



## The Self Illusion: David Hume's View of the Self and Buddhadasa's 'I and Mine'

Kittisak Thowsombat<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, Ramkhamhaeng University

\* Corresponding author, E-mail: k.thowsombat@gmail.com

### Abstract

This very essay resolves itself into four different parts. First, it shall briefly explain one of the most important teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu – 'I' and 'Mine'. Buddhadasa put great emphasis on the feeling of 'I and Mine'- the self. He suggested that this feeling, which results from ignorance, is illusory and gives rise to all mental sufferings. The eradication of 'I and Mine' leads to the cessation of mental defilement-*Nibbana*. Second, it shall discuss David Hume's remark on the self. Hume observed that we experience nothing called the self. What is believed to be the self is an illusion created by the continuous succession of perceptual experience. Third, this essay shall endeavour to investigate Buddhadasa's teaching on 'I and Mine' and Hume's philosophical point of view so as to gain a clear insight into the illusion of the self. Fourth, it shall also briefly discuss the origin of the self. The self can be thought of as one of the evolutionary byproducts of our tendency to impute the intentional stance towards the natural world.

**Keywords:** the self illusion, the origin of the self, the intentional stance

### Introduction

One of the most important aspects that distinguishes philosophy from other sciences is the kind of questions with which philosophy occupies itself. Philosophy questions what seems to be certain and unproblematic to us, and, more often than not, gives us no conclusive answer. Amongst those questions, the 'self' has remained an unsolvable one which has hitherto greatly interested many philosophers.

No sensible man would deny the importance of the philosophical discussion about the self. It has been mentioned and discussed so many times by numbers of philosophers throughout the entire history of philosophy. The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, believed that one ought to know oneself in order to live a good life. In his *Meditations*, Rene Descartes stated that the real self is the thinking self. In Buddhism, it is taught that the self is nothing but an illusion; it is not real. But one might ask what the self really is?



The existence of the self seems to us so clear and unquestionable. Its immanence in our perception is beyond any doubt: we can feel very vividly that inside our head there is something that is our ‘self’. However, in our daily life, we frequently perceive something that seems to exist, but, in fact, it does not. Things that seem to exist, but they do not really exist, are illusions.

This essay shall attempt to demonstrate that the self is one of the most persistent illusions we have ever seen. The Humean theory of personal identity and the Buddhadasa’s teaching of ‘I and Mine’ shall be the scope of investigation in this essay. At the final part of the essay, the theory of the origin of the self advanced by the philosopher Daniel Dennett shall be succinctly discussed. This essay is expected to offer a clear insight into the illusion of the self, which might become a new *Weltanschauung* by which one could deal with the problem of the self more profoundly.

## PART I:

### ‘I and Mine’

It is not difficult to realise that Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s teaching about the eradication of mental sufferings was his leitmotif. He suggested that all mental sufferings in our life can be derived from the two deep-seated instincts, i.e. the ‘I’ instinct and the ‘Mine’ instinct, which are called, in Buddhist teaching, ‘*ahamkara*’ and ‘*mamakara*’ respectively. Amongst these two instincts, *ahamkara* (the ‘I’ instinct) is the most fundamental one. Buddhadasa believed that every animate object is innately endowed with this kind of instinct, which urges living things to wrestle their survival from the bleak hands of natural selection. If we were to compare a living thing with a machine, the ‘I’ instinct would be sort of a programme that does everything to ensure the continuance of the machine in which it is installed. So as to achieve its goal, the programme enjoins its machine to protect and prevent itself from anything deemed harmful to its existence. Furthermore, this instinct also instructs organisms, by means of sexual pleasure, which Buddhadasa regarded as the wage of nature, to reproduce in order to pass on their genetic information to the next generation: to wit, the perpetuation of their survival. According to Buddhadasa, the impulse to procreate is natural since it has been driven by the ‘I’ instinct.

The ‘I’ instinct begets *mamakara* (the ‘Mine’ instinct). When we get involved with something in our life, e.g. a phone, a person, and a belief, we are inclined to regard those things as ours; namely, our phone, our son, and our belief. Due to our being unable to discern and understand the influence of these two instincts on our life, we cling to many things as ours. As a result, attachment arises, which is considered the bane of all mental sufferings.



The perception of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’, as Buddhadasa asserted, is nothing but illusion. He stated that ‘I and Mine’ are our archenemies, which are the offsprings of ‘avidja’ (ignorance). The opposite side of ignorance is the enlightenment – *Nibbana*. The eradication of ignorance, which also results in the destruction of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’, is, therefore, the only way to attain *Nibbana*.

## PART II:

### ‘The Self’

We shall now proceed to the second part of this essay, which deals with the philosophical interpretation of the self proposed by David Hume – one of the greatest British philosophers.

Wherein lies the self? Whence do we obtain the sense of our self? David Hume, in his *magnum opus A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), propounded that the raw materials of thought are impressions and their faint copies, ideas. Impressions can be either of perceiving tastes or colours, for example, or of reflecting, such as emotions and desires. The degree of force and vivacity, with which impressions and ideas strike upon our mind, constitutes their difference (Hume, 1739). Ideas are less lively; there are the faint copies of impressions. Another important tenet is that an idea, of which we are possessed, is a copy of an impression. And for every simple idea, there must be a corresponding simple impression. In other words, an idea without a corresponding impression is well-nigh impossible.

Hume then posed a very intriguing question: ‘from what impression could this idea be derived?’ It is commonly believed that the self ought to be the entity, the existence of which is invariable; hence, it follows that any impression from which the idea of the self can be derived, and to which the idea can refer, must be therefore unchanging. Hume maintained that we have never had such impression; therefore, it is impossible to have an idea of it (Hume 1739, p.251). Thus, the idea of the self is nothing but an illusion. In his own words, the self is nothing but ‘a bundle of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement’ (Hume 1739, p.252). Our mind, as Hume suggested, perceives nothing called ‘self’. What it perceives is merely the incessant concatenation of perceptions:



*There are some philosophers who imagine that we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. . . . For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception [1739, pp.251-252].*

In addition, Hume proposed a *Gedankenexperiment* