be liable to ordinary conditioning. But all that occurs outside the soul, note well, and so does not essentially qualify its freedom of volition as such[44].

Cognition, volition and valuation are not only distinctive functions of soul; they are presumably its only ways to function. The soul's cognition is not to be confused with

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[44] If we are precise in our thinking about volition, we can avoid doctrines that put freedom in doubt. Thus, for example, if a boxer gets knocked-out, his soul's freedom of will is not affected, but the temporary blockage of his sensory and motor faculties makes the assertion of his will in his body impossible, as well as deprive him of information needed to usefully direct such will, for a while.

the computer-style operations of the nervous system serving as its accessory. The soul's volition is not to be confused with physical or mental preliminaries or consequences. The soul's mode of operation is volition, i.e. freewill; that is presumably its *only* modus operandi: it is not subject to any causation from nature (the physical and mental domains), though it may be affected by nature through cognition. But of course, its freewill is operative only during the soul's existence; for the soul may be generated or destroyed by natural causatives (birth or death of a body)[45].

[45] Believers in God would of course add that it is He who controls birth and death.

5. CHAPTER FIVE

Drawn from *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (2004), Chapters 11:3 & 16.

1. The Ego Abhors a Vacuum

It is interesting … to compare our … conclusion concerning 'wanting' as the driver of obsessions and compulsions, and the Buddhist principle that 'desire' is at the root of all human action (creating karma and thence further 'desire', in a seemingly endless cycle). We have … seen that volition usually has some goal (perhaps always so, if we discount apparent whims, granting them to have ends of sorts). In the present context, we have noted that sometimes the purpose involved in volition is particularly perverse because misleadingly eclipsed.

A very perspicacious observation of Buddhist psychology[46], which explains a lot in the present context,

[46] The following account is inspired by Buddhist doctrine, but I have adapted its terms. Thus, most schools of Buddhism deny existence of a "real (individual) self" (here called soul), admitting only an illusory "conventional self" (here called ego) and a substratum for all existence called "Buddha nature" or "original ground" (what we might call a universal soul). In my view, granting the existence of such an undifferentiated substratum, we would be hard put to understand how or why it would give rise to egos (false selves), if we did not assume that the universal whole is first in the interim apparently broken into

is that *the ego is constantly seeking stimulating experiences so as to reassert its existence and identity*. This is the basic 'selfishness' or 'egoism', and 'vanity' or 'egotism', of the ego or false self. By the 'ego'[47], we may understand the (partly or even largely erroneous) self-image of the soul[48]. It is a mental projection, a set of notions and suppositions about itself, which the soul confuses with itself[49]. The self-as-ego always needs buttressing one way or another. We may put it as: 'the ego abhors a vacuum'.

As I have explained in my *Phenomenology*, the 'ego' consists of aspects of one's body, mind and soul – some

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individual fractions (real selves). Although Buddhist theorists enjoy provocative paradoxes, we must remain critical and logical.

[47] Note that our use of the term 'ego' here derives from its popular use, and is not to be confused with that in the psychology of Freud (which refers to a 'realistic, practical' segment of the psyche), though it may encompass aspects of the latter concept, as well as of the contrasting concepts of 'id' (an 'emotive, impulsive' segment) and 'superego' (an 'idealistic, regulatory' segment).

[48] It is interesting to notice how we converse with ourselves, sometimes in the first person singular (I, my), sometimes in the second (you, your), and more rarely in the third person (saying 'one' or 'we', as here). One may also wordlessly project a physical image of oneself doing or having something. All such discourse may, together with other events, be added to the basket that constitutes the 'ego'.

[49] For this reason, the ego may be referred to as the prison of the soul, or more poetically (to use a metaphor dear to Jews) as its place of exile. The ego usually involves an inflated vision of our importance in the scheme of things, due to the maximum proximity of our body and mind in our perspective on the world; but the ego is also in fact an artificial limitation on the natural grandeur of our soul.

correctly experienced or inferred, some wrongly assumed, some fancifully projected – to which one (i.e. one's soul – the cognizing, willing, evaluating self) attaches to as one's very 'self'. It is a partly true, partly false self-image, weaved selectively and with fictional embellishments[50], to which one clings tenaciously in the belief that its loss or damage would be unbearable.

Being a cognitive construct of the soul (and not itself a soul), the ego has *no will of its own* (even though we sometimes speak of it as if it did). It is not a separate entity competing with the self – although we often present it as such, because that is a convenient image, a useful figure of speech. Every supposed voluntary action of the 'ego' is an act of the soul or self, for which the latter remains fully responsible. Nevertheless, the ego-construct strongly *influences* most thoughts and deeds of the soul, sometimes for the good, often for the bad, acting like a veil to knowledge and an obstacle to volition, in the way of a filter.

Bodily sensations and sentiments are major constituents of the ego, which have a particularly powerful influence on identity and behavior, due to their enormous and insistent presence. But many other factors come into play, too, such as ongoing mental chatter.

A common affliction today (in men as well as women) is repeated gazing at one's image in the mirror. This is not just amusing narcissism, but an expression of the ego's deep insecurity and need for confirmation of existence and identity, as well as a preparation for social projection. A

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[50] This means, for instances, treating momentary appearances as established realities, or transient or occasional traits as lifelong characteristics.

similar affliction is looking at photos or films of oneself, and showing them to other people.

Our ego is also 'relative' to other people, in that we project some of it (usually the more flattering aspects, though often also aspects that may excite pity and charity) to them as our social persona (partly as cunning construct and partly incidentally or accidentally). To the extent that one manages to convince others of the personality projected – through one's words and deeds, as well as physical appearance – one reinforces one's own conviction in the said self-image.[51]

Although ego building is possible in isolation from other people, it is (for good or bad) made easier in many respects in social contexts. The reason is that other people only know the individual through some phenomenal factors, whereas the individual also has intuitive (non-phenomenal) knowledge of self. With other people, we can selectively 'show and tell'; also, they linger on the past, instead of letting it stay in the past, since the image of us they memorize is accumulative and rather rigid.

The ego is essentially *restless and insecure*. It prefers pleasant experiences; but if such are unavailable, it will just as well seek painful ones rather than none at all. Fearing to face its own vacuity, it will seek sensations, thoughts, distractions and possibilities of self-identification (e.g. listen to heavy metal music on the radio or watch a scary movie on TV, or just go to sleep and dream, or play games with someone). It will invent artificial intellectual problems, so as to have something to

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[51] The relativity of ego is also, by the way, an insight drawn from Buddhist psychology. Truly, the East is a rich mine of human understanding.

think about and express itself through. It will create psychological, existential or social problems for itself, so as to have something to respond to and a role to play. That is, our problems are often not accidental, or even incidental, to our pursuits, but their very purpose.

In particular, the ego's need for stimuli helps explain why man is such a social animal. Of course, humans do objectively need each other: for common survival, for procreation, to bring up children. People care for each other, support and help each other, work together for the common good, enrich each other culturally. But modern novelists, journalists and psychologists have come to promote a great emotional dependence in people (which paradoxically breaks down human relations in the long run, because it is misguiding). To correct this erroneous tendency, by showing up the subjectivity of many social bonds, is not 'cynicism', but lucidity and compassion.

Most people quickly feel lonely if they are alone. Although the said hunger for stimulation can be satisfied without resort to company (especially as one matures), the easiest way to satisfy it is through human exchanges. The advantage here is precisely the maximum give and take involved. One gets sensory input, and one has respondents in front of whom to project a social persona. One acts, one gets feedback, one reacts – one is almost never 'bored'. With a companion – a family member, a friend, a lover, a colleague, even an enemy if need be – one is always kept busy and entertained. One prefers a nice, loving relationship; but one might settle for an argument or a

fight, or just a walk in a crowded shopping center. If a human companion is unavailable, a pet will do.[52]

The motivation behind our constant grasping and clinging after objects of desire may be nothing more than a frantic, desperate attempt by the non-existent ego (i.e. to be precise, the self confusing itself with this imagined entity) *to assert itself* through stimulants and 'ego games'. This would be (according to the said thesis) the mother of all compulsions, whether bad or good. Therefore, if we managed to abandon our delusive self-identification with this illusory self, we would be freed of all compulsions.

A further explanation given by Buddhism is that "existence is suffering". The ego necessarily gives rise to suffering – being finite, it is inevitably subject to repeated vexation, frustration, pain, fear, anger, hatred, despair, boredom, and so forth, whether due to the presence of objects of aversion or to the absence of objects of desire. This suffering is expressed emotionally, as a sort of background noise of negative feeling, underlying to some extent all one's experiences, even those that superficially appear positive. This negative substratum, of which we are sometimes acutely conscious and sometimes only vaguely aware, strongly *influences* our behavior, causing us to think and act non-stop, often in deviant ways (such as drug

[52] Of course, some people are loners against their will, because they cannot handle the challenges of relations. Hermits, on the contrary, avoid human or other contacts, so as to reduce unnecessary stimulation, and the artificial problems that come with it. They wish to simplify their life and experience to facilitate meditation. But some people manage to meditate in the midst of disturbances.

taking), in a blind and hopeless attempt to rid ourselves of the inexplicable unpleasant feeling.[53]

The Buddhist principle of desire is thus very general[54]: it refers to a sort of gluing[55] of the self to all objects of cognition and volition, called attachment or variously desire, grasping, clinging. However, such attachment is not easily shaken off. The opposite acts – viz. detachment, indifference, renunciation, letting go – are equally forms of attachment, insofar as they are intentional acts. Escape from or avoidance of attachment is impossible, if it is itself a pursuit of sorts. The whole difficulty of 'liberation' is that the latter circle must somehow be squared. Thus, Buddhism teaches more radically that there is compulsiveness of sorts in all our actions, which can only be eliminated in the ultimate 'enlightenment'.

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[53] This is the first of the "Four Noble Truths" at the core of Buddhism. Note that one does not experience the emotion the French call "*le mal d'être*" all the time; one may be very happy for a long time, unaware of this substratum. But this happiness is inevitably temporary, i.e. it is dependent on causes and conditions like good health, a loving spouse, material plenty, etc. It is brittle, fragile; and at some level, we all know it and brace ourselves for the inevitable end.

[54] This is worth comparing to the concept of an "evil impulse or inclination" (*yetser haraa*), proposed in Judaism. According to the Rabbis, all men and women, naturally, by the mere fact of being physically constituted, have such an inherent negative tendency. This is not, however, all bad. When people work against such resistance (the matter weighing them down, as it were) to achieve good, they acquire credit. But moreover, it is sometimes a good thing when they fail to overcome it. For example, yielding occasionally to sexual desire makes reproduction possible; if everyone was too saintly, there would be no one left.

[55] See my next essay, *Ungluing the mind*.

2. Ungluing the Mind

The genius of Oriental psychology! The *Treatise On Sitting Forgetting*[56] recommends us to make the effort that "the mind does not stick to things". According to this view, the ordinary mind needs some content to cling to, to *actualize* at all. Rather than giving thoughts free rein (abdication) or trying to rein them in (suppression), it recommends we repeatedly unglue our minds.

How true this description of mind is! It explains so much of our behavior! Consider how we ordinarily always have some mental content, be it some catchy musical tune, the face of someone one is infatuated with, the memory of some recent conversation, success or vexation, the anticipation of some event or the planning of some action, philosophical reflections or pious prayers, or any kind of thought or mental activity. Tempting random thoughts are constantly offered up to our conscious mind from the subconscious, so as to provide 'fodder' for rumination. Problems (psychological, familial, social, political, etc.) are subconsciously contrived, so as to have a problem to solve, something to think, emote, talk and act over.

We are never quiet, always fixated on or obsessed by some topic, always "mulling and musing". We feel we *need* to fill the mind: whence our enslavement to newspapers and books, radio and television, and other 'entertainments'[57],

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[56] See *Taoist Meditation*, pp. 84-7. The *Treatise* is "a Tang dynasty text on meditation practice".

[57] To the great profit and pleasure of those who provide us with the content. They know that however stupid or false it all is, we are hooked to the drug and will come back for more.

however tiring or enervating they may be. Sensuousness – whether in the form of sex or masturbation, of drugs or alcohol, of rock or techno music, or of porno, horror or action-packed movies – is also just a way to give content to mind, through more and more sensational sensory stimuli, whether pleasant or painful. Most of us cannot bear to be truly idle and quiescent for one minute, except in lazy sleep. And even then, our pastime consists of dreams. Even the meditation some of us resort to is used (mostly, at first) as just another way to 'occupy' our minds.

Like a pot of boiling soup, with gaseous bubbles rising up to the surface and bursting, the mind's substratum seems constantly excited by sensory inputs, emotions, reminiscences, and more or less voluntary imaginings and verbal thoughts. A memory may at first just appear as a hint, a tempting loose thread; curious, I grab it, and am transported into the depths of the memory. Why did this memory beckon? Very often, by logical or incidental association with a preceding memory or sensation or emotion or imagination or cogitation. Trains of thought are formed, as we become increasingly entangled. Like monkeys swinging from branch to branch, we cling to one item then to a more or less associated item; and thus we wander endlessly through the forest of the mind!

The *Treatise* teaches: to free ourselves from such travail, we have to avoid the mind's tendency to fixate on things. *Our (subconscious or conscious) attention sticks to things, to whatever it finds. When we unglue it from one thing, it automatically finds another to stick to.* It is analogous to a sucker or magnet, which you detach from one thing, and it immediately locks on to another. Thus, one is always 'absorbed' in something, as if terrified of having to face

oneself alone. This image of human psychology is very powerful and instructive.

Practicing ‘no thought’, ‘no mind’, ‘empty-mindedness’ does not mean trying to be vacuous and inane all day long – but rather signifies having a light-footed consciousness, one that does not compulsively stick to just-anything merely for the sake of filling the mind, but is intelligently deployed. If awareness is truly required, it is flexibly provided. If there is no real requirement, one can effortlessly return to inner quiet and calm.

Of course, such smart practice implies giving up desires and habits one has long identified with! It is no use just thinking or talking about it; one has to *do* it! “Just say no” to all foolishness. Sitting meditation is a great help, developing the repose we need to see things in perspective and take the necessary steps.

I have found with practice that if, as soon as one awakens in the morning, one resists the mental temptation to ‘*stir up*’ one’s mind with extraneous thoughts, and in particular negative thoughts, one finds it easier to rest in serenity (and perhaps good cheer) thereafter, all day long. It is a shortcut: rather than allow scattered thoughts to proliferate, and then have to quiet the mind down later, it is smart to make a small effort of self-control from the start.

Negative thoughts may be stimulated by a diffuse negative feeling, as attempts to understand and rid oneself of such bad feeling; even so, one can resist the temptation to so respond, and give the feeling time to naturally subside. The ego tends to identify with such unpleasant emotion, and uses it as a springboard for thoughts of frustration, hatred, fear or despair, etc. But all these are mere excuses

for mental activity, and one is wise to cultivate inner calm and equanimity.

Our ordinary way of confronting the world is very selfish, self-centered or conceited – every thing or event is *related to oneself* in one way or the other. We are affected by each and every presentation. In meditation, after a while, our self becomes transparent – more selfless, indifferent and humble. Sensations, emotions, memories, fantasies and thoughts come and go, but we do not attach ourselves to them, because we do not attach as much importance to them.

3. Abstract *vs.* Concrete Self

I finally managed to conceive (on a theoretical level, without making personal claims to the direct experience concerned) how the Buddhist idea of 'emptiness' of self (in subjects, and indeed in objects of consciousness) might be convincingly presented and consistently argued, when I read the following passage from ***Patanjali's Yoga Sutra***[58]:

> *"A succession of consiousnesses, generating a vast array of distinctive perceptions, appear to consolidate into one individual consciousness" (IV, 5).*

It occurred to me that the logical demands that every event of consciousness requires a subject (i.e. a soul being conscious) as well as an object (i.e. the content of consciousness), and that every event of volition requires an agent as well as an act, could still be met in the context

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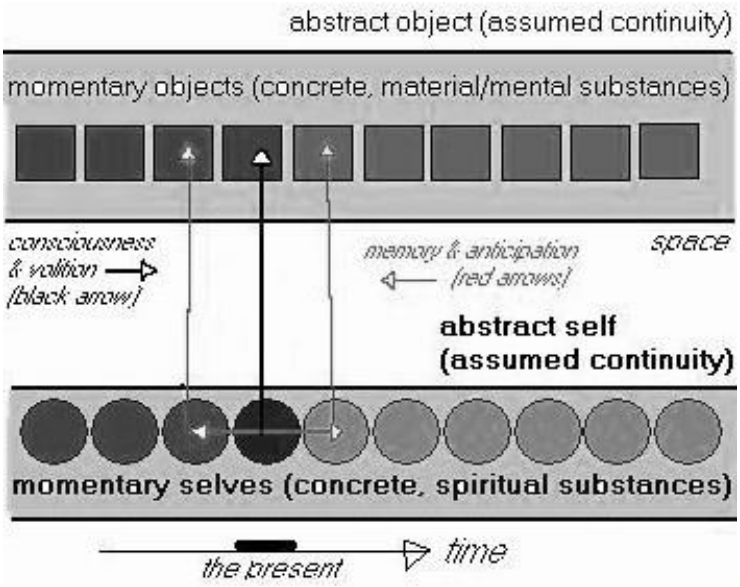
[58] This text is available at time of writing at ***www.arlingtoncenter.org***.

of 'emptiness' of self, if we assume the schema in Figure 4, below.

Figure 4. How momentary subjects and objects give rise to abstractions.



Note: This is a very rough illustration, to facilitate discussion. The self has no phenomenal qualities in our experience; so, all its spatial features here are merely symbolic. The drawing is not intended to assign a specific shape and size to the concrete or abstract soul (respectively, the successive circles and the virtual tube linking them together), since the self has no extension. Similarly, the space

> between the subject and object is not to be considered literal, since the self has no location or distance[59]. The black arrow signifies consciousness and volition, probing and changing objects external to the soul; while the red arrows are virtual representations of memory and anticipation reaching the past or future, respectively, through the continuity of the soul or at least the succession of soul moments (more on this further on).

As I have argued in *Buddhist Illogic* and in *Phenomenology*, consciousness has to be understood to signify a subject as well as an object. When something appears, it appears *to* someone. Otherwise, it merely exists – it does not 'appear'. Patanjali seems to agree with the implied objectivist position, when he writes further on:

> *"But the object is not dependent on [people's different] perceptions; if it were, what would happen to it when nobody was looking?" (IV, 16.)*

Granting the existence of a subject of consciousness, and similarly of an agent of volition, – i.e. me in my case, you in yours – the issue arises: how is this entity known? It does not seem to manifest any phenomenal qualities, i.e. it is not perceivable by any of the material senses or in the analogous modes within the mind. Is it only, then, known by conceptual inference from perceived phenomena? No – I have argued in those works – this would not suffice to

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59 We roughly locate the self or soul in our body (including head), because it seems at the center of all our sensory experiences (behind the eyes, between the ears, in the nose, under the tongue and the skin), and because our imaginations and verbal thoughts all seem to be going on inside the head.

explain how we routinely experience self-knowledge, i.e. our awareness of our *individual* acts of perception and conception, logical insights, choices and volitions, preferences and feelings.

Therefore, we must have *not just a general theoretical knowledge of the self, but direct access to it time after time*. Since this direct access cannot be subsumed under 'perception' – having no phenomenal evidence to rely on – it must be called by another name, say 'intuition'. Furthermore, since the self, as subject (or as agent), has none of the perceptible qualities of objects (including acts), it should be distinguished from them with regard to substance. Whereas concrete objects (or acts) are labeled 'material' if sensory or 'mental' if imaginary, concrete subjects (or agents) are to be labeled 'spiritual' (souls).

Now, until the above-mentioned insight generated in me by Patanjali's text, I assumed all this to imply that the soul needs be an entity existing continuously for some extended duration of time. In such case, the Buddhist idea that the soul is 'empty' of substance could not be conceptually expressed and logically upheld. But now I realize that a compromise position is possible, which reduces the apparent conflict between theoretical construct and alleged mystical experience.

This reconciliation is possible if we clearly distinguish between the intuited *momentary* existence of **concrete soul** from the assumed *continuous* existence of **abstract soul**. The same distinction can be made for the object – i.e. perception only reveals the object's moment by moment concrete existence, whereas the apparent unity between its momentary manifestations is a product of abstraction.

It *suffices*, for logical consistency, that we posit a momentary, concrete spiritual substance being conscious *at that moment* of a momentary, concrete material or mental substance; or likewise *at that moment* willing changes in matter or mind.

With regard to consciousness, the momentary soul may *at the moment of its existence* equally intuit itself, its own acts or tendencies (cognitions, volitions and evaluations), and also *past* moments of soul experiencing objects, self, etc. (insofar as such past is inscribed as memory in the present), as well as *future* such moments (by anticipation, i.e. by present imaginative projection). Similarly, with regard to volition, the momentary soul wills whatever it does at the present moment of its existence, and has no need of past or future moments to do so. All that is intended and hopefully made clear in the above drawing.

Each momentary self exists while in the present, but the next moment it is effectively another momentary self that exists. However, each momentary self, seeing at that moment its *unity of form* with the preceding and following momentary selves, gets the false impression that it is *one* with them, i.e. may identify itself with them as previous and later expressions or parts of itself. Thus, the illusory notion that it is spread over time arises – due to a confusion between the abstract self and the sum of the concrete selves. Similarly, mutadis mutandis, with regard to objects be they mental or material.

According to this viewpoint, we need only assume that traces of the past are carried over into the present through some sort of ‘memory’ inscribed in successive present concrete subjects or as objects somewhere in their environments. There is thus no logical necessity for us to

assume that the different moments are bound together in one continuous *concrete* soul and in continuous concrete objects of consciousness. We can equally regard the apparent unities of subject (or of object) over time to be due to *abstract* commonalties between merely momentary concrete souls (or objects).

This is easy to grasp with reference to *the image of a wave at sea*. As 'it' rolls across the surface of the water, it visually seems like one continuous thing. But upon reflection, we know that the water composing the wave is constantly being replaced by water further on in its course. That is, contrary to appearance, the water constituting the wave does not travel along with the wave, but just bobs up and down. 'The wave' is thus just an abstraction, i.e. a mental projection by us based on perceived repetition of a certain shape over time.

But it should be pointed out that this analogy is not perfect. For, in the case of the wave of water, each successive water-content along the path of the wave exists before the wave passes through it and continues to exist after. Whereas, in the case of a subject or object in time, the present is the only position where existence is actual – the past having ceased to exist and the future being not-yet in existence.

Patanjali, in the initially quoted verse, seems to assume that time is actually divided into discrete 'moments' of some duration. This is apparently contrary to the assumption of modern physicists that time is an infinitely divisible continuum. The following verses seem to confirm that his position is that the continuity is illusory:

> *"The past and future are immanent in an object, existing as different sectors in the same flow of*

> *experiential substances" (IV, 12). "Their transformations tend to blur together, imbuing each new object with a quality of substantiality" (IV, 14).*

And further on, more explicitly:

> *"One can see that the flow is actually a series of discrete events, each corresponding to the merest instant of time, in which one form becomes another" (IV, 33).*

But I think it ultimately matters little in the present context whether we assume that time comprises a succession of separate events or a non-stop flow. For we can apply the above illustration and analysis in either case, i.e. whether we assume the series of circles or squares merely contiguous or infinitely overlapping. Perhaps we could explicate the 'moment' of Patanjali as the breadth of time that a given subject's consciousness is able to span in one go. That is, perhaps time is continuous but our consciousness functions subjectively in discrete bits.

The important thing is that we may now accept *two* theses or theoretical constructs relative to the given data.

- One is that of ordinary consciousness, which presumes that underlying the abstract self is a continuous concrete entity (likewise, with regard to an abstract object).
- The other construct is that claimed by Buddhists with reference to deep meditation, namely that no concrete continuity (but only a succession of discrete events) underlies the abstract continuity; i.e. that the apparent continuity is not real but illusory. Or in other words,

that the abstract self (or likewise, the abstract object) is 'empty'.

We need not at this stage judge between these two theories. What interests us is that *both are consistent with* the demand that consciousness imply both a subject and an object.

But in either case, the *concrete* soul is *not* 'empty' – there is at least a momentary entity beneath it. In other words, the 'momentary concrete soul' is the common ground of both the ordinary mindset (which however unifies different moments into one 'continuous concrete soul') and the Buddhist claim (which rejects such unification, regarding the apparent continuity as merely abstract).[60]

Note well that no special logical doctrine needs to be conjured to explicate the claim that an abstract concept may not be underlain by a concrete unity. We have an example of this assumption in the ordinary view that a *class* concept or common name refers to a shared characteristic without implying (contrary to the Platonic idea) that it refers to an actual archetype suspended somewhere. This is by way of contrast to the *individual* concept or proper name, which is ordinarily taken to signify that all the objects it groups and labels are manifestations or facets in space and time of a single entity. The following is a more specific example:

If I think of 'myself' in the rougher sense, I include all the sensations felt at various times in different locations in my

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[60] In either case, if we wish to support an ultimate monism, we can imagine all instances of subject and object, and the consciousness relating them, as 'bubbles' momentarily popping-up in an underlying unitary substrate of all existence.

body, the sight of my skin, the sound of my voice, the thoughts in my head, etc. Although these factors are scattered in time and place, I regard them as 'an individual' called Avi Sion. Furthermore, each slice of my life is somewhat different from the previous: the air in my lungs, the food in my stomach, the blood in my veins, and so forth, are constantly on the move. Likewise, in space: no cross-section of me is comparable; organs differ, I move my arms and legs, etc. Even so, I ordinarily think of me as singular; i.e. the abstraction 'Avi Sion' is in this case considered as referring to a concrete 'sausage' in space-time. Similarly, if I think of another human being or your pet dog or my car.

In contrast, if I think of the 'classes' with the common names 'human beings' or 'dogs' or 'cars', there is no intention (again, except for Platonists) to unify all instances into one big meta-individual. Thus, we commonly readily admit that there are abstract concepts without a single concrete referent, i.e. which merely intend a *similarity* between two or more concrete referents. The Buddhist proposition is simply that this latter understanding is also applicable to the case of 'individuals'.

The discussion becomes more complicated if we more carefully consider the time factor. Firstly, in our above illustration, the arrow symbolizing consciousness and volition is perpendicular to time's arrow; but that implies synchronicity, i.e. that these relations take no time to relate subject and (external) object, or agent and (external) act. It would perhaps be more accurate to suppose a delay, so that consciousness currently observes what is already slightly in the past and volition eventually affects what is still slightly in the future; i.e. we have two diverging

arrows. But such supposition is problematic, since the premise of discontinuity is that no intermediate time exists, no being in between the moments shown; i.e. that the present moment is an indivisibly unity.

Secondly, we have too easily assumed that memory and anticipation can somehow function across time, even while considering each moment of time as essentially independent of the previous or next one. The above illustration suggests the pathway of memory to go through cognition of the past when it was present, coupled with a transfer of information from past subject to now present subject. However, here again, with regard to retrospection, it would be inappropriate given the premise of discontinuity to propose that movement of information (communication) occurs from one moment to the next, with time's arrow. Similarly, anticipation cannot be considered as prospective or advance vision of the future itself, and yet when we mentally project a prediction (e.g. when willing), we intend it into a not yet existent future; this is even more problematic, seeming to imply movement of information against time's arrow.

In reply to such objections, some Buddhist philosophers would respond that there is no space and so no time delay between subject and object, since both are in one and the same "mind"; or again, that all moments of time are in fact one, being all illusions of that one and only "mind". But less extreme Buddhist theorists would rather emphasize that the discontinuity thesis is not simply that concrete events (of subject or object) are in fact discrete, suggesting a succession of lawlessly spontaneous and unrelated happenings. No, there is still some sort of 'continuity' to take into account. It is the "karmic" component – the idea that each successive event in a series is *causally*

determined by the preceding (and all environmental factors).

What this means exactly is open to discussion. It is debatable, for instance, whether freewill is allowed for or fatalism is implied. But more radically, if as Buddhists claim 'everything is causally connected to everything', the concept of causality loses all meaning, *since no distinction between causes and non-causes, or between types and degrees of causality, remains*. In short, while the idea seems plausible if we refer back to the image of a wave of water (where 'energy' – another abstraction, note well – is considered as passed on through the water), we are hard put to find a definition or develop a detailed understanding of causality that would correspond to the Buddhist viewpoint.[61]

Another issue to consider is epistemological. Granting we never experience anything other than the immediate present, i.e. that reminiscences and anticipations are events in the present that suck us in and give us the impression of transporting us into past or future, the question arises how do Buddhists know about karma, i.e. that the present is an effect of the past and the future a consequence of the present? It seems to me that they can only claim an *adductive* legitimacy to their karmic interpretation – in other words, not much more than the epistemological basis of the ordinary assumption of continuous essences and souls! By adductive, I mean given an empirical basis, to postulate a certain extrapolation from it, in the way of a coherent hypothesis to be compared to other hypotheses. That is to say, karmic theory is as much a 'conceptual construct' as the continuity theory it seeks to replace.

The thesis of discontinuity seems less credible to me than that of continuity, because it suggests that the whole universe (irrespective of its nature or size) instantly

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[61] I discuss these issues in more detail in my *The Logic of Causation*, chapter 16.3.

vanishes and then reemerges, or is destroyed and then recreated, at every moment. This means that instead of having to explain it once, we have to find a new explanation for it in every moment – and of course, we have no time for that in any one moment.

Moreover, we do not only need to explain the repeated *existence* of the universe, but its apparent *similarity* in any one moment to previous moments – for it always seems to contain traces of the past (e.g. footsteps in the snow, paleontological fossils, mental memories or photographic records) comparable to the present (e.g. you look like I remember you).

And finally, of course, comes the more complex issue of *causality*, to explain why similar entities in similar situations appear to behave similarly (*regularity*) and more difficult still, why some individual entities seem variously linked to individual events (*responsibility*). The thesis that there is some continuity across time thus requires less explanation; and being simpler, it is adductively preferable.

Thus, though all we experience of the self and the world is indeed momentary, the hypothesis of continuity remains conceivable and indeed more probable. The *epistemological* fact of transience of all phenomena and intuitions does not per se exclude the *ontological* possibility of certain continuities between them.

It is true that the 'self' especially has only a present existence, and no past or future within the present, since memories and imaginations (including projections of the future) are located outside of the soul, occurring in the mind and being stored in the brain. And indeed, even the soul's present impressions of itself (by intuition), its mind

(by inner perception) and its physical body and environment (by sensory perception), are open to considerable doubt, being often very transient and not always clear or memorable.

Also, since the soul has no information on itself or on the outside world within itself, there is some justification to regard past and future as essentially 'illusory', as the Buddhists do[62]. The latter term could be considered as somewhat hyperbolic, intending to stress the argument that they are *at best inductive constructs*. 'The past' so-called is constructed from present impressions of the present and apparent present 'memories' of some 'past' – but, judging by verification procedures in the present, the alleged past is *often* more fantasy and self-delusion than a fair estimate of what was. Similarly, and all the more so in the case of 'the future', which not only refers to the apparent past and present, but to incipient intentions of one's own and others' wills (which may or not be finally carried out).

However, such reasonable doubts that can be raised about the present, past and future of the self and its surrounds, cannot be reasonably be taken to an extreme, for the simple reason that that would make the statement of doubt logically self-contradictory. Therefore, we must admit that wherever consciousness occurs, it is based on *some* certainties, which does not necessarily mean total certainty. The inductive constructs that make up most of our 'knowledge' can indeed be erroneous, but it must be admitted (to remain consistent) that they progressively tend to truth.

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62 The contemplation of this illusoriness is, I believe, called *samapatti*.

4. Sundry Reflections on the Soul and God

The soul is what we regard as the essence of a person, the unitary substance that is both subject of consciousness and agent of volition. This soul need only be present during the life of the physical organism sustaining it, not before or after.

Ontologically, whether the soul is perishable or imperishable does not seem relevant to our study of its cognitive, volitional and evaluative capacities. Epistemologically, how would we know it as a fact either way? If there is no contradiction in either concept, and no evident immediate knowledge of it, we must revert to generalizations and hypotheses to establish it. From a philosophical point of view, the soul may be either short-lived or undying; equally. Some souls may be short-lived to different degrees (animals, humans), some undying (God's at least). There is no law of causality, nor law of knowledge, requiring all subjects or agents to be imperishable or to age equally.

Mortality does seem more empirically justified – in that people and animals evidently are observed to physically die. If the soul is an epiphenomenon of matter, it is probably mortal. Immortality implies literally an eternity of existence, and not merely life after death for some time; this seems a very unlikely hypothesis, unless we refer to the religious thesis that the soul originates in God and eventually merges back into Him, or similar ideas. The

issue remains forever (i.e. so long as we exist) open, speculative.[63]

I am not sure Judaism (at its Biblical core, at least) and allied religions ultimately believe in immortality, though they may believe in some transmigration, or at least in the ultimate resurrection of the dead. The 'messianic age' is projected as a period of happy existence for differentiated individuals, rather than as a nirvana wherein all will fuse with God. Just as at some past time, God was alone, so at some future time, He will again be alone: only He (or His Soul, pronoun and noun having one and the same referent) is Eternal. But on the other hand, logically, just as we came from God before we got to Eden, perhaps after the messianic age we shall indeed eventually return to Him.

> The philosophical position concerning the soul adopted in this volume is that it is either directly intuited by itself, or at least implied by its functions of cognition, volition and valuation, some of which are certainly directly intuited (i.e. experienced, although not as concrete phenomena). We could refer this position to the Cartesian "*cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am), if we understand the term 'thought' broadly enough, as referring to the three functions. Epistemologically, I infer that I am, due to having experiences, using logic and forming concepts

[63] Note that my position concerning knowledge of the existence of God is that we can neither prove nor disprove it; on this topic, see my *Judaic Logic*, chapter 14. My views concerning how we ordinarily arrive at knowledge of the nature of God are expounded in *Phenomenology*, chapter 9. Note that I make no claim that anyone has attained to prophetic knowledge, though I keep an open mind relative to this notion.

> (cognition), intending or doing actions (volition) and expressing preferences (valuation). Ontology reverses this order, acknowledging the self as logically prior to any and all such 'thoughts', as their implied subject or agent.

The notion of a soul no doubt has a history. I do not claim to know it, can only roughly guess at it. The idea of a personal soul is thought by historians to be rather recent – dating apparently from the time humans started burying their dead, or otherwise ritually disposing of them. Much later, philosophers (notably Aristotle[64]) developed the hierarchical distinction between vegetative soul, animal soul and human soul. The first level of soul (involving birth, nutrition, reproduction, growth, decay, death) was found in plants, beasts and humans; the second level (involving locomotion and sensation), only in the latter two; and the third level (involving reason, and exceptional liberty), only in the last.

Buddhism (or at least some currents of it), distinctively, denied the real existence of a soul, considering the 'self' apparently at the center of the individual's consciousness as an illusion[65]. According to the mentalist school

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[64] This distinction was later adopted by Jewish mystics, using the terms *ruach, nefesh and neshamah* (although they seem to interpret them in very divergent ways, however convenient – probably because the terms are not clearly defined, and seemingly interchangeable, in the Bible, from which they are drawn). Similar ideas are found in other cultures, but here again I can only guess the history.

[65] Although, if we examine some of the arguments put forward in support of the no-self claim, their illogic is glaring! This is particularly true of the pseudo-reasoning of the foremost philosopher of the Madhyamika school, the Indian Nagarjuna (2nd Cent. CE). To give an example I recently came across in a

(Yogacara), the apparent self is based on eight modes of consciousness – the five due to sensory perceptions; the mental faculty correlating and interpreting them (like the 'common sense' of Aristotle); and two more. The seventh mode (called *manas*) refers to the deluded impression of having a separate self, giving rise to conceit, selfishness, and similar afflictions. The eighth mode (called *citta* or *alayavijnana*) is considered the repository of 'karma', making possible the delays in consequences of actions.

Thus, the 'seventh consciousness' may roughly be equated to the ordinary concept of present soul, although it is declared illusory[66]; and the 'eighth consciousness' may be ultimately compared to the religious concept of a soul that passes on from body to body, although a carryover of

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book by the Dalai Lama (pp. 54-5): "The Vaibhashikas therefore understand final nirvana in terms of the total cessation of the individual. A well-known objection by Nagarjuna… [if so] no one ever attains nirvana, because when nirvana is attained the individual ceases to exist." Nagarjuna is a joker, who likes to play with words (see my *Buddhist Illogic* for many more examples). He here suggests that 'attainment' is only conceivable through alteration (where the subject remains essentially the same, while changing superficially). But it is logically quite conceivable that the individual disappears upon crossing over into nirvana: that would simply be a case of mutation (where the one-time subject becomes something else entirely at a later time). There is nothing absurd in the said Vaibhashika position. (Note incidentally that that position is analogous to the theistic idea of merging back into God, mentioned higher up.)

[66] The accusation of illusion is due to their considering the notion of self as a product of conception *from mental and sensory perceptions* (i.e. *dharmas*, phenomena), rather than as I propose as something known by direct self-intuition (i.e. experience with a *non*-phenomenal content).

potentiality is implied rather than perpetuation of actual existence. This series might be completed by the notion of the 'original ground' or 'causal ground' of consciousness and existence, the Nirvana of one-mind and no-mind – which could be considered as related to our concept of God. Although Buddhists would likely deny it, the analogy seems to be apposite, because it shows the recurrence and uniformity of certain concepts in all human cultures.

Another Indian culture, Hinduism, as well as other peoples and philosophies, consider God more frankly as the Soul of the universe, the common root of all particular souls. In Judaism and sister religions, God is projected as a conscious Presence overseeing (in a cognitive and volitional sense, and in the evaluative sense of lawgiver) the whole world, much as each of us has a soul reigning over his or her own little world. Some suggest, as already mentioned, that our own soul is but a spark[67] out of God's.

Some consider God as transcendent, others as immanent. The latter end up equating God with Nature, in the way of pantheism (Baruch Spinoza comes to mind, here). The human belief in God may have historically developed out of animism, itself probably a generalization of the vague notion of a personal soul.

Peoples living close to Nature (the Indians of North America, for instance) tended to perceive an *undifferentiated* godliness in all life and indeed in all of nature. Everything had a soul—a bubbling stream or a roaring ocean, a majestically immovable mountain, a

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[67] The idea of a 'spark' is drawn from Lurianic kabbalistic philosophy.

pebble rolling downhill, the Sun, the Moon, the vast sky, one day blue, one day grey and rainy, rolling clouds and thunder in the sky, the wind brushing though the forest, a bud flowering, a soaring eagle, a roaming cougar, field mice scattering, a fish jumping up. God was everywhere to be seen and encountered.

Such ideas may have in time become concretized, with the notion of *discrete* "spirits" residing in a stone or tree or river or mountain. Each thing was thought to have consciousness and volition, just as people intuited these powers within themselves (probably long before they named them). People might then seek to talk with bodies of inanimate matter as with animals; for instance, to respectfully ask permission to interact with them in some way. Or they might have to trick or fight them into doing what they wished them to. Eventually, these small, scattered "gods" were taken home or at least represented in stone or wooden idols (as apparently in Africa).

Some gods, like perhaps those of Nordic peoples, may of course have evolved out of historical persons – kings or heroes who were remembered in stories and eventually became larger-than-life myths. Later, as in Greece and Rome, more abstract gods evolved, who represented broad domains of the world (like the heavens or the sea) or of human activity (like love or war).

Eventually, apparently thanks to the Hebrews, *monotheism* was born, i.e. belief in a single and sole universal spiritual God. Founded by the patriarch Abraham, Judaism became a more organized national

religion a few centuries later[68]. Eventually, through Christianity and Islam, both much later offshoots of Judaism, abstract monotheism gained ascendancy in large parts of the world. Christianity is closer to Judaism than Islam in some respects, further in others. The former is more explicitly rooted in Judaic textual details, whereas the latter uses them more as a tacit springboard. Christianity retains some concrete ideas and images relative to its founder Jesus, while Islam like Judaism eschews all such deification or representation.

Still today, in India for instance, the pantheon of gods and the ubiquity of images of them is striking. Although Hinduism has also long ago reached the idea of abstract monotheism, it has not made it exclusive. Buddhism, for its part, attained a high level of abstraction, but without personalizing it as God (at least not originally, although many Buddhist offshoots have in practice identified the founder Buddha with God). This is consistent with the Buddhist doctrine that even the human soul is ultimately "empty" of personality. However, Buddhists have remained influenced by ancient idolatry, in view of the statues of Buddha they worship (and thus mentally project 'soul' into, note)[69].

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[68] A more concrete 'monotheistic' religion, consisting of worship of the Sun exclusively, appeared briefly in Egypt at about that time. But the question is, who inspired whom? It is certainly equally conceivable that a small foreign contingent (Hebrew slaves) culturally influenced the larger host (some of the Egyptians).

[69] To be fair, it may be that in the minds of some practitioners of meditation, statues and flat images are not objects of worship, but mere aids to achieving the depicted stillness, silence and concentration. One would have to ask individual practitioners what their real intentions are. All the

Jewish monotheism is not about God being the Soul of Nature. Nature (*hateva*) is sometimes said to be one of the 'names' of God – but this is taken to mean (e.g. by Maimonides) that Nature is in God's power. In Judaism, God is *absolutely abstract and without any concrete manifestation whatsoever* – no incarnation in human or any other form, and nothing that can be represented by an image. Or more precisely, God is purely spiritual and never material. He is nevertheless the Creator of the world of nature, and remains all-knowing and all-powerful in it. Omniscient – not merely in the sense of knowing generalities (as Aristotle suggested), but also in the sense of knowing every particular; and thus able to exercise providence down to the last detail – as befits omnipotence.

This is analogous to the human soul, which has no phenomenal aspects[70] of its own, although it is capable of knowing and interacting with the phenomenal world. However, the analogy is not total, since Judaism teaches that the world is not God's body, and moreover that humans did not create their own bodies, but God created both their bodies and their souls (Genesis 2:7):

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same, it would seem likely that someone starting with imitation in mind, will develop an emotional attachment to the representative object and end up personifying it and bowing down to it. Which, to my mind, is silly, to say the least.

[70] In this respect, Judaism has similarities to Buddhism; although unlike the latter, the former recognizes a non-phenomenal 'spiritual' substance for soul. Another possible analogy is that between the "Ayin" (non-existence, nothingness) of Jewish kabbalah and the "Shunyata" (emptiness) of Buddhism.

> *"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."*

So, it is conceivable to Jews that whereas God is eternal, humans are not; and it is also conceivable that God's 'breathing life' into us was animating our bodies with a bit of His eternal Soul.

As these reflections show, the histories of the notion of soul and of that of God are closely intertwined. One of the functions of religion and/or metaphysics is to propose origins for soul and God, and explain how they are known.

Catholic Christians, to varying degrees, use *material* representations of Jesus in their homes, churches and processions. This may historically be an inheritance from the representation and worship of Roman emperors, which was widespread and seemed normal in the world Christianity took over. Protestants, later on and for various (political as well as spiritual) reasons, have for the most part eschewed three-dimensional sculptures and dolls, but they still resort to *mental* representations as well as to two-dimensional pictures. Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism similarly resort to incarnations of numerous divinities, giving them bodily form or thinking of them concretely.

These are *perceptual* ideas about divinity. Judaism, and later on Islam, on the basis of the narratives in their scriptures (the Torah and the Koran, respectively) ascribe perceptible *behavior* to God, in the way of manifest miracles (if only the sending of an angel or a prophetic vision, or the decree of a legal system), but they exclude any physical or mental representation of God, which they reprove as "idolatrous". The idea(s) of God transmitted by

their holy books, and later reinforced by interpretative commentaries, are essentially *conceptual*.

As philosophers we might ask: what is the rationale for the worship of statues or other representations? Does the worshipper consider that material (or mental) object itself to be what he or she is worshipping (fetishism), or to contain the divinity aimed at or be an emanation of it or a channel to it – or does the concrete object at hand merely serve as a mnemonic or as an expedient means to focus personal attention on a divinity far beyond it?

One would have to enter people's minds to find out for sure (for their own introspections and oral reports are not necessarily reliable). I would suspect that there is a wide range of attitudes in different people, some imagining a more literal interpretation, others being more conscious of the possible distinctions. The spiritual issue is: does this practice 'weigh down' the soul, preventing it from 'rising' to the formless?[71]

> I should add that I personally suspect that people who believe in some incarnation(s) of God, or in narrow gods or idols, and even atheists or agnostics, *often or at least occasionally* lift their eyes and prayers to the heavens, effectively intending to appeal to or thank God. That is to say,

[71] The essential purpose of idolatry, I would say, is to *imprint* people's minds with alleged representations of gods or God. It is a powerful form of advertising, which produces psychic dependence on the idol, so that it is voluntarily or involuntarily recalled and appealed to in various circumstances. This incidentally benefits the clerical class tending and serving the idol; although, to be fair, the members of that class are rarely hypocritical, but themselves true (indeed, usually truer) believers.

> adherence in principle to some non- or not-quite monotheistic doctrine does not exclude the occasional intuition and practice of monotheism. The issue here is not the culturally specific name given to the Deity, or the theoretical constructions usually associated with that name, but the actual intention of the praying soul at the moment concerned. I think all or most humans have that understanding and reaction in common.

Philosophical theism or theology offers no narrative, no stories, concerning God; it is therefore, of course, free of any concrete representations. It consists of frank, changing *speculations* of a general sort, as to whether *in the context of ordinary human cognitive faculties* an abstract God can be definitely known to exist – or for that matter, not to exist.

Extraordinary forms of knowledge (allegedly attained, for instances, through prophecy or meditation) are not inconceivable, but hard to prove to us ordinary people; they therefore remain speculations. Honest philosophers have no prejudice on the subject, and freely admit room for doubt. Nevertheless, they find it possible to formulate consistent theories, which *might* be true about God and soul. On this basis, though no dogma is allowed, various *personal faiths* are possible.

In this way, without imposing any particular religious doctrine, philosophy may yet save the fact of religion from annihilation by pseudo-thinkers. Here, religion is denuded of all extraneous material (that which has made it disreputable), and limited to certain essential propositions given credence through philosophical discourse. The

spiritual dimension of human existence is thus confirmed and reaffirmed.

6. CHAPTER SIX

Drawn from *Meditations* (2006),
Chapters 8 & 9.

1. The Individual Self in Monism

Granting the Monist thesis [briefly described in the preceding chapters], we can understand that our respective apparent individual selves, whether they are viewed as souls (entities with a spiritual substance distinct from mind and matter) or as something altogether non-substantial (as Buddhism suggests), have a relative mode of existence in comparison to the Soul of God (in Monotheistic religions), or to the underlying Original Ground of such being or the Tao (in competing doctrines).

If our selves are relative to some absolute Self (or a "Non-self", in Buddhism), they are *illusory*. In what sense, illusory? We might say that the illusion consists in artificially differentiating the particular out of the Universal – i.e. it consists in a para-cognitive somewhat arbitrary act of ***individuation***. Apparently, then, tiny fractions of the original Totality have given themselves the false impression of being cut off from their common Source. They (that is, we all) have lost touch with their true Identity, and become confused by their limited

viewpoint into believing themselves to have a *separate identity*.[72]

To illustrate the illusoriness of individuation, we can point to waves in a body of water. A wave is evidently one with the body of water, yet we artificially mentally outline it and conventionally distinguish it, then we give it a name "the wave" and treat it as something else than the water. *There is indeed a bump in the water; but in reality, the boundaries we assign it are arbitrary.* Similarly, goes the argument, with all things material, mental or spiritual.

The **Buddhist** thesis on this topic is generally claimed to differ somewhat, considering that all empirical appearances of selfhood are phenomenal, and nothing but phenomenal. And since phenomena are impermanent like wisps of smoke – arising (we know not whence – thus, from nowhere), abiding only temporarily, all the while changing in many ways, and finally disappearing (we know not wither – thus, to nowhere) – we may not assume any constancy behind or beneath them. Our particular self is thus empty of any substance; and similarly, there is no universal Soul.

This thesis is of course sufficiently empirical with regard to the fact of impermanence of phenomena; but (in my view) there is a conceptual loophole in it. We can point out that it rejects any idea of underlying constancy without

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[72] Rather than suggest like Bishop Berkeley that we are ideas in the mind of God, the viewpoint here advocated is that we are, as it were, ideas in our own minds. God invented us, yes, and allowed for our seeming individuation; but He has no illusions about our separateness. It is we, in our limited and therefore warped perspective, who misperceive ourselves as individuals.

sufficient justification (i.e. by way of a *non-sequitur*); and we can advocate instead an underlying substance (material, mental or spiritual), with equally insufficient justification, or maybe more justification (namely, that this helps explain more things).[73]

Furthermore, we may, and I think logically must, admit that we are aware of our selves, not only through perception of outer and inner phenomena, but also through another direct kind of cognition, which we may call 'intuition', of *non-phenomenal* aspects. There is no reason to suppose offhand only phenomenal aspects exist and are directly cognizable. Indeed, we must admit intuition, to explain how we know what we have perceived, willed or valued *in particular cases*. Conceptual means *cannot* entirely explain such particulars; they can only yield generalities.

Thus, while understanding and respecting the Buddhist non-self doctrine, I personally prefer to believe in the spirituality of the individual self and in God. I may additionally propose the following arguments. To start with, these ideas (of soul and God) do not logically exclude, but *include* the notion of "emptiness"; i.e. it remains true that particular souls and the universal Soul *cannot* be reduced to phenomenal experiences.

Moreover, Monotheism is logically more convincing, because the Buddhist thesis takes for granted without further ado something that the God thesis makes an effort to explain. The manifest facts of consciousness, volition and valuation in us, i.e. in seemingly finite individuals,

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[73] We shall further debate the issue of impermanence later on.

remain unexplained in Buddhism, whereas in the Monotheistic thesis the personal powers of individuals are thought to stem from the like powers of God. That is, since finite souls are (ultimately illusory) fractions of God, their powers of cognition, freewill, and valuing (though proportionately finite) derive from the same powers (on an infinitely grander scale) in the overall Soul, i.e. God.

In truth, Buddhists could retort that though this argument *reduces* the three human powers to the corresponding (greater) powers of God, it leaves unexplained the existence of these same powers in Him. They are derivatives in humans, all right, but still primaries in God.

Yes, but a distinction remains. Monotheism views the ultimate Source as having a personality, whereas for Buddhism, the Original Ground is impersonal. For the former, there is a "Who", while for the latter, only a "What" if anything at all. It seems improbable (to me, at least) that a person would derive from a non-person. Rather, the particular soul has to have this sense of personal identity in the way of a reflection of the universal soul's personality.

But in truth, we can still intellectually reconcile the two doctrines, if we admit that such arguments are finally just verbal differentiations and that we should rather stress their convergences and complementarities.[74]

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[74] Needless to say, I do not intend this statement as a blanket approval, condoning all beliefs and practices included in practice under the heading of Buddhism. I have in past works for instance voiced my reserves regarding the worship directed at statues (idolatry). Even from a Buddhist point of view, this is a weird and spiritually obstructive practice (since it involves mental projection of "selfhood" into purely physical bodies).

In any case, the apparent meditative success of Buddhists does not logically exclude the logical possibility that their doctrine denying soul and God may well be an error of interpretation – since other religions also report meditative successes although they resorted to other interpretations. If we generously accept all or most such human claims at their face value, we logically have to conclude that ***correct interpretation is not necessary for meditative success***.

This suggests that meditation is ultimately independent of doctrinal quarrels. Competing, even conflicting, doctrines may be equally helpful – depending on cultural or personal context. Therefore, meditation is ultimately a pragmatic issue; it does not need particular dogmas to yield its results. Whatever your religious preference, or lack of it, just add one ingredient – meditation; this single measure will over time naturally perform wonders anyway.

The modern **Secularist** denial of spiritual substance (a soul in humans and God) can be depicted as follows. We are in this case dealing with a materialist philosophy, which grants solid reality only to the phenomenal (and conceptual inferences from it). The material phenomenon is regarded as exclusive of any other, although if pressed secularists will acknowledge some sort of additional, mental substance, imagined as a sort of cloud of "consciousness" hovering in the heads of certain material entities (i.e. at least humans and possibly higher animals).

This substance is conceived as a sort of epiphenomenon of specific combinations of matter (namely, those making up a live human body, and in particular its neurological

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Moreover, I do not see how this can be an improvement on the worship of God. If devotion is a good thing, surely the latter is its best expression.

system). They effectively consider mind as a rarified sort of matter. The proponents of this thesis make no clear distinction between the stuff of memories, dreams and imaginings, on the one hand, and the one experiencing these inner phenomena and indeed (via the senses) outer phenomena, on the other. And therefore, they reject all notion of an additional spiritual substance or soul as the essence of self.

This philosophy can thus be doubted on two grounds. Firstly, it fails to clearly and honestly analyze mental experience and draw the necessary conclusions from such analysis. Notably missing is the distinction between the intuited "cognizing, willing and valuing self" and his (or her) "perceived mental (and sensory) experiences", i.e. the distinction between soul and mind within the psyche. Secondly, while secularism does tend to monism in respect of matter, it refuses a similar monist extrapolation with respect to souls, and so denies God.

Today's Secularists of course pose as "scientists"[75], and by this means give their doctrine prestige among non-philosophers and superficial philosophers. But this stance is not scientific, in the strict sense of the term. *Physical science has to date not produced a single mathematical formula showing the reducibility of life, mind, consciousness, or spirit/soul to matter.* Materialists just

[75] Some are indeed scientists – in their specific field, such as Physics. But this does not entitle them to a free ride in the general field of Philosophy. I am thinking here of Hubert Reeves, who appears on TV claiming atheism as incontrovertible fact, as if any other view is simply unthinkable. Laypersons should not confuse his prestige and media-presence with logical confirmation of his view. The underlying fallacy is *ad hominem* argument.

presume that such a universal reductive formula will "someday" be shown possible. Maybe so; but until that day, they cannot logically rely on their presumption as if it were established fact.

They *think* their materialism is "sure" to be eventually proved all-inclusive – but this expectation and hope of theirs has for the moment, to repeat, no scientific justification whatsoever! It is just a figment of their imagination, an act of faith, a mere hypothetical postulate. Secularism is thus *just another religion*, not an exclusive inference from Science.

"Science" is entirely defined by rigor in cognitive method, without prejudice. It demands all available data be taken into consideration by our theories, and duly explained by these theories. Genuine philosophers are not intimidated by the intellectual thuggery of those who pretend that science is exclusively materialist.

In the case of the Materialist theory, the evident data of life, mind, consciousness and spirit or soul has hardly even been acknowledged by its advocates, let alone taken into consideration. It has simply been ignored, swept under the carpet, by them. That is not science – it is sophistry. What is speculative must be admitted to be such. And two speculations that equally fit available data are on the same footing as regards the judgment of science.

2. The Impression of Self

What do we mean by "**the self**"? This term refers primarily to ***that which seems to cognize, to will and to value*** at any given moment. That is, these functions seem to emanate,

at any given time, from a single point or place, deep within "one's own" bodily and mental experiences, which we each call "I" or "me" or "myself".

The self is the one who is conscious, the one experiencing, the one sensing, the one feeling, the one imagining, the one conceiving and thinking, the one liking or desiring, wishing or hoping, the one taking action, etc.… or the one abstaining from such functions. Thus, the self is the Subject of consciousness, the Agent[76] of volitional acts and the Valuator of value judgments.

It is an error of observation to claim that cognitions, volitions and valuations can occur without a 'person' doing the cognizing, willing or valuing. Clear and honest observation recognizes that the distinctive nature of these events is to be relative to a self.

The self is an object of direct, subjective experience, or self-intuition, not to be confused with the phenomena due to sensation of matter or to mental experience. It is not something merely conceptually inferred from such experienced phenomena, but something *non-phenomenal* that is itself experienced.

Note well: our "I" is not a single phenomenon, or an aggregate of phenomena or even a mere abstraction from phenomenal experiences; it is an ongoing non-

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[76] Note well, the word Agent as used here simply refers to 'the one who acts' – the actor of action, the doer of the deed. Agency here implies volition – a machine (or any other deterministic entity) is not considered an agent of its actions, except in a metaphorical way. Moreover, the colloquial connotation of agency as 'acting on behalf of someone else' is *not* intended here, though such instrumentality is logically subsumed under volitional action.

phenomenal experience. (It may well be, however, that the self would be transparent to itself, were it not subjected to phenomenal experiences that it has to cognize and deal with, through consciousness, volition and evaluation[77].)

The self, as here technically defined, *exists for at least a moment of time*. Logically, it does not necessarily follow from such punctual data that the selves intuited at different, even contiguous, moments of time are one and the same self. That is, the *continuity* of self is an additional, perhaps more conceptual idea – although we generally (all except Buddhists) subscribe to such subsistence.

This in turn, note well, does not logically necessarily imply eternity since the beginning or to the end of time – although again, many (but far from all) people subscribe to this additional idea. In addition to our punctual and continuous ideas of self, note also that we think of self as something *cumulative* – our past momentary selves seem to accrete over time, making us heavier with responsibilities as we grow older.

Self-consciousness, here, note well, simply means "consciousness of self" – i.e. with reference to any reflexive act of consciousness, in which the self is both the Subject and the object, which is assumably a direct and immediate cognitive (intuitive) act. Self-consciousness can also mean consciousness (i.e. intuition, here again) of

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77 The self may, in this sense, be said to be 'relative' – not meaning that (once and so long as it occurs) its existence is not 'independent', but that *its own awareness of its own existence* is dependent on external stimuli.

any of the three functions of the self, viz. cognition, volition and valuation.[78]

These three functions, or ways of expression, of the self do not operate independently of each other but are interrelated in various ways. They may occur simultaneously or in complex chains. Cognition is the primary function, but may also occur after volition (e.g. acts of research) and valuation (e.g. deciding what to research). Volition usually implies prior cognition, but is sometimes "blind" (whimsical). Valuation is a particular sort of volition, since it implies choice; and it always implies cognition, if only the awareness of something to evaluate (but usually also awareness of various considerations).

The above proposed definition of the self refers to the essence of selfhood. In relation to this essential self, everything else is "the world out there", "Object", "other".

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[78] The phrase "self-consciousness" is additionally sometimes used, in philosophy and science, to refer to consciousness that one is conscious of some other object – i.e. to "consciousness of consciousness". The latter might be an instant event, made possible by the Subject's dividing his attention, partly on some object and partly on his consciousness of that object; or it might involve a time-lag, assuming that the Subject is first conscious of some object, and a bit later retrospectively conscious of that first consciousness (either directly while it is still "echoing" in his mind, or indirectly through longer-term memory). Another, more colloquial and pejorative, sense of the term "self-consciousness" refers to the awareness we may have of some other person (or persons) observing us, which causes us to behave in a more awkward manner, i.e. without our customary spontaneity or naturalness, because we use our will to make sure the observer gets a certain "favorable" (in whatever sense) image of us.

It is our deepest inside, deeper even than the mind and body. Aspects of mind and body are also often colloquially called self, but this is a misnomer. Self, as here understood, may therefore be equated to what we commonly call the "**soul**", without prejudicing the issue as to what such assumed entity might be construed as.

One widespread theory is that the soul is composed of some non-material, call it 'spiritual', substance. This might be hypothesized as having spatial as well as temporal location and extension, or as somehow located and extended in time but not in space[79]. Another possible way to view it is as a special sort of 'knot' in the fabric of space-time, a knot with different properties than those of so-called material entities. Some philosophers (notably, Buddhist and Materialist ones) altogether deny the soul's existence[80].

Whatever the theoretical differences between competing traditions, concerning the existence and nature of the self, they generally agree on the value and need in practice – i.e. during meditation – to forget, if not actually erase, oneself. This is of course no easy task. Certainly, at the earlier stages of meditation, when we are appalled to discover the mental storms in a teacup our ego concerns constantly produce, it seems like a mission impossible. But there are ways and means to gradually facilitate the required result.

At the deepest level, one has to eventually *give up on the Subject-Object or self-other division*. If Monism is

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[79] Or again, we might like the poet Khalil Gibran consider the soul as "a sea boundless and measureless".

[80] But in my opinion, they fail to adequately explain the peculiarities of cognition, volition and valuation.

considered as the ultimate philosophical truth, then there must indeed be a plane of reality where this duality noticeably dissolves. On a practical level, one undoubtedly cannot logically expect to reach the experience of oneness, until one has managed to surrender attachment to the common impression of duality between self and other, or Subject and Object.

Such surrender is not a psychological impossibility or an artificial mental acrobatic. This is made clear, if we reflect on the fact that the Subject-Object or self-other division constitutes *ratiocination*, i.e. a rational act[81].

Just as our 'reason' divides outer experiences into different sense-modalities, or each modality into different qualities and measures (e.g. in the visual field: colors and intensities, shapes and sizes); or again, just as it makes a distinction between outer and inner experiences (e.g. between physical sights and mental visions) – so, our rational faculty is responsible for the self-other impression. This does not have to be taken to mean that our reason is inventing a false division, producing an illusion; yet, it does mean that without the regard of a rational Subject, such distinction would never arise in the universe.

These insights imply that there is *no need* to epistemologically invalidate the Subject-Object distinction[82] to realize that we can still eventually (if only

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81 See my *Ruminations*, chapter 9.

82 The Buddhists regard it invalid – but I would minimally argue that it has some credibility, like any appearance has until it is found to lead to antinomy. Indeed, I would go further and argue that any attempt at such invalidation is unjustifiable, and even logically impossible.

in the course of meditation) hope to be able to free ourselves in practice from this automatic reaction. We wish to at some stage give up the distinction, not because it is intrinsically wrong or bad, but because we wish to get beyond it, into the mental rest or peace of non-discriminative consciousness.

Sitting in meditation, one's "self" usually seems to be an ever present and weighty experience, distinct from relatively external mental and material experiences. But if one realizes that such self-experience is a rational (i.e. ratiocinative) product, a mental subdivision of the natural unity of all experience at any given moment, one can indeed shake off – or more precisely just drop – this sense of self, and *experience all one's experience as a unity*.[83]

Note well, the task at hand is not to *ex post facto* deconstruct the rational act of division, or reconstruct the lost unity of self and other by somehow mentally sticking or merging them together, or pretend that the Subject or the Object does not really exist. Rather, the meditator has to place his soul in the pre-ratiocinative position, where the cutting-up of experience has *not yet* occurred. It is not a place of counter-comments, but a place of no (verbal or non-verbal) comment. It is the position of pristine experience, where the mental reflex of sorting data out has not yet even begun.

All things are accepted as they appear. An impression of self appears, as against an impression of other? So well and good – it need not be emphasized or noted in any way. It is just experienced. If no distinctions are made, there are

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[83] This would of course be one aspect of overall "integration" (what is called *Samadhi* in Sanskrit, *Wu* in Chinese, *Satori* in Japanese).

no distinctions. We remain observant, that's all. We enjoy the scenery. Our awareness is phenomenological.

In pure experience, what we call "multiplicity" may well be manifest, but it is all part and parcel of the essential "unity". Here, essence and manifestation are one and the same. Here, Subject and Object form a natural continuum. The totality is in harmony, bubbling with life. It is what it is, whatever it happens to be.

Before getting to this stage of integral experience, one may of course have to "work on oneself" long and hard.

7. CHAPTER SEVEN

Drawn from *Meditations* (2006),
Chapters 11, 12 & 13.

1. Not an Essence, but an Entity

Buddhist philosophers have stressed the idea of impermanence, with a view to deny the existence of "essences" in both the objective and subjective domains. However, an impermanent essence is not a contradiction in terms. This means that the question of essences is more complex than merely an issue of impermanence. Several epistemological and ontological issues are involved in this question. We have indicated some of these issues in the preceding chapters.

With regard to the objective domain, comprising the material and mental objects of experience, i.e. the phenomena apparently experienced through the senses or in the mind – their reasoning is that we never perceive firm "essences" but only constantly changing phenomena; whence, they conclude, the objects we refer to are "empty".

In reply, I would say that it is true that many people seem to imagine that the "entities" we refer to in thought (e.g. a dog) have some unchanging core (call it "dog-ness"), which remains constant while the superficial changes and movements we observe occur, and which allow us to

classify a number of particulars under a common heading (i.e. all particular dogs as "dogs").

But of course, if we examine our thought processes more carefully, we have to modify this viewpoint somewhat. We do "define" a particular object by referring to some seemingly constant property (or conjunction of properties) in it – which is preferably actual and static, though (by the way) it might even be a habitual action or repetitive motion or a mere potential.

Note too, there may be more than one property eligible for use as a definition – so long as each property is constant throughout the existence of that object and is exclusive to it. The defining property does not shine out as special in some way; and in some cases, we might well arbitrarily choose one candidate among many.

However, defining is never as direct and simple an insight as it may at times seem. It requires a complex rational activity, involving comparison and contrast between different aspects and phases of the individual object, and between this object and others that seem similar to it in some respects though different from it in others, and between that class of object and all others. Thus, the property used as definition is knowable only through complex conceptual means.

Therefore, our mental separation of one property from the whole object or set of objects is an artifice. And, moreover, our referring to all apparently similar occurrences of that property as "one" property gives the impression of objective unity, when in fact the one-ness is only in the mind of the beholder (though this does not make it unreal). In short, the definition is only an abstraction. It indeed in a sense exists in the object as a

whole, but it is only distinguishable from the whole through cognition and ratiocination.

The material and mental objects we perceive are, therefore, in fact nothing other than more or less arbitrary collections of phenomena, among which one or more is/are selected by us on various grounds as "essential". The "essence" is a potential that can only be actualized relative to a rational observer; it has no independent actual existence when no observer is present. Definition gives us a mental "handle" on objects, but it is not a substitute for them.

An entity is not *only* its definition. An entity is the sum total of innumerable qualities and events related to it; some of these are applicable to it throughout its existence (be that existence transient or eternal) and some of them are applicable to it during only part(s) of its existence (i.e. have a shorter duration). Although the defining property must be general (and exclusive) to the object defined, it does not follow that properties that are not or cannot be used for definition cease to equally "belong to" the object.

It is inexcusably naïve to imagine the essence of an entity as some sort of ghost of the object coterminous with it. In fact, the entity is one – whatever collection of circumstances happens to constitute it. The distinction of an essence in it is a pragmatic measure needed for purposes of knowledge – it does not imply the property concerned to have a separate existence in fact. The property selected is necessarily one aspect among many; it may be just a tiny corner of the whole entity.

We may thus readily agree with Buddhists that named or thought-of objects are "empty"; i.e. that it is inaccurate to consider each object as really having some defining

constant core, whether phenomenal or non-phenomenal. But the Buddhists go on from there are apply the same reasoning to the Subject (or soul) – and this is where we may more radically disagree.

They imply that the Subject of cognitions is itself cognized by way of phenomena, i.e. like any other object. This idea of theirs has some apparent credibility due to the fact that they confuse the Subject with his 'inner', mental phenomena[84]. But though such phenomena are indeed internal *in comparison to* physical phenomena sensed in the body or further out beyond it, they are strictly speaking external in comparison to the "soul".

Anyone who reflects a little would not regard, say, the stuff of a dream he had as himself. His self-awareness is the consciousness of something more inward still than the stuff of imaginations. He is the one experiencing and generating the imaginations. The soul is not a

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[84] See the Buddhist doctrine of the Five Component-Groups. In this doctrine, the fourth and fifth groups, comprising the "determinants" and the "cognitive faculty", are particularly misleading, in that cognition, volition and valuation, the three functions of the self, are there presented without mention of the self, as ordinary phenomenal events. That is, the doctrine commits a *petitio principii*, by depicting psychic events in a manner that deliberately omits verbal acknowledgment of the underlying self, so as to seem to arrive at the (foregone) conclusion that there is no self. No explanation is given, for instance, as to how we tell the difference between two phenomenally identical actions, considering one as really willed by oneself, and the other as a reactive or accidental event – for such differentiation (which is necessary to gauge degrees of responsibility) is only possible by means of self-knowledge, i.e. introspection into one's non-phenomenal self, and they have dogmatically resolved in advance not to accept the existence of a cognizing, willing and valuing self.

phenomenon – it has no smell, taste, solidity, tune or color; it is something *non*-phenomenal.

The self is not perceived as an object in the way of mental phenomena (as the Buddhists suggest), but is intuited directly in the way of a Subject apperceiving itself (at least when it perceives other things, or when it expresses itself through volition or valuation). Our soul is not a presumed "essence" of our mental *phenomenal* experiences; it is an entirely different sort of experience.

Of course, it could still be argued that – even granting that acts of cognition, volition and valuation are non-phenomenal events, known by self-intuition – such acts are mere momentary events, which do not necessarily imply an underlying non-phenomenal continuity (an abiding self). Admittedly, the fact that we cannot physically or mentally see, hear, smell, taste or touch the acts of the self does not logically imply that the self is abiding.

However, note that this last is an argument in favor of the possibility that the self may be impermanent – it does not constitute an argument against the existence of a self (whether lasting or short-lived) underlying each act of cognition, volition or valuation. That is, these functions are inconceivable without *someone* experiencing, willing and choosing, even if it is conceivable that the one doing so does not abide for longer than that moment.[85]

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[85] Note well that I am careful to say the *possibility* that the self is impermanent; which does not exclude the equal possibility that the self is permanent. The mere fact that the cognitions, volitions and valuations of the self are impermanent does not by itself allow us to draw any conclusion either way

To deny that cognition, volition and valuation necessarily involve a self is to place these apparent events under an aetiological régime of natural determinism or spontaneity. That subsumes willing under mechanistic causation or chance happenstance – i.e. it effectively denies the existence of freewill.

Similarly, it implies that there is no more to knowing than the storing of symbols in a machine (as if the "information" stored in a computer has any knowledge value without humans to cognize and understand it, i.e. as if a computer can ever at all *know*). And again, it implies that valuing or disvaluing is no more relevant to a living (and in particular sentient) being than it is to a stone.

The effective elimination of these three categories (i.e. knowing, willing and valuing) by Buddhists (and extreme Materialists, by the way) is without logical justification, because in total disaccord with common experience.

The confusion may in part be caused or perpetuated by equivocation. Because we often use the word "mind" – or alternatively, sometimes, "consciousness" – in a loose, large sense, including the soul, it might be assumed that the soul is similar to mental phenomena in its substance. But the soul and mind are only proximate in a spatial sense, if at all. The soul is not made of mental stuff or of consciousness – the soul uses consciousness to observe mental and physical events (and, indeed, its intimate self).

The self or soul is not an abstraction from mental or physical phenomena. It receives and cognizes mental and material information (and it indirectly chooses and wills

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about the permanence or impermanence of the self. Additional considerations are needed to draw the latter conclusion.

mental and material events) – but it is not identical with such information (or events).

Only intuited events of cognition, volition and valuation can be considered as truly parts of, and direct responsibilities of, the soul. And even here, it would be inaccurate to necessarily equate the soul to these functions. Such a positivistic approach is a hypothesis to be adopted inductively only if we find no good reason to adopt the alternative hypothesis that the soul is more than the evidence of its functioning.

Thus, the inevitable impermanence of the phenomenal world cannot be construed as necessarily implying a similar impermanence for the self. Even granting that material and mental objects are "empty", it does not follow that the self is a non-entity, i.e. non-existent as a distinct unit. The self is not a material or mental substance or entity – but it is a non-phenomenal substance and entity. We may legitimately label that distinct substance 'spiritual' and that entity 'soul'.

Note well that such labeling does not preclude the idea, previously presented, that the individual soul's individuation out from the universal spiritual substance or universal soul is ultimately illusory. We may thus well consider the soul as impermanent in its individuality, while regarding its spiritual substance as eternal.

Upon reflection, this is pretty much the way we view the phenomenal realm, too – as consisting of impermanent illusory individual entities emerging in a permanent real universal substratum. Their illusoriness is mainly due to the conventionality of their individual boundaries.

At this stage, then, we find ourselves with two 'monistic' domains – the one giving rise to material and mental phenomena and the other giving rise to spiritual entities (souls). Obviously, such double 'monism' is not logically coherent! We therefore must assume that these two apparently overlapping domains are really ultimately somehow one and the same.

So, we have perhaps come full circle, and our opinions end up pretty much coinciding with the Buddhists' after all. We ought perhaps to lay the stress, instead, on our difference with regard to *continuity*.

According to Buddhist theory, the self has no continuity, i.e. our self of today is not the same person as our self of yesterday or of tomorrow. In this perspective, they are causatively *connected*, in the sense that earlier conglomerations of phenomena constituting a self 'cause' later ones – but there is no *thread of constancy* that can be identified as the underlying one and the same entity. It is not a case of mere succession of totally discrete events; but there is no essential identity between the events, either.

However, many (myself included) object to this theory on various grounds. While we may admit that one can logically regard selfhood (i.e. being a Subject and Agent) as punctual at every instant without having to assume its extension over a lifetime, we must realize that such an assumption removes all logical possibility of a concept of moral responsibility for past actions.

If one is no longer ever the same person as the person committing a past virtuous or vicious act, then no good deed may be claimed by anyone or rewarded, and no crime may be blamed on anyone or punished. Ex post facto, strictly speaking, the doer of any deed no longer exists.

Similarly, looking forward, there is nothing to be gained or lost by any Agent in doing anything, since by the time any consequences of action emerge the Agent has already disappeared.

In such a framework, all personal morality and social harmony would be completely destroyed. There would be no justification for abstaining from vice or for pursuing virtue. Even the pursuit of spiritual realization would be absurd. Of course, some people do not mind such a prospect, which releases them from all moral obligations or responsibility and lets them go wild.

It is very doubtful that Buddhism (given its overall concerns and aims) supports such a nihilist thesis[86]. In any case, such a viewpoint cannot be considered credible, in the light of all the above observations and arguments.

2. Distinguishing the Ego

The self was above defined – from a philosophical perspective – as *the apparent Subject of cognition and Agent of volition and valuation*. But – in common parlance – most people identify themselves with much more than this minimal definition. To clarify things, it is therefore useful to distinguish two meanings of the term.

In its purest sense, the term self refers to what is usually called the soul or person. In a colloquial sense, the term is broader, including what intellectuals refer to as "the **ego**". The latter term – again from a philosopher's point of view – refers to the material and mental phenomena, which

[86] Although the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna seems to relish it.

indeed seem rightly *associated with* our self, but which we wrongly tend to *identify with* it. Thus, by the term ego we shall mean all aspects of one's larger self *other than* one's soul; i.e. all extraneous aspects of experience, commonly misclassified as part of oneself.

This is just a way to recognize and emphasize that we commonly make errors of identification as to what constitutes the self[87]. If we try to develop a coherent philosophical system, looking at the issues with a phenomenological eye, we must admit the self in the sense of soul (i.e. Subject/Agent) as the core sense of the term. The latter is a non-phenomenal entity, quite distinct from any of the material and mental phenomena people commonly regard as themselves.

We tend to regard our body, including its sensory and motor faculties, as our self, or at least as part of it. But many parts of our body can be incapacitated or detached, and we still remain present. And, conversely, our nervous system may be alive and well, but we are absent from it. So, it is inaccurate to identify our self with our body.

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[87] The word 'ego' originally, in Latin, meant 'I'. Nowadays, in English, it is commonly understood in the pejorative sense used by me in the present essay. I do not subscribe to the sense used in psychoanalytic theory, which presents the ego as a segment of the psyche "mediating between the person and reality". Such a notion is to me conceptually incoherent, since it ascribes a separate personality (i.e. selfhood) to this alleged segment, since to "mediate" anything implies having cognitive, volitional and evaluative powers. The ego of psychoanalysts involves a circularity, since it raises the question: who or what is mediating between the person and reality, and on what basis? The common sense of 'ego' is, I would say, closer semantically to the 'id' of psychoanalysis.

Nevertheless, we are justified in associating our self with our body, because we evidently have a special relationship to it: we have more input from it and more power over it than we do in relation to any other body. Our life takes shape within the context of this body. For this reason, we call it ‘our’ body, implying possession or delimitation.

With regard to the mind, a similar analysis leads to the same conclusion. By ‘mind’, note well, I mean only the apparent mental *phenomena* of memory and imagination (reshufflings of memories), which seem to resemble and emerge from the material phenomena apparently experienced through the body (including the body itself, of course). Mind is not a Subject, but a mere (non-physical) Object; a mind has no consciousness of its own, only a Subject has consciousness.

This limited sense of mind is not to be confused with a larger sense commonly intended by the term, which would include what we have here called soul. I consider this clarification of the word mind very important, because philosophies “of mind” in which this term is loosely and ambiguously used are bound to be incoherent[88].

The term I use for the conjunction of soul and mind is ‘psyche’. Of course, below the psyche, at an unconscious level, lies the brain or central nervous system, which plays a strong role in the production of mental events, although it is not classed as part of the psyche but as *part of the body*. Some of the items we refer to as ‘mind’ should properly be called brain.

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[88] Equivocal use of the term mind leads some philosophers into syllogistic reasoning involving the Fallacy of Four Terms, in which the middle term has different senses in the major and minor premises, so that the conclusion is invalid.

The term "unconscious mind", note well, refers to *potential* (but not currently actual) *items of consciousness stored in the brain* (and possibly the wider nervous system); for example, potential memories. Such items are called mind, only insofar as they might eventually appear as mental objects of consciousness; but strictly speaking, they ought not be called mind. The term "unconscious mind" is moreover an imprecision of language in that the mind is never conscious of anything – it is we, the Subjects, who are conscious of mental items (mental equivalents of sensory phenomena, as well as ideas and emotions).

Thus, mind refers to a collection of evanescent phenomena, without direct connection between them, which succeed each other in our 'mind's eye' (and/or 'mind's ear') but which lack mental continuity, their only continuity being presumably their emergence from the same underlying material brain. The mind cannot be identified with the self, simply because mental events are experienced as mere objects of consciousness and will, and not as the Subject and Agent of such psychical events. Moreover, the mind may momentarily stop displaying sights or sounds without our sense of self disappearing.

Nevertheless, our mind is ours alone. Only we directly experience what goes on in it and only we have direct power over its fantasies. Even if someday scientists manage to look into other people's private minds and find ways to affect their contents, one person remains in a privileged relationship to each mind. It is therefore proper to call our minds 'ours', just as we call our bodies 'ours'.

Thus, the self, in the colloquial sense, is a collection of three things: soul, mind and body – i.e. spiritual, mental

and material experiences. But upon reflection, only the soul counts as self proper – the ego, comprising mind and body, is indeed during our whole lifetime "associated with" our strict self (that is, soul), but it should not be "identified with" that self. The ego is merely an appendage to the self or soul, something 'accidental' (or at best 'incidental') to it.

However, this should not be taken to mean that the soul has no share in the ego. Many of the physical and mental traits that comprise the ego are at least in part due to past choices and actions of the soul. The soul is thus somewhat responsible for much of the ego; the latter is in effect a cumulative expression of the former. Some people have big, mean egos, to their discredit; others have smaller, nicer egos, to their credit. Moreover, the soul tends to function in the context of the ego or what it perceives as the ego.

In narrower psychological terms, the ego is a particular self-image one finds motives for constructing and clinging onto. It is a mental construct composed of images selectively drawn from one's body and mind – some based on fact, some imaginary. Compared to the real state of affairs, this self-image might be inflationary (flattering, pretentious) or it might be depreciative (undemanding, self-pitying). Ideally, of course, one's self-image ought to be realistic; i.e. one must at all times strive to be lucid.

3. Dismissing the Ego

On a practical level, such insights mean that what we regard as our "personal identity" has to be by and by clarified. We gradually, especially with the help of

meditation, realize the disproportionate attention our material and mental experiences receive, and the manipulations we subject them to.

Because of the multiplicity and intensity of our sensory and mental impressions, we all from our birth onwards confuse ourselves with the phenomena impinging upon us. Because they shout so loudly, dance about us so flashily, weigh upon us so heavily, we think our experiences of body and mind are all there is, and we identify with them. To complicate matters further, such self-identification is selective and often self-delusive.

It takes an effort to step back, and realize that body and mind phenomena are just fleeting appearances, and that our self is not the phenomena but the one experiencing them. Even though this self is non-phenomenal (call it a soul, or what you will), it must be put back in the equation. *We may associate ourselves with our bodily and mental phenomena, but we must not identify with them*. There is no denying our identity happens to currently be intimately tied up with a certain body, mind, social milieu, etc. – but this does not make these things one and the same with us.

Gradually, it becomes clear that our personal confusion with these relatively external factors of our existence is a cause of many of the difficulties in our relation to life. We become attached to our corporeality or psychology, or to vain issues of social position, and become ignorant as to who (and more deeply, Who) we really are.

To combat such harmful illusions, and see things as they really are, one has to "work on oneself". One must try and diminish the influence of the ego.

Specifically, one has to overcome the tendencies of egotism and egoism. Egotism refers to the esthetic side of the ego, i.e. to our narcissistic concerns with appearance and position, our yearning for admiration and superiority and our fear of contempt and inferiority. Egoism refers to the ethical side of the ego, i.e. to our material and intellectual acquisitiveness and protectionism.

The issue is one of degree. A minimum of self-love and selfishness may be biologically necessary and normal, but an excess of those traits is certainly quite poisonous to one's self and to others. Much daily suffering ensues from unchecked ego concerns. Egotism produces constant vexation and resentment, while egoism leads to all sorts of anxieties and sorrows.

On this point, all traditions agree: no great spiritual attainment is possible without conquest of egocentricity. Self-esteem and self-confidence are valuable traits, but one must replace conceit with modesty and arrogance with humility. Meditation can help us tremendously in this daunting task.

Of course, *it is none other than the self (i.e. soul) who is egocentric!* The ego is not some other entity in competition with the soul in a divided self, a "bad guy" to pour blame on. We have no one to blame for our psychological failings other than our soul, whose will is essentially free. ***The ego has no consciousness or will of its own: it has no selfhood.***

The ego indeed *seems to* be a competing self, because – and only so long as and to the extent that – we (our self or soul) identify with it. It is like an inanimate mask, which is given an illusion of life when we confuse our real face

with it. But we should not be deluded: it is we who are alive, not the mask.

Rather, the body and mind (i.e. the factors making up the ego) are mechanistic domains that strongly *influence* the soul in sometimes negative ways. They produce natural inclinations like hunger for food or the sex drive or yearning for social affiliation, which are sometimes contrary to the higher interests of the soul. For this reason, we commonly regard our spiritual life as a struggle against our ego inclinations.

Not all ego inclinations are natural. Many of the things we think we need are in fact quite easy to do without. As we commonly say: "It's all in the mind". In today's world, we might often add: "It is just media hype" for ultimately commercial or political purposes. People make mountains out of molehills. For example, some think they cannot make it through the day without a smoke or a drink, when in fact it is not only easy to do without such drugs, but one feels much better without them.

Often, natural inclinations are used as pretexts for unnatural inclinations. For example, if one distinguishes between natural sensations of hunger in the belly and the mental desire to titillate one's taste buds, one can considerably reduce one's intake of calories and avoid getting painfully fat. Similarly, the natural desire for sex for reproductive purposes and as an expression of love should not be confused with the physical lusts encouraged by the porno industry, which have devastating spiritual consequences.

Thus, the struggle against ego inclinations ought not be presented as a struggle against nature – it is rather mostly a fight against illusions of value, against foolishness. It is

especially unnatural tendencies people adopt or are made to adopt that present a problem. It is this artificial aspect of ego that is most problematic. And the first victory in this battle is the realization: “this is not me or mine”.

Once one ceases to confuse oneself with the ego, once one ceases to regard its harmful inclinations as one’s own, it becomes much easier to neutralize it. There is hardly any need to “fight” negative influences – one can simply ignore them as disturbances powerless to affect one’s chosen course of action. The ego need not be suppressed – it is simply seen as irrelevant. It is defeated by the mere disclosure of its essential feebleness.

Meditation teaches this powerful attitude of *equanimity*. One sits (and eventually goes through life) watching disturbances come and go, unperturbed, free of all their push and pull. The soul remains detached, comfortable in its nobility, finding no value in impure forces and therefore thoroughly uninfluenced by them.

This should not, of course, be another “ego trip”. It is not a role one is to play, self-deceitfully feeding one’s vanity. On the contrary, one experiences such meditation as “self-effacement” or “self-abnegation”, as if one has become transparent to the disturbances, as if one is no longer there to be affected by them.

This is, more precisely put, ego-dismissal, since one has ceased to identify with the forces inherent in the ego. Such dismissal should not, of course, be confused with evasion. It is abandonment of the foolish psychological antics – but this implies being very watchful, so as to detect and observe them when they occur.

There is no need for difficult ascetic practices. One has to just become more aware and sincerely committed; then one can nimbly dodge or gently deflect negative tendencies that may appear. Being profoundly at peace, one is not impressed by them and has no personal interest in them.

Many people devote much time and effort to helping other people out materially or educationally. This is rightly considered as an efficient way to combat self-centeredness, although one should always remain alert to the opportunities for hidden egotism and egoism such pursuits offer.

Granting Monism as the true philosophy, it would seem logical to advocate 'altruism' as the ultimate ethical behavior. However, this moral standard is often misunderstood to mean looking out for the interests of others while ignoring one's own interests. Such a position would be simplistic if not dishonest. If we are all one, the all-one includes and does not exclude oneself.

Thus, I would say that whilst altruistic behavior is highly commendable and admirable, working on oneself first and foremost would seem a very necessary adjunct and precondition. Conceivably, when one reaches full realization, one can pretty well forget oneself altogether and devote oneself entirely to others – but until then one must pay some attention to one's legitimate needs, if only because one is best placed to do so.

8. CHAPTER EIGHT

Drawn from *Logical and Spiritual Reflections* (2008),
Book 1, Chapters 5 & 11;
Book 3, Chapter 16.

1. The Self or Soul

As we saw in the examples of Hume's psychological theories of generalization as habit and of causation as association of ideas, he tended in practice to engage in faulty induction (and of course, faulty deduction).

He synthesized from a little data or a superficial analysis, without paying heed to information or arguments that would have delimited or belied his foregone conclusions. He would focus on or select positive aspects of an issue, those that confirmed his theses, and blithely ignore or discard negative aspects, those that weakened his positions.

Such faulty practices on his part are not surprising, in view of his theoretical opposition to induction, i.e. his belief that induction has an intrinsic problem. If one has a general failure of logical understanding, this will inevitably eventually translate into errors of practice. Conversely, the theoretical error is itself due a practical failure. Of course, such error is never ubiquitous; else the person committing it could not at all engage in discourse.

The same tendency of faulty induction is to be found in Hume's treatment of the human soul and of freedom of the

will. Rejecting offhand the Cartesian inference "*cogito, ergo sum*", Hume denied the existence or knowability of a human self or soul, conceiving our common belief in such a thing as due to nothing but the "bundling or collection" of our various perceptions:

> *"It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea."*[89]

Though his thinking on this important issue, as on many others, is clearly based on personal observation and insight, showing Hume to be a real philosopher, worthy of considerable respect, his reasoning is here again faulty. He argues that we would need to experience a single "impression", one permeating our whole experience, to justify the idea of a self. By this, he seems to mean a concrete mental phenomenon of some distinct sort. Not finding such a core experience, he reduces our personal identity to at best the sum total of the mass of fleeting

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[89] *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect. VI.

impressions of all sorts that we obviously have. But we may disagree with this viewpoint on several counts.

First, on what ground does Hume demand at the outset that the self be configured in the way of a single permanent "impression" underlying all inner experience? That must be seen to be a hypothesis of his, one that needs to be inductively proven, and not necessarily as he assumes the only possible way of conceiving the issue. The self might not be as phenomenal an entity as he projects (i.e. an impression), and it may be wiser to define it by referring to its functions (cognition, volition and valuation) rather than to its substance.

With regard to Hume's condition of singularity of impression: it would not be inductively erroneous to claim that the self is the sum total of all impressions. This might be taken to mean that all our impressions are indicative of or even actually cause an underlying entity, which though never perceptible is assumed to endure through time. In other words, the whole is more than the parts. Such assumption would simply constitute a conceptual hypothesis, like for example the hypothesis of electrons in physics as entities underlying electrical phenomena. An abstraction does not have to be identical with the experiential data that supports it.

With regard to Hume's condition of permanence of impression: to demand as he does that we be conscious of the self full time, or even part time, before we believe in it, is not in accord with inductive logic. The latter allows us to extrapolate from occasional apparent self-awareness to an assumption of permanent presence of a real self – this would just be generalization. We might even postulate a self without any direct impression of it, in the way of an

adductive hypothesis to be supported by various other experiences and considerations. Either approach would be in accord with inductive logic, provided we obeyed the usual rules of induction (especially, that no contrary evidence or inconsistency be found).

Secondly, Hume is arguing in a circular manner when he says (in the above quotation): "It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, *or from any other*, that the idea of self is derived". Even if we accepted (which I do not, as just explained) his contention that the self cannot be inferred from impressions other than that of the self, it does not follow that we do not in fact have impressions of the self. When he says: "or from any other", he means to categorically exclude this special experience, which he claims never to have.

We need to seriously consider the empirical and inductive status of Hume's claim to have no self-awareness. It is important to note that this claim is *negative*, which means that it reports an unsuccessful search for something (an impression he can identify with the self). *How much introspective observation is this claim actually based on?* Did he meditate with great effort an hour a day for five years, say, in search of his self? Or did he, as I suspect, casually look into his mind for five seconds of so, a couple of times, and conclude what he had already decided to assert as true, viz. that he had no self?[90]

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[90] I do not mean to say that had Hume meditated sufficiently, he would necessarily have affirmed the self. Many presumably major meditators deny the self's existence (e.g. the Buddhist *anatman* doctrine), or at least its knowability (e.g. in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "Nobody can know the atman inasmuch as the atman is the knower of all things") – not that I always agree with their logic. But the word of a casual observer

Moreover, whether proposed prejudicially or casually, or after very conscientious investigation, a negative statement like that *always and necessarily involves a generalization*. We generalize from "I looked everywhere in me for a long time, and did not find what I sought" to "there's no such thing as the thing sought, in me or anyone else". This to repeat is a generalization, and there is no way for us to arrive at an empirical negative statement in any other way.

Hume generalizes: from the few moments when he perceived no self, to all his temporal existence; and from his own inner life to the same condition in all other persons. Yet Hume does not officially believe in generalization! Is he exempt? Are we to suppose that he is allowed to generalize (and indeed to do so from very tenuous data, his doubtful introspection), but no one else is? This is clearly either a double standard or a self-contradiction on Hume's part. He postures as an empiricist[91], and is widely so regarded, but his empiricism is clearly very superficial and make-believe.

Thirdly, there is an alternative position (which I adhere to), which is fully in accord with the principles of inductive logic. It is that we all do experience our own self

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like Hume is not comparable to that of such meditators. In any case, we are still faced with mere hearsay, which must be empirically and rationally weighed. The said meditators might well be right, but other people cannot take them on faith and abstain from meditation. To claim the knowledge for oneself, one must personally meditate like those meditators did. After that, one must also judge their theoretical claims, and not just assume they were infallible geniuses.

[91] Even as an extreme empiricist, in the sense of modern "logical positivism".

quite often, though such experience may vary in degree and depend on circumstances. The self is always implied and present, in every moment of cognition, volition or valuation. But to be aware of it, or sufficiently aware of it to declare it present with surety, an effort of 'self-consciousness' is needed.

Moreover, such self-consciousness is not a perception, but an intuition, because the self is not a phenomenal entity (i.e. one with visible, audible, or other sensible qualities), but a *non-phenomenal* one. To experience it, one must aim one's awareness 'inward', i.e. towards the sought-for subject, and not outward in the direction of mental or physical objects.

A lot of meditation practice is needed to pacify, silence and still the mind sufficiently to contemplate the self with some clarity and confidence. If there is a stage at which the self effectively disappears, or is seen to be 'empty', as some advanced meditators claim, that stage is much deeper than Hume ever evidently went. So Eastern philosophy cannot be appealed to in support of Hume.

If one expects to find the self in gross sensory or mental "impressions" of the sort Hume had in mind, one will of course be disappointed. But if one realizes that the self is a much more *subtle* appearance than those, to be apperceived rather than perceived, one can well claim to experience the soul directly.[92]

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[92] If we try to tell a blind man about color, he may ask us whether it is loud or smells nice or tastes good or feels rough. But we cannot answer his question with reference to such phenomenal qualities, because the answer is a completely other sort of experience. He may then say: there's no such thing as color! But that is just because *he* cannot see it. Similarly, to

It appears more readily in the way of a 'presence' inherent in all intentions and acts of consciousness, will and valuing, than as an isolated object. But there are suggestions that, at a deeper level, the self can be contemplated 'in itself', and further on (more mystically) as a part or aspect of a universal Self.

Additionally, we have a justifiable *concept* of self. We could accept the self as no more than a conceptual construct – this would logically be an acceptable position. We are logically allowed and even recommended to propose hypotheses that *unify and explain* empirical data.

We could well argue that events like consciousness, volition and valuation imply a self. They are incomprehensible without the assumption of a self. To be conscious is to have a self; to will is to have a self; to desire or dislike is to have a self. The brain and other sense and motor organs are not themselves conscious or in possession of the power of will; these are not a subject or agent, but mere channels or instruments.

But in my view, this narrow, constructivist position would *not* explain all the facts of experience. For how would we then claim to know specific *particulars* about our own individual mental workings from such a general abstraction? To overcome this difficulty, we have to adhere to an intuitionist postulate.

For instance, if I have a thought right now, I can intimately tell whether that thought is my own will, or occurring without or against my will. I am quite able to distinguish between my own beliefs, wills and values – and those

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experience the self, one needs to intuit it – one cannot perceive it, for it has no phenomenal characteristics.

imposed on me by my brain or external influences. If I had no direct intuition of myself, or at least of my own inner acts, no such distinction would be feasible.

No theoretical knowledge of the self can produce such intimate certainties. Therefore, we must admit we do experience the self itself – if only occasionally, e.g. when we specifically make the effort to do so. It is not merely a concept for us, but also a direct experience.

A difficulty in self-awareness is perhaps due to our inability, except possibly in deep meditation, to detect the self as such. Ordinarily, we experience our self through its actual functioning, i.e. when we are involved in particular acts of cognition, volition or valuation. When the self does not 'express' itself in any such acts, it is transparent like space is to our eyes, except perhaps (to repeat) in meditation. Although intuition of self is also an act of the self, there seems to be a requirement that the self first express itself otherwise than through intuition, before intuition can detect it!

Hume refused to acknowledge such appearances of self-consciousness as valid data. He engaged in introspection, but clearly not enough of it; perhaps he was too impatient, and drew a premature conclusion. He generalized – from his own non-experience of self at some time(s) to all persons forever. For these reasons, his negative conclusion cannot be considered an undeniable fact (as many take it to be). It is just a theory, one with very little and inconclusive evidence going for it.

For my part, I insist: there *is* non-phenomenal experiential data from which a concrete idea of self can legitimately be drawn. That momentary self can then be generalized and reasonably claimed more permanent, at least to the earthly

lifetime of the individual. We can further speculate that the self exists before and after death; but that is another issue, much harder to establish inductively if at all.

We can *furthermore*, on the basis of the said subtle data as well as with reference to phenomenal impressions, adductively posit a concept of self, an abstract self. Such adduction is even possible without reference to the intuitive data, but merely on the basis of the grosser data that Hume acknowledges. The abstraction so begun then provides support for the intuitive data, and the intuitive data in turn serves to further confirm and enlarge the abstraction.

Thus, to conclude, Hume's skeptical posture towards the self is mainly due to his personal difficulties with introspection and with inductive procedure. He sets wrong theoretical standards of observation and of judgment, and moreover fails in practice to adhere to his own rules and restrictions.

2. Descartes' Mind-Body Dichotomy

David Hume's skepticism was in part due to the 'mind *versus* body' dualism that Descartes' philosophy produced in Western thinking more than a century earlier. Indeed, its roots are much deeper than that, traceable to Christian thought and earlier still to Greek thought. But within modern philosophy, Descartes was certainly a source of much (unintended) confusion and contention, as well as of (intended) enlightenment in a true sense.

René Descartes[93] considered his mind to be the most knowable of his beliefs, and sought to infer an external world including matter from such introspection. Using reasoning similar to St. Anselm's ontological argument, he first inferred God from his own mental existence; and then inferred the rest of the apparent world from God. God, being necessarily an honest broker, was to be the guarantor that human knowledge could extend out to the external material world.

Descartes' motive in this tortuous construct was primarily epistemological: he wished to establish the validity in principle of human cognition. However, this particular way of looking at things became a problem for subsequent philosophers – for it seemed to imply an ontological radical chasm between mind and body. One could know mind directly and certainly, but body only indirectly and uncertainly. Some philosophers began to doubt that mind and body could be claimed to have any causal relation whatever. 'Being so substantially different, how could either domain be said to cause changes in the other?' – so they argued.

Now, this whole problem, or set of problems, is a figment of these philosophers' imaginations. It is a mystification, a fanciful complication. It is safe to say that it was not Descartes intention to set up a dichotomy between mind and body; he was on the contrary attempting to harmonize them, first epistemologically and thence ontologically. His presentation of the issues was not perfect; but it was an honest try that can be improved.

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93 France, 1596-1650.

Phenomenology. Descartes first mistake was to effectively *start with* the commonsense distinction between mind and body, or a mental domain and a bodily one. The mind-body distinction cannot reasonably be used as a starting point, for it is only an assumption, a construct. Armed with this awareness, the apparent difficulty is easily resolved…

If we take a phenomenological approach to the issues involved, we realize that to begin with we have a mass of appearances, some of which may *seem* essentially different from others. We may then, as a hypothetical way of ordering the data, well assume that the seeming difference is significant, and label one set of appearances 'mental' and the other 'material' (or 'physical').

This is not done arbitrarily – but so as to organize our experiences, and explain why some are clearer than others, or why some behave somewhat more erratically than others, or why some seem to us more under our control than others, and so forth. So long as this hypothesis of substantial difference serves its useful purposes, it is maintained; but were it found logically or experientially inadequate, it would soon be replaced.

Such cognitive behavior is in accord with the *principle of induction*, which allows us, and indeed enjoins us, to rely on the suggestions of appearance unless or until they are specifically shown to be illusory.

Had Descartes proceeded thus, in a more phenomenological manner than he did, he would not have given *ab initio* precedence to mind over matter, or alternatively to matter over mind, but he would have treated both domains as appearances of equal initial status to be later sorted out, and no dichotomy would have arisen

in the first place. Descartes was in fact trying to proceed in a phenomenological manner; but his meditation did not begin far back enough.

Were it not for this natural, *inductive* approach, the opponents of Descartes would have a hard time explaining how come they manage to at all discuss both mind and body. How do those who believe only in the mind know about or understand claims to the body? How do those who believe only in the body know about or understand claims to the mind? Obviously, both groups start with *the appearances of* both body and mind, and it is due to this that they can communicate and debate.

The self. Moreover, to speak of a mind-body dichotomy is inaccurate and misleading in other respects. Our experience apparently covers *three* domains, not two. In addition to the physical phenomena we seem to outwardly perceive through the senses, and the mental phenomena we seem to inwardly perceive, which we call memories and imaginations (the latter being reshuffled memories), we believe in a third factor.

This is the self – that within us which perceives and thinks about the other two domains. This self – which we most identify with, rather than the mental and physical phenomena that surround it – is also experienced. It is known not merely by conceptual means, but primarily by a direct cognitive means we call *intuition* (or self-knowledge – i.e. knowledge of the self by the self).

The self (or soul or spirit) may be defined as that which is conscious in various ways, exercises will and makes value judgments. Such acts or functions of the self are also known by intuition. The difference between objects of intuition (i.e. the self and its functions) and all mental and

material objects of perception is that the latter are phenomenal (they have phenomenal appearances like color, shape, sound, touch, smell, taste), whereas the former are non-phenomenal.

We do colloquially lump together the soul and its functions (spiritual appearances[94]), mental phenomena (memories, imaginations – and derivatively, conceptual constructs), and some bodily phenomena (the nervous system, including the brain and all sensory and motor functions) – as "the mind" (or, I prefer to say: "the psyche"). But such unification is a simplification and should not be taken literally in the present context.

Indeed, if we go back to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" statement, we find in it three factors: "I" (the self), "think" (mental phenomena, supposedly observed by the self) and "am" (the inferred existence). Logically, the "being" inferred is just that of the self (and, though he does not say it, the mental phenomena of thought); but Descartes' tacitly intended implication is that there is a physical substratum to such existence, i.e. a body and more broadly a physical world.

Anyway, this is how the argument is usually understood, as an inference of body and matter from self and thought (mind). The reason being that only such physical existence

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[94] I use the word 'spiritual' in a very simple sense, meaning 'pertaining to the spirit'. Note also that the terms self, soul and spirit are to me identical – although some people believe in a self without a soul or spirit, namely Buddhists (on the one hand, who regard the self as 'empty') and Behaviorists (on the other hand, who identify the self entirely with the perceptible phenomena that most people consider as its mere effects).

is regarded as 'true' existence, while mental and all the more so spiritual existence are regarded as a merely 'virtual' sorts of being. At least, this is the opinion implied by the proponents of a dichotomy between mind and body who have a materialist preference.

Those with more mentalist or spiritual propensities interpret the dichotomy as disproof of a material world. That is, they point out that Descartes' premise ("I think") does not logically imply any conclusion other than "I and my thought exist" – so that the usual inference that body and matter therefore exist is a *non-sequitur* (it does not follow). Their error, of course, is to accept Descartes' approach – whereas, as already shown above, the correct phenomenological procedure is not quite as he proposed.

Causality. As for the "law of causality" which some critics propose, that the domains of mind and body are so 'substantially' different that they cannot conceivably impinge on each other – this too is a figment of biased imagination. What do they base this alleged law of causality on? If we consider the concepts of causation (deterministic causality) and volition (causality through will)[95], we find no basis for a 'law' that the substances of cause and effect must be the same. Such a law might conceivably be proposed as a hypothesis; but why do so, if such a hypothesis gives rise to intractable difficulties?

Causation can be formally defined with reference to terms of unspecified substance. For instance, the strongest form of causation between two items C and E can be defined as "if C, then E; and if not C, then not E". Such a formal

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[95] See my works *The Logic of Causation* and *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* for detailed treatments of those concepts.

statement can be applied to any pair of items, even if one is mental and the other is material or vice versa. There is no justification refusing to apply the definition to cases where the terms refer to different substances.

With regard to volition, it is important to clarify the issues and not lump everything together. We can (in a first phase, at least) refer to our common-sense beliefs for guidance, again on the basis of the earlier mentioned principle of induction.

These include that the self (soul) can will some mental events (e.g. some imaginations) and some material events (e.g. some physical movements of the body)[96]. It can do so (as introspectively evident) in its own mind and body – and also indirectly, in other minds and bodies (at least through its physical acts, if not in some cases through its mental acts).

Conversely, the self might be *influenced* in such mental or physical acts of will by mental and/or physical things *of which it is conscious*, or it might be *causatively* affected by such things (i.e. they might deterministically limit or widen its power to act).

An 'influence' functions through consciousness, and increases or decreases the ease or difficulty of a volitional act, but does not determine it; the act remains free, if the agent of it (the willing self) puts sufficient energy (will) into it. A 'causative', on the other hand, functions even if

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[96] I say 'some' mental and physical events, to stress that some (other) mental events are not caused by volition but by the brain (or whatever other means), and likewise for some (other) bodily events. The 'mind' and 'body' are domains affected by various causalities, and not by volition only or by causation only. There is no reserved domain either way.

unbeknownst to the self, and does not affect the volition as such, but either delimits or enlarges its scope. All this is quite consistent, and no logical objection can be raised against it as an aetiological hypothesis.

Thus, in the direction from body to mind, we believe that mental objects (like sensations and memories) can arise from material causes; and that either (in some cases) through the influence of those objects when perceived or (in other cases) more directly through causation, the self's acts of will and other aspects of behavior may be affected.

Conversely, in the direction from mind to body, we believe that the self has a power we call 'will' that can affect the body, either indirectly via events it produces in the mind that in turn causatively affect the body, or directly by producing changes in the body. Such effects of the will can in turn affect other bodies and minds.

We certainly have much introspective data on which to base these beliefs. These have the phenomenological status of appearances, i.e. the minimal credibility granted to all appearances initially. We are free, according to inductive logic, to use this database to build up a consistent intelligent theory of what is going on, provided we do not thereby create unsolvable problems.

Inversely, critics of this commonsense view of events must provide equally or more credible evidence and arguments in support of their contention. They must not only, as they tend to do, merely deny – but must also explain by what means and on what basis they are able to at all discuss the issue and take the intellectual positions they take.

Materialism. Now, there is one problem that some consider especially unsolvable. It is that the commonsense theory of a self, with consciousness and volition, interacting with a world of matter, is inconsistent with the *exclusively materialist thesis* that there is nothing but matter in the world and that matter can only move within a deterministic framework.

People who adhere to the latter thesis, who flatteringly call themselves scientists, are willing to accept indeterminism to some extent, in the sense that this is understood within quantum mechanics or in the Big Bang theory – but they refuse any possible impact of a non-material soul on material processes. That, to them, would imply a breach in the universality of modern physical laws.

This problem is easily solved. The solution is simply that all the so-called 'laws' of physics are known by inductive means – through generalizations or through theories based on adductive arguments. Such general propositions or ideas are undoubtedly based on empirical observations; but they also *add to* these observations, and such additions might well in time turn out to be unjustified by further observations. True scientific propositions are not exclusively empirical – they also depend on reasoning.

This being the case, it is absurd to argue that, since these 'laws' do not allow for non-physical things having any impact on physical things, any suggestion of volition is invalid. That is simply *a circular argument – it begs the question*. They do not prove in any way that spiritual entities (our self or soul) cannot affect (not even via mental events) physical events; they *just assert* that it is so.

It is not a conclusion of theirs; it is a premise. It is not a conclusion of any experimental or mathematical proof, but

a prejudice (proposed so as to simplify the world for their simple minds). It is a modern dogma, as closed-minded as past religious dogmas that science was supposed to replace.

What is evident to any lucid observer and honest thinker is that the apparent universality of all these physical laws is made possible because their proponents *do not address* the introspective data at all. They ignore (i.e. discard, refuse to even consider) data that does not fit into their materialist way of looking at the world, and they call this 'science'.

But science strictly means *using stringent cognitive methodology*: i.e. logic, inductive and deductive; it is not reserved to a materialist thesis. No such dogmatic reservation is philosophically ever justified or justifiable.

3. Buddhist Denial of the Soul

The same analysis … [for phenomena in general] can be applied to humans, but only to some extent. If we identify ourselves with our bodily and mental experiences, we come to the conclusion that we are likewise composites empty of essence! Most Buddhists stop there and declare that therefore we have no self. But here they are committing an error, for it is wrong to limit our experience of humans to their material and mental manifestations[97];

[97] As previously pointed out: in *Phenomenology*, chapter V, and in *Meditations*, chapter 12, the terms "self", "consciousness" and "mind" are in Buddhism sometimes treated as equivalent, and yet sometimes used with slightly different senses. As a result of such vagueness, wrong theories are proposed and many inconsistencies remain invisible.

we are evidently aware of more than that. Our spiritual experiences must also be taken into consideration – and in that case, we must admit that we can become (by a mode of experience we may call apperception or intuition) aware of our "self" (or spirit or soul).

In truth, Buddhists agree with this viewpoint when they admit that we are potentially or ultimately all Buddhas[98] – this is effectively an admission of soul, although most would dogmatically refuse that inference. Some say pointblank that there is no soul; but others, prefer to be more cryptic, and say: "there is and is not; and there neither is nor is not"[99]. But logically, these two (or more)

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[98] I give you one example (though I have come across many). S. Suzuki writes: "So it is absolutely necessary for everyone to believe in nothing. But I do not mean voidness… This is called Buddha nature, or Buddha himself" (p. 117.)

[99] To be fair, see Mu Soeng p. 125. According to that (excellent) commentator, the *anatman* doctrine was never intended as "a metaphysical statement" but as "a therapeutic device". As he tells it: "The Buddha responded to the Brahmanical formulation of a permanent entity, the self or atman, with silence, without taking a position either for or against." Logically, this would imply Buddhism to consider the issue of self to be merely *problematic*, neither affirming nor denying such a thing. However, in my own readings of Buddhist texts, I have more often than not read an assertoric *denial* of self, or a "both yes and no, and/or neither yes nor no" salad, rather than merely an avoidance of the issue of self. Another comment worth my making here: the idea of a self ought not to be identified with the Brahmanical idea of a *permanent* self; the latter is a more specific idea than the former, and denial of the latter does not logically entail denial of the former. I support the idea of an *impermanent* individual self, assigning permanence only to the universal self (i.e. the transcendent, or God). These (and many other) nuances should not be glossed over.

postures must be considered equivalent, as their intent is simply that it is wrong to claim that soul exists.

But let us insist – our bodies and minds are composites and impermanent, like cars or dreams, but we differ in that we have a relatively abiding self. (I say: "relatively abiding" to stress that the individual soul need not be considered absolutely eternal, although the common source of all spiritual substance – which many of us identify with God[100] – is necessarily absolutely eternal.)

By self (or spirit or soul), we mean *the Subject of consciousness* (i.e. the "person" experiencing, cognizing, perceiving, conceiving, knowing, etc.) and *the Agent of volition and valuation* (i.e. the "person" who wishes, wills, values, etc.). Note well this definition, which is often ignored by those who deny the self's existence.

A machine, computer or robot has no self – we (humans, and at least higher animals) evidently do: we all well know that we do. This self that we know is not our ego (a collection of aspects of our body and mind), though most of us do tend to confuse our self with our ego.

The self we know is manifest in our every act of cognition, volition or valuation, as the one engaged in that act. Although it is non-phenomenal, we are quite able to be aware of it. Although non-phenomenal, the self relates to phenomena (to those of its own body and mind, as well as to those further afield) either as their witness (i.e. through cognition), or by being affected by them or (when cognizing them) influenced by them, or by affecting them (through volition). But, though thus related to phenomena

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[100] See reasons for this in my *Meditations*, chapter 8.

to various degrees, it is not identical with them and not to be identified with them.

The Buddhist denial of self is presented as empirical: one's own bodily and mental experience is carefully examined, and nothing but passing phenomena are observed in it. But my contention is that such analysis is based on incomplete data – it does not take into account the intuitive self-awareness of the Subject and Agent. The self is willfully ignored in the way of a prejudice, rather than denied as a result of dispassionate observation. The non-self is not here a conclusion, but a premise – a dogma, an ideology.

Moreover, it must be stressed that the negation of any term (whether the term 'self' or any other) cannot logically be purely empirical. We never perceive a negative, we only search for and fail to perceive the corresponding positive, and thence *inductively* 'infer' that the thing negated is absent. This conclusion is not necessarily final – it is a hypothesis that may be later overturned if new data is encountered that belies it, or even if an alternative hypothesis is found more frequently supported by the evidence.

Thus, the non-self cannot be – as Buddhism presents it – a purely empirical product of deep meditation; according to logic, its negativity makes it necessarily a *rational* construct. It is therefore not an absolute truth of any sort – but a mere generalization from "I diligently searched, but did not so far find a self" to "no self was there to be found". It is not perceptual, but *conceptual* – it is a thesis like any other open to doubt and debate, and requiring proof (in the inductive sense, at least). If no inconsistency is found in

its counter-thesis, the idea of a self may also legitimately be upheld.

Thus, even though we may admit that the body and mind are devoid of essence(s), we can still claim that there is a soul. The soul is not meant to be the essence of the phenomena of body and mind, but a distinct non-phenomenal entity housed in, intersecting or housing[101] these phenomena in some way. Body and mind merely constitute the soul's mundane playground, i.e. a particular domain of the world over which that individual soul[102] has special powers of consciousness and volition.

This view agrees with the proponents of emptiness at least in the insight that the self is not to be confused with body and mind. Also, the fact that the soul is non-phenomenal, i.e. neither a material nor a mental entity, does not logically exclude that it too be "empty" of essence, of course. But, whereas they go on to claim that the self does not exist, we would insist that even if (or even though) the individual soul is empty, it evidently exists – just as body and mind evidently exist whatever we say about them.[103]

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101 We tend to view the soul as a small thing, something somewhere in the body or at best coextensive with it. But we should at least conceive the possibility of the opposite idea – viz. that the soul is enormous in comparison with the body, i.e. that the body is a small mark within the soul or a minor appendage to it. Our view of their relative size is, in truth, a function of the relative importance we attach to them, i.e. how frequently we focus our interest on the one or the other.

102 Or individuated soul. I say this to stress that the individual soul may be considered as artificial subdivision of the universal soul (or God, in Judaic terms).

103 In my view, whatever even just but appears to exist does indeed exist (if only in the way of appearance). Is it real or

It is in any case patently absurd to say or imply, as the Buddhists do, that *a non-existent* can think that it exists and (upon enlightenment) realize that it does not exist! A non-existent cannot think or realize anything; it is not an entity or a thing – it is nothing at all, it is not. An existent, on the other hand, can well (as these existing Buddhists do) think that it does not exist and other such nonsense! There is no logic in the no-self viewpoint.

The non-self idea may be viewed as supportive of materialism (in a large sense of the term, which includes mental phenomena as within the domain of matter). That is why many people today find it appealing: eager to reject the demands and constraints of the ethics of monotheistic religion, yet wishing to retain or introduce some spirituality in their lives, they embrace soul denial.

All this is not intended to deny the crucial importance of *self-effacement* in meditation and more broadly in the course of spiritual development. I would certainly agree with Buddhist teaching that the self at some stage becomes an impediment to enlightenment and must be effectively forgotten to contemplate things as they are.[104]

But to my mind, the non-self thesis need not be taken literally. I think Buddhists formulated it as an *upaya*, a skillful means[105], to facilitate forgetting the self. It is easier

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illusory, though? Those characterizations are open to discussion, and depend on a great many logical factors.

[104] Judaism agrees with this epistemological and ethical posture, as evidenced for instance by this statement of the Baal Shem Tov: "Before you can find God, you must lose yourself". (From *A Treasury of Jewish Quotations*.)

[105] Ultimately, Buddhism is not interested in descriptive philosophy; what concerns it is to liberate us spiritually. If an idea is effective as a means to that end, it is taught.

to forget what one believes does not exist, than to forget what one believes does exist. As far as I see (at my present stage of development), though disbelief in the self has some practical advantages, there is insufficient theoretical justification for such a doctrine.

We colloquially say that our mind is "empty" when our mind-space is for a while without feelings or thoughts, as occasionally happens quite naturally. In that state of mind, we are generally less distracted, and can observe whatever presents itself to us without interfering in the presentation. Sometimes, that commonplace empty-mindedness is experienced rather as a sort of momentary detachment or even alienation from the world around us, as when our eyes become unfocused and just stare out without seeing anything.

The Buddhist sense of the word emptiness is of course much more complex than that, though not totally unrelated. When applied objectively, to things beyond or within the mind, it signifies that they are viewed without recourse to superimposed categories or hypotheses. Applied subjectively, the implication of the term is that the self is an illusion of consciousness, i.e. that our apperception of a cognizing soul is likewise a merely superimposed idea.

But is this Buddhist claim to be taken on faith, or do they manage to prove it incontrovertibly in any way? The mere fact that this doctrine was once proclaimed, and is claimed again by many authorities throughout the centuries, does not in itself make it a certain truth. We must be permitted to doubt it, and ask questions about it, and raise objections to it – without being accused of being heretics or morons.

9. CHAPTER NINE

Drawn from *Logical and Spiritual Reflections* (2008),

Book 4, Chapters 3, 4, 7, 10 & 11;

Book 5, Chapter 8 (part).

1. Awareness of Self

The philosophical idea of Monism is of utility to meditation. When the philosopher proposes that matter, mind and spirit must eventually be One, he/she does so because this theory seems like a logical conclusion from all the data of experience and thought. But for someone engaged in meditation, this idea has a more practical intent: it informs him/her that all common distinctions are ultimately unnecessary to meditation, even artificial impediments to it, since they disturb the natural rest of the psyche, i.e. they are psychologically pointless and fatiguing.

In truth, it is more accurate to say that the distinction between soul and mind-and-body is at first psychologically valuable, too, in that it allows us to focus on the non-phenomenal soul alone, while regarding the phenomena of body and mind as mere distractions relative to that object of meditation. Once this level has been mastered, and we become adept at strongly intuiting the self in the midst of mind-body events, it becomes wise to transcend all such

separation, and view self-awareness as a distraction, too.

We may distinguish four senses or levels or types of "self-awareness" in the course of spiritual development:

a. The lowest form of self-awareness is that of the narcissist. Here one focuses on aspects of one's body and mind, of one's life and history, etc., that are either pleasing or displeasing, confusing this "ego" construct with one's self. This is a sort of egotistic and egoistic indulgence devoid of reflection, an unconscious and unintelligent existence.

b. At a higher level of self-awareness, one begins to look upon the preceding level with some degree of criticality. Here, one realizes that one's behavior thus far has been stupid and unseemly, and one makes some effort to improve and correct it. This is a start of spiritual consciousness, tending towards a more wholesome understanding of who one is.

c. In a later stage, one realizes the distinction between: the non-phenomenal soul on the one hand, and the phenomenal body-mind complex on the other. As this realization develops, and one dissociates oneself more and more from the body and mind, and one associates oneself progressively more with the soul – one's value system and behavior patterns are radically changed.

d. But even the latter evolution is not final, because the soul one identifies with there is the individuated soul, whereas one has to eventually realize the universal soul; or, as some prefer to put it, the non-soul (i.e. non-individual soul). Although the individual soul is already realized to be non-phenomenal, it is still restrictive in scope; only when such limits are transcended, one attains true self-awareness.

For monotheists, this last stage corresponds to full consciousness of God; for Buddhists, it signifies enlightenment, realizing the Buddha-mind or emptiness. Thus, meditation proceeds by broadening and internalizing consciousness, tending gradually towards a holistic consciousness and a deep understanding of self.

The problem of identifying with one's real self could be viewed as a linguistic problem, to some extent. When you feel pangs of hunger, do not think "I am hungry" but think "my body is emitting pangs of hunger"; or when you feel some emotion, do not think "I am sad (or happy)" but "my mind is manifesting waves of sadness (or happiness)". Likewise, in similar circumstances – use language with precision, or at least be peripherally aware of the more accurate description of experience. Avoid bad habits, and do not confuse linguistic shortcuts with phenomenological formulations.

2. Meditation on the Self

Why (as is evident in the course of meditation) are inner and outer silence and stillness so difficult to attain? Because through our imagining visual or auditory phenomena (e.g. daydreaming or humming a tune), or indulging in emotions (such as joy and sadness, or physical feelings), or intending non-phenomenal thoughts (including attitudes, resolutions, likes and dislikes, and other postures of the will), or thinking verbal thoughts (mentally or out loud), or engaging in various bodily actions (in pursuit of sensations or other causes of mental events) – we are constantly *producing mind*.

This compulsive production of mental content could be considered as the main way we generate and perpetuate our ego (or false self). Without such mental furniture, the ego effectively disappears, leaving behind a gaping hole. That is, to even momentarily stop such mental production, achieving silence and stillness, is to come in contact with the underlying true self[106] sought in meditation.

All our inner and outer babbling and restlessness is, in this perspective, just a pretext to obtain and maintain the (illusory) comfort and security of having a more substantial 'self'. The insubstantiality and elusiveness of the true self seems somewhat frightening to us, and so we work hard trying to

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[106] This is often referred to by Buddhists as the non-self, or more paradoxically still as the non-existent self. But it would be more accurate to characterize it as the non-phenomenal self, to distinguish it from the phenomenal self (self in the sense of ego).

produce a more substantial and manifest expression or substitute.

Meditation on the (true) self is daring to venture out into the empty internal space of egolessness. It is the adventure of inner space travel, more daunting perhaps than outer space travel.

Rather than dismiss the self on ideological grounds (as some people do, wishing to seem profound or fashionable), it is important to meditate on the self. This meditation consists in observing how we actually regard our self.

The sense of 'I' or 'me' is perhaps first of all physiological – consisting of the inner and outer sensations I have of 'my' body, including touch sensations, smells, tastes, sounds and sights. At first, I naïvely associate myself fully with these sensations. I do not regard them as objects relative to some more central self; they simply *are* me. I cannot at first conceive of me as someone other than the person associated with this body, this face, this voice, this way of moving, and so on. It is only at a later stage, by means of intellectual reflection, that I can reject that instinctive view as inadequate. I may for instance argue that a person can lose an arm or leg, yet still remain the same person.

I may then look for my self within more psychological aspects of my experience. Most of us attach great importance to our emotions and valuations; they feel like true expressions of our deeper self. Our desires and fears, our joys and anger, and so on, all seem to intimately describe us. Yet, as we go through life, we may realize that all such self-

expressions are not indispensable; we may change emotions, appetites and affections, yet still consider we are the same person somehow.

We may then seek to identify more precisely with our cognitions and volitions. By cognition, is meant the relation we have to apparent objects, whatever their status or nature seem. By volition, is meant the force through which we seem to determine physical actions (moving arms and legs, making facial expressions, etc.) and mental actions (imaginations, thoughts, valuations). But even here, if we reflect philosophically, we soon realize that although such acts may be expressions of some deeper self, they cannot be equated to it, because they noticeably vary in orientation and content.

The effective self must therefore be something more 'abstract'. But this abstraction cannot be in the way of a concept, **for a concept would not suffice to explain how I know myself to be the author of *particular* actions at a *given* time – a concept can only declare me the *occasional* author of *kinds of* actions**. Therefore this abstraction must be assumed and recognized to be something non-phenomenal that is directly experienced. Hence, the idea of apperception or intuition of self.

Once this idea is philosophically understood, as here explained, one can with an effort of attention, become more conscious of one's actual intuitions of self. These intuitions are generally present in everyday consciousness, but being very fine they require particular attentiveness. The most effective way to learn to notice the precise focus of self is in the course

of sitting meditation, when one is maximally calm and contemplative.

Note well here: our knowledge of the self is direct and experiential; philosophical analysis only serves *to eliminate* inappropriate or incoherent views about the self, which interfere with our positive intuition of it. We intellectually disown what cannot logically be the self, so as to open the door to refined discernment of the self.

Thereafter, meditating on the self more precisely, one will at first identify it as the Subject of cognitions and the Agent of volitions (including valuations); this is an individual self. At a higher or deeper stage, if one perseveres in meditation and other virtues, one may realize and get to contemplate the universal self (or so we are taught by many traditions).

On the basis of the preceding insights, I would recommend the following as an effective meditation on the self[107]:

> *Turn your gaze on yourself; with eyes open, with eyes closed.*
>
> *Anything phenomenal you see, hear, sense or feel is not you.*
>
> *Think, without words: "this is not me"; move on from it.*
>
> *What is left? Look for yourself. Do you find anything?*

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[107] This exercise is comparable in effect to the "original face" *koan*.

This meditation could be characterized as a 'method of the residue'. It consists in eliminating from consideration sensory or mental experiences that cannot rightly be identified with the self (since it is non-phenomenal); we are then left only with the intuitive experience of it. Practice of this technique increases one's sensitivity to apperception, teaching us to be aware of something always present in us to which we usually pay little attention because we are blinded to it by the more noticeable phenomenal percepts.

3. Behold the Mind

Judging by a collection of essays attributed to Bodhidharma[108], the latter's teaching of Zen meditation was quite introverted. He keeps stressing the futility of physical acts and rituals, and stresses the necessity of "*beholding the mind*", to achieve enlightenment/liberation. This message is repeated throughout the volume in various words. For instance:

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[108] *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, consisting of four essays. Like the translator, Red Pine, I assume their author is indeed Bodhidharma; but who the genial author(s) is/are, is ultimately not very important: some human being(s) had this interesting teaching to transmit to us. I notice that D. T. Suzuki, in his *First Series* of *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, (pp. 178), mentions six (not just four) Bodhidharma essays as quite well-known and popular in Japan today. While acknowledging the Zen spirit of all those essays, Suzuki considers only two of them as likely to have been written by the first patriarch of Zen.

> *Responding, perceiving, arching your eyebrows, blinking your eyes, moving your hands and feet, it's all your miraculously aware nature. And this nature is the mind. And the mind is the buddha… Someone who sees his own nature finds the Way… is a buddha."* (P. 29.)

The implication here is that buddhahood (ultimate realization) is not something far away, like the peak of a high mountain difficult to climb. It is something close by, attainable by a mere change of outlook. That is, the separation between samsara and nirvana is paper-thin: on one side, you are in samsara, and on the other, in nirvana. In his words:

> *Seeing through the mundane and witnessing the sublime is less than an eye-blink away. Realization is now.* (P. 113.)

The transition is not to be achieved by elaborate external deeds, but by acute attentiveness. Thus, he states:

> *People who seek blessings by concentrating on external works instead of internal cultivation are attempting the impossible*. (P. 95.)

Even so, in view of the ambiguity of the word "mind" the advice to behold the mind remains somewhat difficult to understand precisely. For "mind" (to my mind) in the largest sense includes every aspect of the psyche:

1. The *real self* (or soul or spirit), which stands as Subject of all acts of consciousness (i.e.

awareness of any sort) and the Agent of all acts of volition (will) and valuation (valuing or disvaluing anything). This 'entity' is without phenomenal characteristics ("empty" in Buddhist parlance), and so intuited (apperceived) rather than perceived, note well.

2. The *faculties or inner acts* of that self – viz. consciousness, volition and valuation. These intentional expressions of the real self are also in themselves devoid of any phenomenal aspects, and so intuited rather than perceived. Here, we must carefully distinguish between the *fact* (or relation) of consciousness and the *content* (or object) of consciousness[109], as well as distinguish the Subject who is conscious from the particular act of consciousness. And similar distinctions apply to volition and valuation.

3. The *illusory self* (or ego), a collection of body and mind phenomena that the real self habitually delusively (at least partly delusively) identifies with itself. This composite 'entity' includes a multiplicity of changing mental phenomena (i.e. mental projections, memories, imaginations, concepts, verbal descriptions, emotions) and physical phenomena (sensations, sense-perceptions, physical feelings), and is

[109] There is no awareness without content (i.e. object); one is here aware of another act of awareness whose content is in turn something else.

ordinarily confused with the real self. The ego is constantly crystallizing in our mental outlook, if we do not work hard to oppose this seemingly natural tendency[110].

4. The *physical infrastructure* of the psyche and its workings; i.e. the nervous system, including the brain, spine and nerves, the physiological characteristics of humans that are involved in sensory, motor and emotive functions. This is one sense or aspect of the term "mind" as colloquially used; it is sometimes the intent of the more specific term "unconscious mind". It is appropriate to refer to these physical structures and events as pertaining to the mind, insofar as they apparently constitute the interface between the material and the mental and spiritual domains; the mind is supported and fed by them and acts on the body and the world beyond it through them.

Note the difference between the last two of these factors of the psyche. The third refers to inner phenomena, a private subjective self-perception (which thereafter may have social ramifications), whereas the fourth refers to objective phenomena

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[110] Meditation is precisely the most effective tool for overcoming our built-in tendency to ego formation. Even so, one may at any moment fall back into old ego habits; for example, the other day a young woman looked at me in a certain way, and I found myself flattered and captivated.

(knowable only from the outside, even for the body's owner).[111]

Now, when he recommends our "beholding the mind" Bodhidharma is obviously not referring to the third aspect of the psyche, the perceived (phenomenal) aspect; the ego is (rightly) the *bête noire* of the Buddhist.

He does sometimes seem to be referring to the fourth aspect of mind, the mystery of the mind's wordless power over the body; for instance, when he states that no deluded person "understands the movement of his own hands and feet," or more explicitly put:

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[111] In this regard, it is important not to confuse the latter 'objectivity' with an exclusive standard of truth, as do certain modern "scientists". Such Behaviorism, advocated under a pretext of positivism or radical empiricism, is a non-scientific ideological stance that would more accurately be described as narrow or extremely materialist. It is epistemologically fallacious, because its proponents deliberately ignore a major portion of common personal experience (viz. introspective data), and formulate their theories on the basis of an arbitrary selection of experiential data (viz. physical phenomena). Really, what this anti-phenomenological doctrine signifies is that the convenience of certain low-level laboratory technicians is to be elevated to the status of a philosophy of mind! The psychological motive behind this doctrine is an ailment that afflicts more and more people nowadays: it is a deep personal *fear of introspection* – i.e. of confronting the mental and spiritual aspects of one's psyche.

> *…every movement or state is all your mind. At every moment, where language can't go, that's your mind*[112].

But mostly, Bodhidharma seems to be referring to either the first or to the second of the above-listed factors – i.e. to the intuited (non-phenomenal) aspects of the psyche.

> *If you can simply concentrate your mind's inner light and behold its outer illumination, you'll dispel the three poisons and drive away the six thieves once and for all. And without effort you'll gain possession of an infinite number of virtues, perfections and doors to the truth.* (P. 113.)

Sometimes, his emphasis seems to be on the real self; as when he writes: "No karma can restrain this real body" (p. 21), "Awaken to your original body and mind" (p. 31); "Your real body has no sensation, etc." (p. 39), or further (emphasizing the non-phenomenal nature of the real self):

> *The buddha is your real body, your original mind. This mind has no form or characteristics, no cause or effect, no tendons or bones… But this mind isn't outside the material body… Without this mind we can't move. The body has no awareness.* (P. 43.)

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[112] P. 23. This makes me think of Tai Chi, which is a meditation on movement, on the relation between the mind and physical movement. Similarly in Yoga.

Sometimes, it seems to be on the acts of consciousness, and the related acts of volition and valuation, of that real self; for example:

> *Language and behavior, perception and conception are all functions of the moving mind. All motion is the mind's motion. Motion is its function… Even so, the mind neither moves nor functions, because the essence of its functioning is emptiness and emptiness is essentially motionless.* (Pp. 43-44.)

All this gives me the idea of a meditation consisting of 'awareness of awareness'. In this meditation, one focuses on *the one who is aware* (oneself) and/or on *the fact of awareness* (as distinct from its content). Whatever material or mental[113] phenomenal objects come to our attention, we simply ignore them and rather pay attention to *our being conscious* of them. The objects come and go during the meditation, but the Subject and consciousness endure and are focused on persistently.

It may be suggested that the emphasis ought to be on the awareness rather than on the one aware, for there is a danger in the latter case that one may get fixated on an ego representation of self rather than on the real self. Moreover, my experience is that meditative insight seems to hit a peak when the impression of self seems to disappear; one seems to face the

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[113] In the narrower sense of 'mind' – referring to *phenomenal* events (memories, imaginations, dreams, verbal thoughts, etc.) only. Note in passing that the term 'mind' colloquially also often refers to the *mindspace*, the presumed extension *in which* mental phenomena occur.

surrounding world unburdened by an extraneous presence. Thus, even if the self is not really absent (since it is being conscious), it is best to behave *as if* it does not exist. For this reason, we should describe this exercise more narrowly as meditation on awareness.

Be mindful of the miracle of your being aware, or of your awareness as such, whether directed outward or inward. Bodhidharma says: "*Buddha* is Sanskrit for what you call *aware, miraculously aware*"[114]. The sense of wonder when observing consciousness is, he clearly suggests, essential to enlightenment[115].

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[114] Verbatim from the present translation; on p. 29.

[115] It is interesting to note in passing how far this viewpoint is from the view of some Buddhists (more 'Hinayana' in outlook, perhaps) that Enlightenment is the actual *extinction* of consciousness (and volition and all other aspects of selfhood). For Bodhidharma (a 'Mahayana' teacher), the purpose of it all is to reach a summit of consciousness, not *un*consciousness. The difference is perhaps due to a different reading of the twelve *nidanas* doctrine (on the chain of causation of samsaric existence). According to that, the first three causes in the chain are ignorance, actions and consciousness; these clearly refer respectively to lack of spiritual understanding, acting in accordance with such incomprehension, and the narrow and delusive consciousness emerging from such action. It is not consciousness *per se* which is the problem (as some seem to think), but the *limited and limiting* consciousness of ordinary existence. The solution is therefore not the annihilation of consciousness, but its maximal intensification and expansion. Thus, consciousness as such is not a disvalue, but a value. (In accord with this divergence in interpretation, the Hinayana branch tends to regard Emptiness as nothingness, literally a negative,

Cultivate this wonderment. Don't take consciousness for granted, making it invisible to itself. Realize the marvel that one thing (you) can see another (whatever you look at, including yourself). Wow! How can such a thing be?

At first, such meditation requires effort; but one can eventually reach an effortless level of concentration that may be characterized as contemplation. Note well that the true object of such meditation on awareness itself is not phenomenal – it has no visual or auditory or tactile or gustatory or olfactory qualities. It is truly spiritual and purely immaterial, and is for this reason likened to a transparent empty space.

Of course, it is not much use to take note of one's awareness just momentarily; one has to persevere in that effort for some time. At the same time, one should beware of making this a "gaining idea"[116], i.e. of letting such effort become a distraction in itself. One cannot grab hold of results in meditation, but must proceed gently, with some detachment.

I have personally tried such meditation on awareness repeatedly lately, and it seems to be an effective way to discard passing perceptions, fancies and thoughts, and attain a more dilated and contemplative state of mind. Although I cannot yet claim to have had the

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whereas the Mahayana branch stresses the positive meaning of it, as the "Buddha-nature" underlying all things.)

[116] Advice often given in his books by a modern disciple of Bodhidharma, Shunryu Suzuki.

lofty experience of beholding the mind that Bodhidharma recounts, I have found it worthwhile.

4. The Buddhist No-Soul Theory

One of the major and distinctive theses of Buddhism is the theory of "no-soul" – (or *anatta* in Pali, *anatman* in Sanskrit). This is part of a larger thesis that nothing has a real essence, the individual soul or self being here conceived as a special case of the concept of essence, i.e. as the essence of a person.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine arose in reaction to a thesis, labeled "Eternalism", which was apparently normative in Indian philosophy at the time, *that 'things' consist of eternal, unchanging 'essences', substantial and causally independent entities*. Similarly, with regard to the special case of souls.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine was based on the assumption that the belief in such "essences", including in particular the belief in souls (as the essences of our bodily and mental existences), is the root cause of our imprisonment in samsara (i.e. our fundamental ignorance and suffering), so that its abandonment would put us in nirvana (i.e. enlighten and liberate us).

There has been a theory very similar to Eternalism in Western philosophy, namely the "Monadology" of Gottfried Liebniz. This was of course an extremist ontological idea, due to a simplistic reading of predication as stating that the predicate is literally "contained in" the subject. That is, that whatever is

predicable of anything must be "part of its nature", and therefore inextricably intrinsic and peculiar to it – so that the world is composed of a multiplicity of eternal substances each of which is an island onto itself.

Opposite such inaccurate philosophy, the Buddhist counter-theory would indeed *prima facie* appear to be a laudable improvement. But, I submit, the Eternalist theory serves Buddhism as a convenient philosophical 'red herring'. It is surely not the commonsense or scientific worldview (which are effectively ignored by Buddhism); and the Buddhist rebuttal constitutes another extremist position (in the opposite direction), which altogether denies the reality of any essences by allegedly reducing everything in the world to an infinite crisscross of mutual dependencies (the co-dependence or interdependence theory).

Although Buddhists would protest that their thesis is not the opposite extreme, viz. Nihilism, but a middle way between those two extremes, it is hard to see how we might reasonably not judge it as an extreme view. It is true that there are two, nay three, Buddhist positions in this context. One, attributed to the Theravada branch, of ultimately a total void (extinction in meditation); another, attributed to the mainstream Mahayana branch, of an ultimate original ground (an underlying universal spiritual substance of sorts, albeit one piously declared 'void' or 'empty'); and a third, claimed by Zen adepts, of neither this nor that, i.e. fence-sitting between the previous two positions (hence, more 'middle way' than them).

Of these three, the said mainstream Mahayana option would seem the least Nihilistic, in that it admits of some sort of real existence – viz. the existence of the "original ground". Logically, however, this Monist thesis (to which I personally tend to adhere) should logically be classed as an Eternalist philosophy of sorts, since the original ground is beyond impermanence. Impermanent appearances continuously bubble forth from it, but it is everywhere and ever one and the same calm fullness. Thus, the other two Buddhist theses, which are more clearly anti-Eternalist, can reasonably be viewed as Nihilist rather than middle way.

The commonsense view (to which most of us adhere, consciously or not) is rather noncommittal on such issues. It is truly a middle way, without prejudice. It does not draw any such general conclusions offhand. It neither reduces everything to independent substances nor reduces everything to mutually dependent non-substances, but remains open to there being perhaps a bit of both these extreme scenarios present in the real world, and other options besides. At a more scientific level, this common view becomes the "laws of nature" approach – the idea that there are various degrees of being and forms of dependencies, which (in the physical domain, at least, and possibly in the mental domain to some extent) are best expressed through quantitative formulas.

In such ordinary viewpoint, there seems to be some concrete 'substance(s)' in the world, but not everything is reducible to this concept. Furthermore, substantial things need not be individually permanent, but change is possible from one form to

another. However, Physics does assume as one of its basic premises a law of conservation of matter and energy – i.e. that the total quantity of physical substance is constant. Moreover, that which is impermanent lasts for a while. Things that exist must exist for some time (some more, some less) – they cannot logically be so impermanent as to "exist" for no time at all.

Anyway, the concept of essence is certainly not, in our commonplace view, equated to that of substance. Essences are rarely substances, but usually structures or processes that seem to be generally and exclusively present in the phenomena at hand, and so are used to define them. Essences are usually *abstractions*, i.e. rational insights or concepts, rather than concrete percepts or objects of perception. Abstraction claims validity of insight without claiming to be literally within reality; though it depends on a Subject to occur, it in principle correctly interprets the Object. One cannot deny abstraction as such without resorting to abstractions – so such a skeptical position would be logically untenable.

In the Buddhist view, in contradistinction, the apparent or alleged essences of things are *conventional*, or even *purely nominal*, and souls are no exceptions to this rule. By "conventional" (and all the more so by "nominal") is here meant that we, the people who believe in essences or souls, project this idea onto reality, whereas reality has in fact no such thing in it. In Buddhist epistemology, people ordinarily use their mind conventionally (or under the bad influence of words) in this manner, projecting onto reality things that are absent in it.

How (we may ask) do we know that reality is not as it appears to the ordinary mind? We know this, according to this theory, through enlightened consciousness. Thus, Buddhist epistemology, while invalidating ordinary consciousness, affirms the optimistic idea that we can transcend it and see things as they are. This can, incidentally, be compared and contrasted to Kantian epistemology, which likewise claims our phenomenal knowledge to be imperfect, but distinctively puts the perfection of 'noumenal' knowledge beyond our reach. While this theory of Immanuel Kant's is inconsistent with itself, the Buddhist theory is not so in that respect.

Still, note well the difference between ordinary 'abstractionism' and Buddhist conventionalism or nominalism. For the Buddhists, as in Kant, our minds *invent* abstractions without any objective support; whereas in ordinary rational epistemology, abstraction is *an act of rational insight* – i.e. it does record something objective, which is not a pure figment of the imagination.

In addition to the said epistemological explanation or rationalization of its no-soul thesis, Buddhist philosophers propose various ontological claims and arguments. According to them, all things, including apparent souls, lack essence, because they are impermanent and discontinuous. They say this can be readily observed, and that in any case it can be logically argued – as well as being evident to anyone who is enlightened.

With regard to observation, they claim (much like David Hume later) to have looked for a soul

everywhere within themselves and never found one. The soul is therefore (to them) an illusion of conventionally minded people – who are deluded by their ego (bodily and mental appearances of selfhood) into believing that there is something (i.e. someone) at the center of all their experience and thought.

But we must note that this is of course not a pure observation of an absence of soul, but a generalization from a number of failures to positively observe a soul. The generalization of negation could be right, but it does not have quite the same epistemological status as a positive observation. There is nothing empirically or logically necessary about the no-soul claim. At least, not from the point of view of an unenlightened person; and it is hard to see how an enlightened person could avoid equal reliance on generalization.

Moreover, we can fault their inference and larger argument by pointing out that it is absurd to look for the soul in the phenomenal realm (i.e. with reference to perceived sensible qualities, like sights, sounds, odors, savors, tactile feelings, whether mental or physical), if the soul happens to be a non-phenomenal entity (something intuited, which has in itself no phenomenal aspects).

It is worth additionally clarifying that, though our soul is a non-material, spiritual substance at the center of a multitude of mental and physical phenomena, it is not their "essence" or defining character. Our soul is "us", our self – the subject of our cognitions and agent of our volitions and valuations. It is an intellectual error to try and identify us with things that

are only associated with us. We are not one with or part of our minds and/or bodies, but something beyond them, though in their midst, cognizing and interacting with them in various ways.

With regard to impermanence, Buddhists apparently consider that, since our soul always has an apparent beginning (our birth) and end (our death), it is necessarily illusory. In their view – reflecting the general assumption, it seems, of ancient Indian philosophy, what is temporary (or passing) is necessarily illusory; only the permanent (or eternal) is real. Moreover, in their view, nothing is eternal – by which they mean, surely, that nothing phenomenal is eternal; for they certainly believe in the eternity of enlightenment or of the underlying "nature of mind" or "ground of all being" – even if they affirm this universal substratum to be ultimately "empty".

But this viewpoint can be contested. To be real is to be a fact, i.e. to occur or have occurred. How long or short this fact is or was or will be is surely irrelevant to its status as a fact. An illusion is something that is or was thought to be but is not or was not. To identify reality with eternity and illusion with impermanence is to confuse two separate issues. I have never come across a convincing argument why such equations ought to be made. Surely, one can imagine eternal illusions and transient realities. Thus, we should consider that the issue of the soul's persistence, i.e. whether the soul is eternal or as short-lived as the body and mind evidently are, has nothing to do with its reality or illusion.

The Buddhist argument against the soul also appeals to the general idea of discontinuity, i.e. the idea that everything changes all the time, and so nothing can ever be pointed to as "one and the same thing" from one moment to the next. This idea is presented as an observation – but it is clearly a mere hypothesis, an abstraction extrapolated from an observation. Given the observed fact of change, one can equally well suppose that some sort of continuity underlies pairs of moments. Since all we actually experience are the successive moments, the issue as to whether some residue of each moment is to be found in the next is open to debate. Thus, to speak of discontinuity is already to *assume* something beyond observation.

Furthermore, even given a seeming discontinuity, we cannot draw a definite conclusion that there *really* is discontinuity – let alone that this is true in all cases. Discontinuity is an *abstraction* from experience; it is not a pure object of experience. Additionally, the concept of *universal* discontinuity remains always somewhat open to doubt, because it is an inductive assumption – at best, a mere generalization. Moreover, the internal consistency of this concept is unsure, since it implies a *permanence* of discontinuity across time. That is, if we regard abstraction as necessarily implying some sort of continuity (whether of the object or of the subject), the concept of discontinuity is self-contradictory when taken to an extreme.

This insight is especially pertinent in the case of the soul, which is here both subject and object. We could not possibly claim to know for a fact that the soul is discontinuous (i.e. a succession of discrete

momentary souls), because such a statement claims for the soul to the ability to *transcend* discontinuity sufficiently to see that the soul is discontinuous. That is to say, to make such a claim, the soul (as subject) must be *present in the time straddling* two or more of its alleged merely momentary instances or segments (i.e. the soul as object). This is clearly a self-contradiction. Thus, the Buddhist argument in favor of the thesis that the soul is non-existent does not survive serious logical scrutiny.

Another Buddhist claim regarding the soul is that it is subject to "dependent origination" or "conditioning" – i.e. that its actual existence, as a unit of being, as a fact – is impossible in isolation, is only possible in relation to all other things (which are themselves similarly interdependent). However, this theory – that everything in the universe could only exist in the presence of everything else in the universe, and that a smaller universe (holding just one of those things, or some but not all of them) is inconceivable – is just a speculation; it is not proved in any way.

Moreover, we could again ask whether this theory is consistent with itself. If it is, like all sublunary things, something dependent or conditioned – and it surely is so, notably with reference to human experience and thought – how can it be claimed as a universal and eternal truth? Any claim that the relative is absolute seems paradoxical and open to doubt. There has to be something absolute to anchor the relative on. To claim everything dependent on everything else and vice versa is still to claim this big soup of interdependent things to be an independent thing. And if this in turn is not an irreducible fact, something

else must be. There is no way to be an absolute relativist!

The belief that something can be "both A and not-A", or "neither A nor not-A", seems to be the essence of all mysticism (in the pejorative sense). The claim to make no claim is itself a claim – there is no escape from this logic. To claim that everything is illusory is to claim this as a fact – i.e. as something that is not illusory. To claim there is nothing, no person, at the core of our being might seem superficially at first sight logically possible, i.e. not self-contradictory – until we ask just who is making the claim and to whom it is addressed. Inanimate objects are not concerned with such issues. A non-self can neither be deluded nor realize its delusion. Any occurrence of cognition, valuation or volition implies a self.

5. Self and Enlightenment

The phenomenal self. When Buddhists speak of one's 'consciousness' or 'mind' they are often referring to what could be described as one's sphere of experience at any moment. Moment after moment, all around the central point where cognition actually takes place, there is a cloud of phenomena: bodily sensations and sentiments, appearances of surrounding sights and sounds, and mental images and sounds, verbal and non-verbal thoughts, and moods. It is important during meditation (and eventually, beyond it) to get to be and to remain aware of this totality of variegated experience, and to

realize the great weight of this experience in one's life.

According to Buddhists, this phenomenal mass is all there really is to one's life – and thence they conclude that there is no self. This phenomenal cloud, they claim, is what we call the self, it is the whole of the self. Moreover, according to the Yogacara school, this cloud is *only* mind (since, they argue, all experience is necessarily mediated by consciousness). But I beg to differ on such views – and claim that we must pay attention to *the center* of that sphere of experience too.

At the center is the self, the one who is experiencing. This Subject experiencing the changing phenomenal objects is the real meaning of the word self. It is a non-phenomenal entity, who is not experienced outside itself, but is known to itself by intuition. That is the soul or spirit. Buddhists philosophers deny it, but I am not convinced by their reasoning. Even so, I am convinced that Enlightenment is (as they claim) the central goal of human existence – the meaning of it all.

The Jewish core value is, of course, service of God, i.e. fulfilling the commandments given in the written and oral Torah. But, it seems to me, the higher one tends spiritually, the better one can fulfill such a mission. Enlightenment means the perfection of wisdom. So there's no contradiction between these values. The more perfect the tool, the better it does the job.

The value of Enlightenment. The Buddhist idea of Enlightenment (*boddhi*) is one of its great

contributions to human aspiration and inspiration. I would like Judaism to more consciously value and pursue this goal, through meditation. Of course, Judaism would never accept the idea that Enlightenment makes one a 'god'. I agree with this crucial caveat.

There are some significant points of similitude between the Judaic-Christian-Islamic group of religions and the Hindu-Buddhist group. One point all (or at least some schools in all) might agree with, is the notion that we are all rooted in an infinite God or Original Ground and that we will all one day return to this Source. Indeed, these grand religions may be viewed as teachings on how to prepare for or accelerate such a return.

Now, both groups would consider that when an individual human manages somehow to merge back into God (or whatever the Source is called), God remains unaffected, i.e. nothing has been added to Him. From the latter's viewpoint there was never separation, no breach of unity. Where the two groups would differ, however, is in the status acquired by an individual who fuses with the Deity. The religions of Indian origin would regard such a person as having become a 'god', or even identified with the one and only God; whereas the Middle Eastern religions would consider the individual as ceasing to exist as a distinct entity.

I would refer to the tacit image of a drop of water flowing back into the ocean: certainly, that drop loses all 'personality', and moreover it becomes a mere part

of and does not become equated with the ocean as a whole.

10. CHAPTER TEN

Critique of the Buddhist Five Skandhas doctrine

Drawn from a yet to be published work,
this essay was first posted in 2016 as a preview
on the author's blog.

In this essay, I critically comment on the Buddhist 'five skandhas' doctrine. This doctrine is attributed to the Buddha himself and considered as a core belief of Buddhism[117]*. However, in my humble opinion, in view of its evident intellectual limitations, this doctrine should not be given such elevated status. Buddhism and its founder have much more intelligent ideas to offer the world. That being the case, the present critique of the five skandhas doctrine should not be taken as a general critique of Buddhism or its founder.*

Although often listed in the literature, the five skandhas are rarely clearly defined and expounded on. The Sanskrit word *skandha* (Pali: *khanda*) means 'aggregate' – and apparently refers to a building-block, of the mind or perhaps of the world. In Sanskrit, the five skandhas listed are: *rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara, vijnana* (in Pali:

[117] According to the Wikipedia article on this topic, the American Buddhist monk Thanissaro, in *Handful of Leaves*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed. 2006, p. 309, alleges that the Buddha "never defined a 'person' in terms of the aggregates" and that this doctrine is not pan-Buddhist. To my mind, if he said that (I have not seen it with my own eyes), he may well be right.

rupa, vedana, sanna, sankhara, vinnana). In the dozens of English texts that I have read over the years, I have seen these terms translated in various ways, and with rare exceptions barely explained. It is not made clear whether these terms are essentially phenomenological, psychological, metaphysical, ontological or epistemological. When interpretations are proposed, they differ considerably from one text to another. Nevertheless, this being an important doctrine in Buddhism, it is worth analyzing and evaluating.

1. My Own Phenomenological Reading

Before studying the normative interpretations of these terms, permit me to present my own initial interpretations, even while admitting that they are largely inaccurate historically. That way, the reader will know where I am coming from, and will be better able to follow my thinking. When I first came across the five skandhas in Buddhist books, I took them to constitute a sort of *phenomenology*, i.e. a list of the different categories of being or appearance, one that suggests an ontological and epistemological theory insofar as the list distinguishes and interrelates the categories in certain ways. Consider the following reading:

- *Rupa*, usually translated as 'form', could be taken to refer to *the apparently external and material world*, which contains the phenomena of all shapes and sizes in motion that we seem to witness through our senses, the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. This field of experience is quantitatively overwhelming, and takes up most of our existence, but

is of course not the whole story, not the whole of our world.

- *Vedana*, usually translated as 'sensation or feeling', could be taken to refer more specifically to *the phenomena we experience as within our personal body*. In a sense, these are part of the external and material world, since our body is apparently part of it; but in another sense, they are closer to home (i.e. more internal) and less material (i.e. containing some phenomena notably different from those we experience further afield). In this context, our touch sensations of bodies beyond our own body are feelings, as are all the myriad physical sensations we experience within our bodies, such as sexual feelings (desire, satisfaction), digestive feelings (hunger, thirst, satiety, stomach aches, sensations when urinating or defecating, etc.), and feelings in other internal organs (headaches, heart beats, heartburn, muscular cramps, nerve pains, etc.). Here would also be included emotional reactions experienced within the body, such as love (a flutter or warmth in the heart region), fear (a flutter or warmth in the stomach region), etc. In short, all the pleasures and pains we may be subject to within our bodies, whether they stem from physical or mental causes. Also to be included under this heading would be our sensations of volition (acts of will), i.e. the sense we have that we move our body parts around and our whole body through space; and therefore also our sensations of velleity (pre-volitions, attitudes, intentions). Note however that, while volitions and intentions may have phenomenal aspects, they are largely non-phenomenal; i.e. they are intuited rather than perceived.

- *Samskara*, usually translated as ‘mental formations’, and sometimes as ‘impulses to volition’, could be taken to refer to *the inner phenomena we experience through our faculties of memory and imagination* (the latter being voluntary or involuntary manipulation of memory items to produce somewhat new images, sounds, etc.). This includes the images of visualizations, the sounds of verbal thoughts, dreams (during sleep) and hallucinations (the latter being stronger projections, apparently into the space where matter resides, of imaginations). These phenomena resemble those experienced as external and material, in that they also have shape, color, sound, etc., and yet are experienced as substantially different, of a different ‘stuff’, so much so that we give them a different name (they are characterized as mental, as opposed to material), even if we do regard the mental phenomena, or phantasms, as derivatives of the material ones (through memory of experiences). Such mental phenomena obviously can and do condition (variously incite or otherwise affect) subsequent more overt actions.
- *Samjna*, usually translated as ‘perception’, but often as ‘apperception’, ‘conception’ or ‘cognition’, could be taken to refer to our various *objects of cognition*, i.e. whatever we intuit (non-phenomenal concretes), whatever we perceive apparently through the physical senses or mentally through memory and imagination (phenomenal concretes), and all the abstractions and theories (based on the preceding items) that we construct through conceptual insight and reasoning (including negation, similarity, dissimilarity, etc.). Thus, *samjna* would include our non-phenomenal

impressions (apperceptions), our phenomenal experiences (perceptions), and the concepts and thoughts (conceptions) emerging from the preceding through which we get, not merely to experience things, but also to order and interrelate them, and thus to understand them (or be confused by them) to various degrees. Thus, note well, *samjna* focuses on objects in the context of their being cognized, i.e. as contents of cognition (and not as objects apart from cognition).

- *Vijnana*, usually translated as 'consciousness', could be taken to refer to *the fact of cognition*, the cognizing, as against its object (content), and its subject (the self apparently doing the cognizing). Consciousness has to be listed separately because it is substantially different from any of the other categories in our enumeration. Note well that, to assure a complete enumeration, this term in my view would have to include both the *relation of cognition* and *the apparent self or soul* which is related by it to the object. This refers to the self which we all routinely intuit – even though Buddhists deny the latter's reality and consider it as illusory. This understanding is not entirely foreign to Buddhist practice, which tends to use the terms 'consciousness' and 'mind' in an ambiguous manner that sometimes really (though typically without frankly admitting it) intends the self (i.e. the one who is conscious)[118]. Moreover, it should be stressed that the self not only cognizes, but also wills and values – i.e. that *volition and valuation* are among its powers as

[118] I have often in my past writings pointed out the vagueness of the terms mind and consciousness in the discourse of Buddhist philosophers, and explained there how it allows them to get away with much fallacious reasoning.

well as cognition, and that these three faculties are interdependent and do not exist without each other.

That is to say in our present perspective: while *rupa* refers to external and material objects, *vedana* to more specifically bodily objects, and *samskara* to mental objects, and while *samjna* identifies these same categories of objects as contents of cognitive acts, *vijnana* refers to the implied knowing (and willing and valuing) acts and to the spiritual entities (ourselves) apparently engaged in them. From this we see that the various phenomenological categories here enumerated overlap somewhat: *rupa* includes at least part of *vedana*, *samskara* is a side-effect of *rupa* and *vedana*, *samjna* includes the preceding experiences and adds their more complex conceptual and rational products, while *vijnana* focuses on the subject and the relationship of consciousness (and volition and valuation) between it and these various concrete and abstract objects.[119]

The above phenomenological account is merely, to repeat, my personal projection: it is the way I have in the past tended to interpret the five skandhas doctrine in view of the terminology used for it in English. This is the way I, given my own philosophical background, would build a theory of knowledge and being if I was forced to use these

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[119] Note that in my listing, *samjna* is placed after *samskara*, which is not the usual order of listing. I could also have placed *samjna* after *vijnana*, since the latter category adds objects of cognition to be considered by the former. However, *vijnana* also has *samjna* as one of its objects, since the latter involves consciousness and a conscious subject; so the chosen order of presentation seems most logical.

five given terms, even while aware that such theory contains some non-orthodox perspectives.

2. A More Orthodox Psychological Reading

However, Buddhists and other commentators present these terms in a rather different light. I will use as my springboard an interesting account I have seen on this topic by Caroline Brazier in *Buddhist Psychology*. Let us first look at this *psychological* approach, which I think is close to the original intent of the five skandhas doctrine, given that Buddhism is concerned with 'enlightening and liberating' people rather than with merely informing them to satisfy their curiosity. She writes:

> "The skandhas are the stages in a process whereby the self-prison is created and maintained. At each stage, perception is infiltrated by personal agendas that create distortion. Delusion predominates…. Each of us continually seeks affirmation that we are that person who we have assumed ourselves to be. Situations that disturb this process are avoided or reinterpreted, and the self appears to become more substantial" (pp. 92-93).

Her exposition of the stages is as follows (summarily put, paraphrasing her). The first stage is *rupa*, which is finding indications of self in everything we come in contact with; i.e. grasping onto all sorts of things because they reinforce our belief in having a self, and indeed one with a specific identity we are attached to. Next in the process comes *vedana*, which refers to our immediate value-judgments in relation to things that we come across (people, events, whatever); we may find them attractive, repulsive or

confusing – but in any case, we have a visceral reaction to them that affects our subsequent responses to them. Thirdly comes *samjna*, which consists in spinning further fantasies and thoughts around the things we have already encountered and initially reacted to; due to this, we are unconsciously carried off into certain habitual behavior-patterns. *Samskara* refers to these action and thought responses which we have, through repetitive past choices, conditioned ourselves into doing almost automatically. Finally comes *vijnana*, which refers more broadly to the mentality (perspectives and policies) we adopt to ensure our self is well-endowed and protected in all circumstances.

These five stages constitute a vicious circle, in that the later stages affect and reinforce the earlier ones. They ensure that we enter and remain stuck in the cycle of birth, suffering and death. The important thing to note is that the purpose of this psychological description is to make us aware of the ways we ordinarily operate, so that we may over time learn to control and change those ways, and become enlightened and liberated. As Brazier puts it: "Buddhism is not a matter of just going with the flow. It is about changing course" (p. 95). In this approach, the skandhas doctrine is a practical rather than theoretical one. It is a 'skillful means', rather than an academic exposition. It is concerned with the ways we commonly form and maintain of our 'self'.

Needless to say, this looks like a very penetrating and valuable teaching[120]. The question for us to ask at this point, however, is whether it is entirely correct. That is to

[120] One that could be, and no doubt is, used in meditation.

say, assuming the above sketch is an accurate rendition of the Buddhist theory of human psychology, is this the way we ordinary (unenlightened, unliberated) human beings actually function? Brazier, being a committed Buddhist, takes this for granted rather uncritically. I would answer that though this theory seems partially correct, it is certainly not fully so. What we have here, at first sight, is a portrait of someone who is (very roughly put): very narrow-minded (*rupa*), instinctive (*vedana*), irrational (*samjna*), habitual (*samskara*), and selfish (*vijnana*). This may fully describe some people, and it may partly describe all of us, but it is certainly not a complete picture of the ordinary human psyche.

What is manifestly missing in this portrait are the higher faculties of human beings – their intelligence, their reason and their freewill. It could be argued that these higher faculties are present in the background, in the implication that people can (and occasionally do) become aware of their said lowly psychological behavior and make an effort to overcome it. But if so, this should be explicitly included in the description. That is to say, intelligence, reason and freewill should be presented as additional skandhas. But they are not so presented – it is not made clear that humans can function more wisely, and look at the facts of a situation objectively and intelligently, and decide through conscious reasoning how to best respond, and proceed with conscious volition to do so. In any case, these higher faculties are routinely used by most people, and not just used for the purpose of attaining enlightenment and liberation.

Why are these higher faculties, which are common enough, even if to varying degrees, not mentioned in the Buddhist account as integral factors of the human psyche?

I would suggest that the main reason is that the self (or soul) has to be dogmatically kept out of it[121]. The central pillar of the Buddhist theory of enlightenment and liberation is that our belief that we have a self is the deep cause of all our suffering, because a self is necessarily attached to its own existence, and the way out of this suffering is to realize that we do not really have a self and so do not need to attach to anything. In such a context, the human psyche must necessarily be described as essentially reactive and stupid, like a ship without a helmsman, at the mercy of every wind and current. Buddhism does regard humans as able to transcend these limitations, by following the ways and means taught by the Buddha in the Dharma; but it does not (in my opinion) fully clarify the psychological processes involved in self-improvement, no doubt due to the impossibility of verbally describing them with precision and generality.

Brazier does go on to describe how Buddhist psychology conceives transcending of the skandhas. She does so in terms of the 'five omnipresent factors' being transformed into 'five rare factors' "through spiritual practice." But of course, that account does not clearly say *who* is doing the spiritual practice, and *what faculties* are involved. It does

[121] It is interesting to note in passing how modern physicists, biologist, psychologists and philosophers tend to similarly studiously ignore the human soul and its functions of cognition, volition and valuation, in their respective accounts of the world, life and humanity. But whereas Buddhism's motive is to protect its dogma of no-self, the motive of modern 'scientists' is to protect their dogma of universal materialism and determinism. The intellectual sin involved in both cases is to deliberately make things look simpler than they are so as to make them fit more easily into one's pet theory.

not acknowledge that the individual person involved (the self) has to realize (through intelligence and reason) the need for and way to such transformation, and then proceed to bring it about (through complex volitional thoughts and actions). The self and its higher faculties are not given due recognition (because, as already explained, such recognition would go against the Buddhist dogma of no-self). This is not a fault found only in Brazier's account, but in all orthodox Buddhist accounts.

Understandably, Buddhism, particularly its Zen branch, rejects excessive intellectualism. Admittedly, intelligence, reason and freewill are all very well in principle, as tools for human betterment; but used in excess – or simply misused or abused – they can also and often do exacerbate human delusion and suffering. The intellect can be compulsively used to weave complex webs that distance its victim from reality rather than bring him or her closer to it. We can by such excess become more and more artificial and divorced from our true nature. Of that danger there is no doubt; it is observable. But intellectualism is surely not the whole story concerning our said higher faculties. Surely, they play a big role in improving our understanding and behavior, both in everyday life and in longer-term more intentionally spiritual pursuits.

Moreover, we have to ask whether the five skandhas doctrine, even taken at face value, is truly consistent. We are told that *rupa* consists in viewing things in relation to self rather than objectively, that *vedana* consists in immediate likes or dislikes, that *samjna* consists in making up associations, that *samskara* consists in conditioning, and that *vijnana* consists in selfish mentality – and it is all made to seem simple and mechanical. But is it? The Buddhist account itself tells us that these events are

interrelated, i.e. stages in a process. Therefore, beneath each of them there must be complex mechanisms at play. *Rupa* must involve a certain sense of self and of its identity, to be able to select information of interest. *Vedana*, however instantaneous it may seem, cannot be immediate since it must be filtered through the subconscious scale of values of the person concerned. *Samjna* presupposes that there are older mental contents to which it associates new mental contents. *Samskara* refers to habits, which imply programming by repetition. And *vijnana* in turn implies storage of information and of valuations.

Furthermore, even if we grant that the five skandhas reflect common *tendencies* within the human psyche, it is introspectively evident that normally the self can in fact, at every one of these stages, intervene through free will based on rational considerations and conscious valuations. That is to say, faced with the ego-centricity of *rupa*, we can still choose to view things more objectively; faced with thoughtless valuations of *vedana*, we can still choose to evaluate things in a more balanced manner; faced with wild associations of *samjna*, we can still choose to put things in context more accurately; faced with our bad *samskara* habits, we can still choose to resist temptations or overpower resistances; faced with native *vijnana* selfishness, we can still choose to act with larger perspectives in mind. The human psyche is not a mechanical doll, driven by forces beyond control – there is a responsible soul at its center, able (whether immediately or gradually) to impose its will on the rest of the psyche. Buddhists cannot consistently deny all this, since they do believe in and advocate self-improvement, as the Noble Eightfold Path makes clear.

This brings us to the crux of the matter, the *determinism* tacitly involved in the five skandhas doctrine. The skandhas are imagined by Buddhists as *dharmas*, i.e. as "a series of consecutive impersonal momentary events," as Vasubandhu put it[122]. No one is making them happen, they just happen each one caused by the ones preceding it and causing the ones succeeding it. They do not happen to someone, either, even if they seem to. They are "linked to suffering," but no one suffers them. Clearly, there is logically no room, in this conception of psychological processes, for a person actually cognizing, understanding, evaluating, reasoning, deciding, choosing and engaging in action. Not only is the person removed, but the acts of cognition, valuation and volition are also removed. They are reduced to mere momentary electrical disturbances in the mental cloud[123], as it were. They are no longer special *relations* between a subject or author and other things in the mind or body. This doctrine is, really, crass reification of things that are definitely not entities.

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[122] Quoted or paraphrased (not clear which) in *Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Edward Conze. Vasubandhu was a Buddhist monk and major philosopher, fl. 4th to 5th cent. CE in Ghandara (a kingdom located astride modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan). His philosophical posture is today normative, at least among the Mahayana, but it was opposed by a Hinayana school called the Personalists, which lasted for many centuries as of 300 BCE and involved a good many monks (e.g. an estimated 30% of India's 200,000 monks in the 7th cent.). See pp. 190-197.

[123] Modern 'scientists' (I put the word in inverted commas deliberately, to signify criticism) would say much the same, but would place the electrical disturbances on the more physical plane of the brain and nervous system. The idea that the mind is a sort of very sophisticated computer is untenable, for exactly the same reasons that the idea of skandhas is untenable.

The five skandhas is clearly a mechanistic thesis, even if it is mitigated in a subterranean manner by the Buddhist faith in the possibility of enlightenment and liberation. In this view, logically, such spiritual attainment is itself merely the product of a chain of impersonal mental events, with no one initiating them and no one profiting from them[124]. This state of affairs is claimed to be known by means 'deep meditation', although it is not made clear who is doing the meditating, nor by means of what faculties or for what useful purpose. Clearly, objectively, however deep such meditation it could not possibly guarantee the verity of the alleged insights, but must needs submit them to logical evaluation in accord with the laws of thought. Scientific thought cannot accept any deep insights, or any revelations based on them, at face value; it demands rational assessment of all claims.

In truth, granting that there is some truth to the psychological processes described by the skandhas doctrine, they must be viewed more restrictively as processes of *ego*-building, rather than so radically as processes of *self*-invention. They refer, not to ways that 'we' (a never explained yet still repeatedly used grammatical subject) imagine the self or soul to exist, but

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[124] One Victoria Lavorerio, in a paper called "The self in Buddhism," has written: "If following Descartes we say that where there is a thought there is a thinker, the Buddhist would respond 'where there is a thought, there is a thought'." While rather witty, this statement is of course inane, since its author does not grasp the logical absurdities of the Buddhist no-soul thesis (and that, even though she quotes a couple of arguments of mine regarding them), but merely seeks to position herself fashionably. See her essay here: http://www.academia.edu/1489808/The_self_in_Buddhism.

to ways that we (the truly existing self or soul, our real selves) constructs and maintains a particular self-*image* that we think flattering or securing. What is evident in honest, non-dogmatic meditation is that, while such processes can surely *influence* our mental and physical behavior, i.e. make things easier or more difficult for us, they do not normally *determine* it. An influence, however strong, can always (with the appropriate attitude and effort) be overcome. At almost every moment of our existence, we remain free to choose to resist these mental forces or to give in to them. If we but make the effort to be aware, to judge and to intervene as well as we can, we remain or become effective masters of our fate.

It is only because we indeed exist as individuals, and have these powers of cognition, valuation and volition, that we can observe, identify, understand and overcome the impersonal forces described by the five skandhas doctrine. Therefore, in fact, the said doctrine, far from constituting an exhaustive listing of the basic building blocks of the human psyche, at best depicts just some surface aspects of much more complicated events and structures. Not only is the list incomplete in that it lacks overt reference to the human self and its higher faculties, but additionally its presentation of the five lower faculties (even assuming that these five faculties indeed exist) is rather superficial. For all the above reasons, and yet others, I view the five skandhas account of human psychology as deficient.

As regards enlightenment, liberation and wisdom, these are impossible without a soul and its faculties of cognition, volition and valuation. Enlightenment means perfect cognition by the soul, i.e. a consciousness as high, wide and deep and accurate as can be for the person concerned. Liberation means perfect volition by the soul, i.e. a will as

free of obstructions and as powerful as can be for the person concerned. Wisdom means perfect valuation by the soul, meaning full understanding of good and bad coupled with behavior that is accordingly fully virtuous and non-vicious. Enlightenment, liberation and wisdom are concepts only applicable to sentient beings (notably to humans and other animals, and perhaps in some sense to plants); they are irrelevant to non-spiritual entities (i.e. material and/or mental entities devoid of soul, such as skandhas, computers or fantasy creatures).

3. The Metaphysical Aspects

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (EB) defines the skandhas as "the five elements that sum up the whole of an individual's mental and physical existence." It lists them as "(1) matter, or body, the manifest form of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water; (2) sensations, or feelings; (3) perceptions of sense objects; (4) mental formations; and (5) awareness, or consciousness, of the other three mental aggregates [i.e. items 2-4]."

In most accounts I have seen, this theory is presented as descriptive of what constitutes a person. Some accounts I have seen, however, apply it more broadly, viewing the five skandhas as the constituents of the phenomenal world. In any case, this theory clearly contains an ontological thesis, insofar as it acknowledges two kinds of phenomena, the material (the first skandha) and the mental (the other four skandhas)[125]. Moreover, note in passing,

[125] I assume that the Yogacara, Mind-Only, school would advocate that matter is a sort of mental phenomenon. In that case, they would presumably advocate that the skandhas

since the above definition mentions the 'four elements', it includes a physical theory, one admittedly very vague and by today's standards rather useless[126]. Secondly, the skandhas doctrine has some epistemological implications, in that it identifies sensations or feelings, perception of sense objects, and so on – implying our ability to know *of* such things, presumably by introspection.

Furthermore, the said source (EB) explains that "The self (or soul) cannot be identified with any one of the parts, nor is it the total of the parts. All individuals are subject to constant change, as the elements of consciousness are never the same, and man may be compared to a river, which retains an identity, though the drops of water that make it up are different from one moment to the next." This statement is the metaphysical element in the skandhas doctrine, since it involves important claims regarding the ultimate nature of individuals (i.e. persons, people).

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theory concerns not only personality but the whole phenomenal world.

[126] It is worth noting, of course, that the fact that this simplistic, though ancient and widespread, theory of physics (with reference to the 'elements' of earth, air, fire and water, or similar concepts) is advocated by Buddhism is proof that this doctrine is not the product of any 'omniscience'. If the Buddha indeed formulated it or accepted it, he cannot be said to have been 'omniscient' since this is not an accurate account of the physical world. This being the case, it is permitted to also doubt he was 'omniscient' in his understanding of the mental or spiritual world. Of course, it could be argued that he appealed to the four elements theory only because it was commonly accepted in his day, in the way of a 'skillful means', without intending to endorse it.

This explanation reminds us that *the philosophical motive* of the skandhas doctrine is to buttress the Buddhist claim that we have no self or soul (*anatta*). According to this doctrine, we are only clusters of the listed five material and mental phenomena, which are in constant flux, unfolding as a succession of events, each new event being caused by those before it and causing those after it. It is stressed that none of the skandhas is the self, and neither is their sum the self. The self is not something apart from them, either. What we call the self is a mere illusion, due to our conflating these ongoing, causally-linked events and giving them a name.

The no-self idea is usually expressed by saying that the human being is 'empty of self'. This is presented as one aspect of a wider metaphysical doctrine of ultimate 'emptiness' (*shunyata*), applicable to all things in the phenomenal world. Initially, I suggest, Buddhist thought sought *to replace* the self we all naturally assume we have with the five skandhas. Since the doctrine of ultimate emptiness needed to be applied to the apparent self, an explanation of apparent selfhood was provided through the doctrine of the five skandhas. The self does not really exist; it is only made to appear to exist due to the play and interplay of the five skandhas. However, consistency required that the five skandhas be empty *too*. This was later acknowledged, for instance, in *The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, which stated:

> "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form… The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness."[127]

[127] Given in full in Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of Understanding* (Berkeley, Ca.: Parallax Press, 1988).

Here, the five skandhas, thanks to which the self seems to us to exist even though it is in fact empty, are *affirmed to be empty too*, note well. All phenomenal existents are empty, and this includes the skandhas too. The question might then well be asked (by me, at least): *if the skandhas are equally empty, what ideological need have we of them? Why can we not just as well admit the existence of the self or soul, and call* it *'empty' too, directly?* This is of course a significant flaw in the doctrine of the skandhas – it shows the idea of them to be *logically redundant*. If the motive behind it was to explain the emptiness of self, it was not only unnecessary but useless, since the emptiness of skandhas also had to be admitted! Logically, far from simplifying things, the skandhas hypothesis complicated them.

In other words, the Heart Sutra could equally well have stated: "self is emptiness, and emptiness is self;" or even: "soul is emptiness, and emptiness is soul." And indeed, it could be argued that soul, being more insubstantial (less phenomenal) than the skandhas, is closer to emptiness than the skandhas are. There are obviously two concepts here to clarify – (a) soul and (b) emptiness. Additionally, we must (c) examine their interrelation.

(a) The term ***soul*** refers to an entity of spiritual substance, i.e. of a substance other than the substances that material or mental things seem to have. Soul has no phenomenal characteristics – no shape or color, no sound, no flavor, no odor, no hardness or softness, no heat or cold, etc. That is to say, it cannot be cognized by external perception (using the five sense organs) or by internal perception (using the proverbial mind's eye, and its analogues, the mind's ear,

etc.). This does not mean it cannot be cognized by some other, appropriate means – which we can refer to as *apperception* or *intuition*.

Just because the soul is not phenomenal, *it does not follow* that it does not exist. Buddhists apparently cannot understand this line of reasoning. In the West, David Hume (Scotland, 1711-76) evidently had the same problem. Looking into himself, he could only perceive images and thoughts, but no soul. Obviously, if you look for something in the wrong place or in the wrong way, you won't find it. If you look for something non-phenomenal in a field of phenomena, you won't find it. If you look for color with your ears or for sound with your nose, you won't find them. To look for the soul, you just need to be intuitively aware. All of us are constantly self-aware, even though we cannot precisely pinpoint where that self is. There is no need for advanced meditation methods to be aware of one's soul – it is a common, routine occurrence.

Note well that I am not affirming like René Descartes (France, 1596-1650) that soul is known through some sort of *inference*, namely the famous *cogito ergo sum*, i.e. "I think therefore I am." We obviously can and do know *about* the soul through such rational means, i.e. through abstract theorizing – but our primary and main source of knowledge *of* the soul is through direct personal *experience*, which may be referred to as apperception or intuition. So, my approach is not exclusively rationalist, but largely empiricist. In this, note well, my doctrine of the soul differs radically from the Cartesian – as well as from the Buddhist.

According to Buddhist dogma, one cannot perceive the soul in meditation; if one observes attentively one only

finds various mental phenomena (the five skandhas, to be exact). But I reply that the soul is manifestly a *non-phenomenal* object and should not be conflated with such overt phenomena. We all have a more or less distinct '*sense of self*' most if not all of the time, without need of meditation.

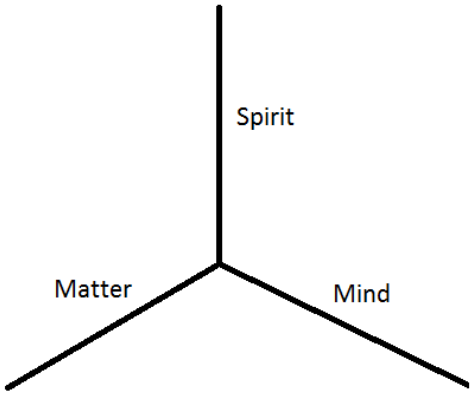
This is obvious from the very fact that everyone understands the word 'self'. Buddhism admits this sense of self, but absurdly – quite dogmatically – takes it to be 'illusory'. Having at the outset dismissed this significant 'sense' (intuition) as irrelevant, it is not surprising that it cannot find the soul (i.e. the human self) in the midst of the phenomena of mind (the five skandhas)! Note this well – **Buddhism has no credible argument to back its no-soul thesis**. It *begs the question*, calling the sense of self illusory because it believes there is no self, and claiming that it knows by introspection that there is no self while rejecting offhand the ordinary experience of self we all have. As a result of this manifest error of reasoning, if not outright doctrinaire dishonesty, Buddhism becomes embroiled in many logical absurdities.

Just as one would not look for visual phenomena with one's hearing faculty or for auditory phenomena with one's visual faculty, so it is absurd to look for spiritual things (the soul, and its many acts of consciousness, will and valuation) with one's senses or by observing mental phenomena. Each kind of appearance has its appropriate organ(s) of knowledge. For spiritual things, only intuition (or apperception) is appropriate.

To understand how the soul can exist apparently in midst of the body and mind (i.e. of bodily and mental phenomena) and yet be invisible, inaudible, etc. (i.e. non-

phenomenal), just imagine a three-dimensional space (see illustration below). Say that two dimensions represent matter and mind and the third applies to spirit. Obviously, the phenomena of mind will not be found in the matter dimension, or vice versa. Similarly, the soul cannot be found in the dimensions of matter and/or mind, irrespective of how much you look for it there. Why? Simply because its place is elsewhere – in the spiritual dimension, which is perpendicular to the other two. Thus, it is quite legitimate to claim awareness of the soul even while admitting that it has no phenomenal (matter-mind) characteristics.

Figure 5. Matter, mind and spirit presented as three dimensions of existence.



Note well that *the above illustration of the spiritual as located in another dimension is intended as merely figurative, and not to be taken literally, because the concept of dimensions is itself a material-mental concept based on the perception and projection of space*. Even the idea of time as a fourth dimension relative to the three dimensions of space is mere analogy; all the more so, the idea of spirit as a further dimension (or maybe a set of dimensions) is somewhat artificial. The simple truth is that **spirit cannot really or fully be expressed in material or mental terms, being so very different, truly *sui generis***. We might likewise object to the image of mind as a distinct dimension (or set of them) in comparison to matter, but mind does have some phenomenal characteristics in common with matter whereas spirit cannot be said to be at all phenomenal. So, to repeat, the above analysis of these three domains with reference to dimensions is *merely a convenient metaphor*.

Furthermore, it would be epistemologically quite legitimate to claim the existence of soul on purely abstract, conceptual grounds. This is justifiable with reference to the principles of adduction. One can hypothesize an entity, if such assumption serves to explain various observable concrete phenomena. In the case of soul, the 'phenomena' involved are our commonplace experiences of cognition, volition and valuation. These experiences are largely intuitive too, but they make their manifest mark in the fields of mind and body. We experience cognition whenever we perceive or conceive anything. We experience volition whenever we think or do anything. We experience valuation whenever we like or dislike anything. Soul explains all these experiences by means of a central entity. This is akin to, say, in astronomy,

discovering a planet invisible to our telescopes by observing the displacement of other celestial bodies around it. This is inductive logic.

But in truth, soul is not a mere abstraction; it is a concrete (though spiritual) thing that can be cognized directly using our inner faculty of intuition, to repeat. One error Buddhists make is to confuse entity and essence. The claim of a soul is not a claim of essence, but of entity. The soul is not the essence of the body, or even of the body-mind complex – it is a distinct entity that resides, somehow, in the midst of these phenomena, and affects them and is influenced (and perhaps also affected) by them, but does not have the same nature as them. It is a substance, but a very different and insubstantial substance, as already pointed out. Indeed, to call soul an entity or substance is really just *metaphor* – analogical thinking. In truth, soul is so different from the other constituents of the world that it can only be described by means of analogy – it cannot really be reduced to anything else we know of.

We can see the said philosophical error made, for instance, in the *Milinda-panha*, a non-canonical but orthodox Theravada (Pali) text[128]. Here, Milinda questions Nagasena, after the latter claims not to really exist. He asks him very pertinent questions such as who, then, is it that eats, engages in spiritual practices, keeps morality, gains

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[128] See Conze, pp. 147-151. The dialogue is given in full here. Milinda (Gk. Menander) was the "Greek ruler of a large Indo-Greek empire [namely Bactria] in the late 2nd century BC." Nagasena was a senior Buddhist monk. The text was, according to EB, "composed in northern India in perhaps the 1st or 2nd century AD (and possibly originally in Sanskrit) by an unknown author."

merit, etc. The latter replies by giving the example of a chariot, pointing out that no part of the chariot can be considered as the chariot, nor even the combination of all the parts. Milinda, whose questions were excellent, is very easily taken in by Nagasena's answers. But (to my mind) we need not be.

For a start, a chariot cannot be considered as analogous to a person. We do not look upon a chariot as like a person, for the simple reason that it does not have capacities of cognition, volition and valuation. To look for the analogue of a soul in a chariot is to commit the red herring fallacy. Moreover, while it is true that a chariot contains no 'core entity' which can be so called, and it is true that no one part or combination of its parts can be used to define it, it still has an 'essence'. A chariot, as a man-made object, is defined by means of its purpose or utility – as a horse-drawn carriage, used for transport and travel, especially in war or hunting or racing. Its essence is an *abstraction*, not a concrete entity. Certainly, all the required parts must be there to form a functioning chariot, but these parts can be changed at will for other parts *like them* (though not for other parts unlike them: e.g. one cannot replace a wheel with a shoe). The one constant in it is the said abstract purpose or utility.[129]

The same reasoning does not apply to persons, obviously. So, Nagasena's argument was in fact beside the point. As already mentioned, a soul is not an essence, but a core (spiritual) entity. It therefore cannot be viewed as one of the five skandhas, nor as the sum of those skandhas, as the

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[129] Similarly, a river, though not man-made, can be defined by means of abstractions. This is said with reference to the analogy proposed by EB earlier on.

Buddhists rightly insist. It can, however, contrary to Buddhist dogma, be viewed as one of the parts of the complete person, namely the spiritual part; but more precisely, it should be viewed as the core entity, i.e. as the specific part that exclusively gives the whole a personality, or selfhood. This is especially true if we start wondering where our soul came from when we were born, whether it continues to exist after we die, where it goes if it does endure, whether it is perishable, and so forth.

This brings us to the question as to *whether the soul is eternal or temporary*, or (in more Western terminology) whether the soul is immortal or mortal. Eternal would mean that it has existed since the beginning of time and will exist till the end of time. Temporary would mean any shorter period of time, though it may be very long indeed. Temporary could mean as long as the current body lives, or it could mean for many lifetimes – and that with or without physical bodies.

It seems that Indian philosophy had no place for temporary souls, only eternal souls or no-souls – with regard to soul, it was all or nothing[130]. However, this disjunction is philosophically untenable. It is conceivable that the soul is an epiphenomenon of the living human (and more broadly animal, or at least higher animal) body, which comes into existence with it and ceases to exist when it does. Or it may be that this temporary soul lasts longer, transmigrating from body to body or maybe existing without a body. We do not know (at least, I don't); but

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[130] For instance, in the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, the *atman* (individual soul) is said by Krishna to be: "unborn, undying; never ceasing, never beginning; deathless, birthless; unchanging for ever." (*The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*.)

what is sure is that these are conceptual possibilities that cannot be ignored. Certainly, non-Buddhist humanity has found them conceivable, since many religions are based on such alternative beliefs.

As regards the eternal soul, the question is whether such a soul can or cannot be liberated from the (alleged) cycle of birth and death. Does eternity of the soul logically imply its eternal imprisonment in suffering? I do not see why. It is conceivable that the eternal soul was once happy, then somehow fell into suffering, but can still pull itself out of its predicament through spiritual practices. It may well be, even, that its liberation depends on a spiritual program like the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism; i.e. on realizing that it is in a vicious circle of suffering, that this suffering is caused by attachment and can be cured by non-attachment, and that such non-attachment can be cultivated through the Noble Eightfold Path. So, there is nothing inherently contradictory to Buddhism in the assertion of an eternal soul. I am not advocating this, only pointing out that it can consistently be advocated contrary to established dogma.

What is sure, in any case, is that the no-soul idea is logically untenable. Buddhists have never squarely faced the logical problems it raises and honestly tried to solve them. They are always inhibited by the fear of being regarded by their peers as heretical holders of ‘false views’; so, they keep repeating the no-soul catechism and keep trying to justify it (using absurd means such as the tetralemma, which puts forward the nutty idea that something can both be and not-be, or that something can both not-be and not-not-be). The use of the five skandhas doctrine as an explanation of the (alleged) illusion of selfhood simply does not convince any honest observer, as above shown. Buddhist preachers say that individuals

should not take Buddhism on faith, but try and think the issues through for themselves, and they will see the logic of it. But when someone does so, and comes to a different conclusion and rejects one of their clichés, they are nonplussed if not hostile.

The truth is that it is impossible to formulate a credible theory of the human psyche without admitting the existence of a soul at its center. *Someone* has to be suffering and wanting to escape from suffering. A machine-like entity cannot suffer and cannot engage in spiritual practices to overcome suffering. Spiritual practice means, and can only mean, practice by a spiritual entity, i.e. a soul with powers of cognition, volition and valuation. These powers cannot be equated electrical signals in the brain, or to events in the skandhas. They are *sui generis*, very miraculous and mysterious things, not reducible to mechanical processes. Cognition without consciousness *by a subject* (a cognizing entity) is a contradiction in terms; volition without a freely willing *agent* (an actor or doer) is a contradiction in terms; valuation without *someone at risk* (who stands to gain or lose something) is a contradiction in terms. This is not mere grammar; it is logic.

An important question as regards the soul is whether it is the same throughout its existence, or alternatively it spiritually changes (for better or worse) over time. This issue is important as it could affect responsibility, and reward or punishment (karma, in Buddhism). Granting that the soul is responsible for its acts of will *at the time* of such actions, is it just for the soul to receive the consequences of such actions *at a later time*? Should I pay in my old age for the vices of my youth that I no longer

indulge in, or get the belated rewards for my youthful virtues even if I no longer have them? If the soul is unchanging through time, the answer would obviously be yes. But if the soul does evolve or devolve over time, the answer might at first sight seem negative. Can it still be said that *the same person* involved in such case?

Different solutions to this problem might be proposed. First, we should emphasize that much of the karmic load (for good or bad) of our lives is placed in our mental and bodily dimensions, our mind and body. The question here posed is whether some of the karmic load is placed in our spiritual dimension, our soul. If we say that the soul is constant, we must place all apparent spiritual changes related to it in its mental and physical environment. Thus, the same soul as a baby has more limited powers of walking, talking, etc.; as an adult, his intellectual and bodily powers reach their peak; in old age, they gradually deteriorate.

Moreover, if one thinks and acts in a saintly manner, one is likely to have a pleasant inner life and probably outer life too; whereas, if one thinks and acts in a depraved manner, one is likely to have an unpleasant inner life and probably outer life too. But what of in some supposed afterlife, when the soul is without body or mind? The choices a person makes at any given time reflect its total circumstances at that time. If I am the same across time, then in principle if I were put back in the same circumstances I would react the same way to them. This would seem contrary to the principle of free will, which is that whatever the surrounding influences the soul remains free to choose – and is therefore ultimately unpredictable.

A better position to adopt may be that proposed by Buddhism in the context of the five skandhas doctrine. I am referring to 'the Burden Sutra' expounded by Vasubandhu[131]:

> "The processes which have taken place in the past cause suffering in those which succeed them. The preceding Skandhas are therefore called the 'burden', the subsequent ones its 'bearer' [of the burden]."

We could adapt the same idea to the soul (instead of the skandhas), and say that since its present existence is caused by its past existence, it is in a real sense at all times a continuation of its past, carrying on not only its existence but also its good and bad karma. In this way, even if the soul (the 'bearer') has undergone inner changes, it remains responsible for its past deeds (the 'burden'). The past becomes cumulatively imbedded in the present and future. In that case, we must ask the question: what changes are possible within a soul? Is it not a unitary thing? Can it conceivably have parts? This would seem to take us back full circle to a psychological description, such as the one proposed in the five skandhas theory!

However, I would suggest that such questions are not appropriate in the spiritual realm, which is not quite comparable to the material and mental realms. The soul, being non-phenomenal, cannot be thought of as having size or shape or even exact location, or as increasing or decreasing in content – these concepts and others like them being drawn from the phenomenal realms. We should rather accept that we cannot describe the soul, any

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131 In Conze, again (p. 195).

more than we can truly fathom its ultimate workings. Just as cognition, volition and valuation are *sui generis* world-events, so is the soul too special to fit into any simplistic analogies.

It should be added that the view of the soul here proposed is not very far, in many respects, from the Buddhist notion of Buddha-nature. Consider the following brilliant statements by Son Master Chinul[132]:

> "The material body is temporal, having birth and death. The real mind is like space, unending and unchanging….
>
> The material body is a compound of four elements, earth water, fire, and air. Their substance is insentient; how can they perceive or cognize? That which can perceive and cognize has to be your Buddha-nature….
>
> In the eyes, it is called seeing. In the ears, it is called hearing…. In the hands, it grabs and holds. In the feet, it walks and runs…. Perceptives [sic] know this is the Buddha-nature, the essence of enlightenment. Those who do not know call it the soul….
>
> Since it has no form, could it have size? Since it has no size, could it have bounds? Because it has no bounds, it has no inside or outside. Having no inside or outside, it has no far or near. With no far or near, there is no there or here. Since there is no there or here, there is no going or coming. Because there is no going or coming, there is no birth or

132 Korea, 1158-1210.

> death. Having no birth or death, it has no past or present…."[133]

Clearly, the "real mind" which is "like space," the "Buddha-nature" which alone can "perceive and cognize," that which sees and hears and grabs and walks, i.e. that which is the Subject of acts of consciousness and the Author of volitional acts, corresponds to what we commonly call the soul, even if the said writer refuses to "call it the soul." It is noteworthy that, despite the Buddhist dogma that cognitive and volitional acts do not imply a self, this writer seems to advocate that they do (even while virtuously denying selfhood). Is then the difference between these concepts merely verbal? I would say not. The idea of the soul suggests individuation (in some realistic sense), whereas that of Buddha-nature has a more universal connotation (with apparent individuality regarded as wholly illusory).

(b) Let us now examine the Buddhist concept of ***Emptiness***. Note at the outset that I make no claim to higher consciousness, and have no interest in engaging in fanciful metaphysical speculations using big words. I write as a logical philosopher, an honest ordinary man intent on finding the truth without frills. By 'emptiness', most Buddhists do not mean literal vacuity, or a void (non-existence). It may be that some Hinayana thinkers understood the term that way, but I gather Mahayana thinkers viewed it more positively (or ambiguously) as referring to 'neither existence nor non-existence'. The

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133 *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*, vol. 1. Tr. Thomas Cleary. Pp. 417-419, 424.

latter expression is meant to reject both excessive belief in the existence of the phenomenal world (Eternalism) and excessive belief in the non-existence of the phenomenal world (Nihilism). It is intended as a golden mean – a 'middle way'.

However, as regards this concept of 'middle way', it is inaccurate (quite muddle-headed, in fact) to say, as Buddhists do, that this emptiness is 'non-dualistic', suggesting that it literally *includes* all opposites, i.e. allows of effective contradiction. All that can be said is that emptiness comprises everything that is positively *actual*, whether in the past, present or future. Just as actuals are never contradictory, i.e. just as contradiction never occurs in reality at any time or place (not even, upon reflection, in the mind), so emptiness does not admit of contradictions. Contradiction is certainly illusory, and any claim to it is necessarily false. 'Non-dualistic' must be taken to mean (more accurately) unitary, undifferentiated. It refers to the actual positive, not to any imagined negative.

Often, it is implied that Emptiness corresponds to the Absolute, the Infinite, Ultimate Reality, the Original or Primordial ground of Being, or of Mind, the One, Nothingness, the Noumenon, and so forth. This concept, and some of the terminology used for it, are of course not entirely foreign to other philosophies and religions.

From its Pre-Socratic beginnings, Greek philosophy has sought for the underlying unity of the many, what lies beneath the variegated phenomenal world, the common ground of all things we commonly experience, from whence things presumably come and to which they presumably go (as it were). These ideas culminated in

Neo-Platonism in late Antiquity, and returned to Western philosophy in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance in various contexts. Comparable notions are also found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and of course in other Indian religions, notably Hinduism – especially in their respective more mystical undercurrents. Greek philosophy has of course influenced these various religions, and they have also demonstrably influenced each other, in this respect. There has also no doubt been influences from and to Buddhism, as the above mentioned *Milinda-panha* attests, being a dialogue between a Greek king and a Buddhist monk.

With regard to our bodies, or to matter in general, it is often argued that though they appear varyingly 'substantial' (including gases and liquids with solids), if we go deeper into their composition, as we nowadays can, we shall find mostly empty space, with only very rare particles of mass, which are just pockets of energy anyway, connected by insubstantial fields of force. But the obvious reply to that is that this would still not be total void; i.e. even if matter is not as full and substantial as it at first appears, that does not mean that there is nothing in it *at all*.

Nevertheless, I do not think that the Buddhist concept of emptiness applied to matter refers to this empty space with very rare substantiality. Rather, I think that it refers to the assumed universal and unitary common ground of all things, which is conceivable as *pure existence, prior to any differentiation* into distinct entities, characteristics or events. This root existent cannot be described or localized, because to do so would be to ascribe to it some specific character or location to the exclusion of another.

With regard to mental phenomena, by which I mean the stuff of memories and derived phantasms, which apparently occur our heads, they seem much less substantial than material ones, but nevertheless they are *phenomenal* insofar as we perceive them as having colors, shapes, sounds, and perhaps also (though I can't say I am sure of it) also odors, flavors and feelings of touch. We must also in this context pay attention to concrete feelings and emotions which appear to occur in our bodies or heads, which we would collectively classify as touch-sensations.

It is worth noting the importance touch-sensations play in our view of matter: the 'solidity' we ascribe to matter is defined in terms of the resistance we *experience* when we push it, pull it or squeeze it, as well as with regard to the evident *relative* duration of the object at hand. No matter how much empty interspace matter may in fact contain, the experience of solidity (to various degrees) remains, and strongly determines our sense of 'materiality'. Mental phenomena, in this context, appear far less 'solid' than material ones, being able to dissolve more quickly and to be relatively more malleable (and in some respects less so). The Buddhist adjective 'empty' should not be taken to mean 'devoid of solidity', for solidity (as just explained) is a *phenomenological* given and therefore cannot be denied.

Additionally, in my view, we must take into consideration, as mental 'phenomena' in an expanded sense (more precisely, 'appearances'), objects of intuition like self, consciousness, volition and valuation, even though they are quite *non-phenomenal*, i.e. devoid of color, shape, sound, etc. All these existents can also, and all the more

so, be regarded as empty, if we understand the concept correctly as above suggested.

According to Buddhism, this root and foundation of all existence, which is somewhat immanent as well as transcendental, can be known through meditation, or at any rate when such meditation attains its goal of enlightenment. In this, Buddhism differs from Kantian philosophy, which views the noumenal realm as in principle unattainable by the human cognitive apparatus (even though Kant[134] evidently claimed, merely by formulating his theory, quite paradoxically, to at least know *of* it).

Nevertheless, the two agree on many points, such as the characterization of the phenomenal realm as illusory while the noumenal is real. What is clear is that emptiness refers to a universal and unitary substratum, which is eminently calm and quiet, and yet somehow houses and even produces all the multiplicity and motion we perceive on our superficial plane. The world of phenomena rides on the noumenal like ocean waves ride on the ocean. Water and waves are essentially one and the same, yet they are distinguishable by abstraction; likewise, with regard to the noumenal and phenomenal.

Mention should be made here of the Buddhist theory of *the codependence or interdependence of all dharmas*. According to this theory, everything is caused by everything else; nothing is capable of standing alone. That precisely is why everything (i.e. all things in the world of phenomena) may be said to be empty – because it has no 'own being' (*svabhaha*). This means that not only we

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134 Immanuel Kant (Germany, 1724-1804).

humans, and all sentient beings, are empty of self, but even plants and inanimate entities are empty. This may sound conceivable at first blush, but the notion of interdependence does not stand serious logical scrutiny. The claim that everything is a cause of everything is a claim that there is at least a partial, contingent causative relation between literally *any two* things. But such causative relation must needs be somewhat exclusive to exist at all[135]. So, the idea put forward by Buddhist philosophers is in fact fallacious, a 'stolen concept'.

It should also be said that the term 'emptiness', insofar as it is intended negatively, i.e. as indicative of *privation of* existence, is necessarily *conceptual*. We can say that being comes from and returns to non-being, but it must be acknowledged that this is something that cannot be known by direct experience, whether ordinary or meditative, but only by conceptual insight. The simple reason for this is that negation cannot be an object of perception or intuition, but can only be known by *inductive inference* from an unsuccessful search for something positive[136]. Only positives can be experienced. All negative terms are, logically, necessarily conceptual; indeed, negation is one of the foundations of conceptual thought. Thus, any claim that one has *purely experienced*, in the most profound levels of contemplation, the Nothingness at the root of Existence, is not credible: reasoning (even if wordless) was surely involved.

For Buddhism, the original ground is something impersonal, though some might view it as a sort of

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135 See my *The Logic of Causation*, chapter 16.3, for a full refutation.

136 See my *Ruminations*, chapter 9.

pantheism. For the above mentioned major religions, the original ground is identified with God. In my opinion, such identification is more credible, because I do not see how the conscious, willful, and valuing individual soul could emerge from something greater that is not itself essentially conscious, willful, and valuing. These faculties being higher than impersonal nature, their ultimate source must potentially have them too. In Jewish kabbalah, for instance, the human soul is viewed as a spark of the Divine Soul (a chip off the old block as it were). We are in God's image and likeness in that, like Him, we have soul, cognition, volition and valuation, although to an infinitesimal degree in comparison to His omniscience, omnipotence and all-goodness. But in any case, it is clear that there is some considerable agreement between the various philosophies and religions.

(c) Let us now consider soul *in the context of* emptiness. Is the concept of self or soul logically compatible, or (as the Buddhists claim) incompatible, with that of emptiness? Can a soul find liberation from its limitations and suffering, or is it necessarily stuck in eternal bondage to birth and death, deluded by endless grasping and clinging to things of naught? Is liberation only possible by giving up our belief the soul? If the answer to these questions is in accord with Buddhism, the five skandhas doctrine would seem to be useful; but if a soul can (through whatever heroic efforts of spiritual practice) extricate itself from the phenomenal and reach the noumenal, then that doctrine would seem to be, at best, redundant, if not ridiculous.

Consider, first, a temporary soul (whether its existence is limited to one lifetime or it spans several lifetimes, either in a body or disembodied). Such a soul, necessarily, like all other impermanent existents that have a beginning and an end, has come from emptiness and will return to emptiness; it is created and conditioned, by the uncreated and unconditioned One. Moreover, a temporary soul might even be regarded as eternal in the sense that it has a share in eternity, not only when it temporarily exists manifestly as a distinct entity, but even before its creation and after its apparent destruction, when it is still or again an undifferentiated part of the original ground. So, no problem there, other than finding out precisely how to indeed liberate it (no mean feat, of course).

A problem might rather be found with regard to an eternal soul, and this is no doubt what caused Buddhists to be leery of the very idea of self (which they regarded as necessarily eternal, remember). The problem is: if the individual soul (or anything else, for that matter) stands side by side with the ultimate reality throughout eternity, then how can it ever merge with it? No way to liberation would seem conceivable for a soul by definition eternally separate from emptiness. But even here, we could argue that the separation of the distinct soul from the universal unitary matrix is only illusory; i.e. that all through eternity this indestructible soul is in fact a constant emanation from the abyss and really always imbedded in it. What makes an illusion (e.g. a mirage or a reflection) illusory is not how long it lasts (a split second or a billion years), but its relativity (a mirage is due to refraction of light from an oasis, a mirror image of the moon is due to reflection of light from the moon). So, in truth, even an eternal soul can conceivably be reconciled with emptiness. I am not

affirming the soul is necessarily eternal in that sense, but only pointing out that it conceivably could be so.

In conclusion, the skandhas idea serves no purpose with regard to the requirement of emptiness. Indeed, it is highly misleading, since it is based on false assumptions concerning other doctrinal possibilities. Buddhists cling to this idea for dear life, but without true justification. Clearly, the position taken here by me is that logically we can well claim that people have a soul, and reject the orthodox Buddhist belief that what we call our self is nothing but a cluster of passing impersonal events, without giving up on the more metaphysical doctrine that at the root of spiritual (i.e. every soul's) existence there is 'emptiness' as here understood.

Just as we can say that apparently substantial material, or concrete mental, phenomena are ultimately empty, so we can say that the soul each of us consists of is 'substantial' in its own rarified, spiritual way and at the same time ultimately empty, i.e. at root just part of the universal and unitary ground of all being. In other words, contrary to what Buddhist philosophers imagined, it is not necessary to deny the existence of the soul in order to affirm its 'emptiness', any more than it is necessary to deny the existence of the body or mind in order to affirm their 'emptiness'. That is to say, there is no logical necessity to adopt the five skandhas idea, if the purpose of such position is simply to affirm 'emptiness'.

4. In Conclusion

The fact of the matter is that the no-soul thesis is riddled with contradictions. We are told by Buddhists that we can

find liberation, but at the same time that we don't even *exist*. We are told to be conscious, but at the same time we are denied the power of cognition – i.e. that the soul is the *subject* of cognitive events. We are told to make the effort to find liberation, but at the same time we are denied possession of volition – i.e. that the soul is the *free agent* of acts of will. We are told to make the wise choices in life, but at the same time we are denied the privilege of value-judgment – i.e. that the soul is capable of *independent and objective* valuation.

The no-soul thesis is upheld in spite of these paradoxes, which were well-known to Buddhist philosophers from the start. What is the meaning of spirituality without a spirit (soul, self)? Who can be liberated if there is no one to liberate? Why and how engage in spiritual practice if we not only do not exist, but also have no power of consciousness, volition or valuation? Why bother to find release from suffering if we do not really suffer? Who is writing all this and who is reading it? The no-soul thesis simply cannot be upheld. The soul can well be claimed to be ultimately 'empty' in the aforesaid sense, but the thesis of five skandhas instead of a soul is logically untenable.

We have seen that the five skandhas doctrine cannot be regarded as an accurate description of the human psyche in its entirety. It is not a thorough phenomenological account, since it ignores mankind's major higher faculties – intelligence, rationality and freewill. It focuses exclusively on some petty aspects of human psychology, the five skandhas, without openly acknowledging the more noble side of humanity, which makes liberation from such pettiness possible. It has metaphysical pretensions, with ontological and epistemological implications – notably, the idea that we are empty of soul, devoid of

personality – but it turns out that this idea does not stand up to logical scrutiny, being based on circular arguments and foregone conclusions.

Thus, whereas the five skandhas thesis may have at first seemed like an important observation and idea, which applied and buttressed the more general Buddhist thesis of emptiness, and at the same time provided a spiritually useful description of human psychology, it turns out to be a rather limited and not very well thought-out creed. This does not mean that it has no worth at all, but it does mean that it is far less important than it is made out to be.

This being said, I hasten to add that the present criticism of this one doctrine within Buddhist psychology and philosophy is not intended as a blanket belittling or rejection of Buddhist psychology and philosophy. Certainly, Buddhist psychology and philosophy have a great deal more to offer the seeker after wisdom than this one doctrine. It is rich in profound insights into the human psyche and condition, which every human being can benefit from. This is evident already in the opening salvo of Buddhist thought, the Four Noble Truths, which acknowledge the human condition of suffering and identify the psychological source of such suffering in clinging to all sorts of vain things, and which declare the possibility of relief from suffering through a set program of spiritual practices.

In the Buddhist conception of human life, our minds are poisoned by numerous cognitive and volitional and emotional problems. At the root of human suffering lies a mass of ignorance and delusion about oneself and the world one suddenly and inexplicably finds oneself in. These give rise to all sorts of unwise desires, including

greed (for food, for material possessions) and lust (for sexual gratification, for power), and aversions (fears, hatreds). The latter impel people to act with selfishness (in the more pathological sense of the term), and in some cases with dishonesty or even violence (coldness and cruelty), and generally with stupidity. But Buddhism proposes ways to cure these diseases, so its outlook is essentially positive.

Clearly, Buddhism has a particularly 'psychological' approach to life. It is also distinguished by its businesslike, 'no blame' approach to spirituality, which is no doubt why many people in the West nowadays are attracted to it. Unlike most of the other major religions, notably Judaism and its Christian and Islamic offshoots, it does not try to make people feel guilty for their sins, but rather encourages them to deal with their problems out of rational self-interest. It is thus less emotional and more rational in many ways.

Judaism too, for instance, includes psychological teachings, although perhaps to a lesser extent. One of the main features of Judaic psychology is the idea that humans have two innate tendencies – a good inclination (*yetzer tov*) and a bad inclination (*yetzer ra'*)[137]. These two

[137] This two-inclinations psychological thesis of course stands in contrast to three other theses: that humans have only a good inclination (optimism), or only a bad inclination (pessimism), or no natural inclination at all (neutrality). This is an interesting issue that deserves a longer discussion. The difference between these four theses is moot, if we consider that all this is about *influences* on the soul, and not about determinism or fatalism; the soul remains free to choose whether influenced one way or the other to greater or lesser degree. I think the point of the Jewish doctrine is simply this: to

inclinations *influence* a person for good or for bad in the course of life (physical life and spiritual life), but they never *control* one, for human beings are graced with freewill. This means that come what may, a man or woman is always (at least, once adult) responsible for his or her choices. This ethical belief in freedom of choice and personal responsibility is present in Judaism since its inception, as the following Biblical verse makes clear: "*Sin coucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it*" (Gen. 4:7)[138]. Knowing this, that one indeed has freedom of will, one can overcome all bad influences and forge ahead towards the eternal life.

In Buddhism, we may discern a similar possibility of taking full responsibility for one's life in the very first chapter of the *Dhammapada* (1:1-2). "*If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows… If a man acts with a pure mind, joy follows*." Although the five skandhas doctrine gives people the impression (as shown above)

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make the individual aware that he is constantly under pressure from influences of various sorts, some good and some bad, and that he is wise to at all times *identify with* the positive ones and *avoid identifying with* the negative ones; i.e. to regard the true ultimate desire of his soul as the good and to regard the bad as delusive nonsense.

[138] The idea of 'inclination to evil' may also be traced to the Bible, namely to Gen. 8:21, which quotes God as stating that "the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (That is said after the Deluge; earlier, in Gen. 6:5, it is said more pessimistically that "every inclination of the thoughts of his [man's] heart is only evil all through the day." Commentators explain the difference by suggesting that the Deluge made man wiser. Maybe the difference between the terms "the inclination of man's heart" and the "inclination of *the thoughts of* man's heart" has some significance.)

that they are not responsible for their deeds, we see here that this is not really the message of Buddhism, which generally enjoins strong spiritual effort in the direction of self-liberation and thence of liberation for all sentient beings.

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Works by Avi Sion

Avi Sion is the author of several works on logic and philosophy: *Future Logic* (1990); *Judaic Logic* (1995); *Buddhist Illogic* (2002); *Phenomenology* (2003); *The Logic of Causation* (1999, 2003, 2010); *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (2004); *Ruminations* (2005); *Meditations* (2006); *Logical and Spiritual Reflections* (2008-9); *A Fortiori Logic* (2013).

These works can be freely studied at: www.TheLogician.net.

The Self can be freely read online at: www.avisiontheself.bravesites.com.

Avi Sion can be reached for questions or comments at: avi-sion@thelogician.net

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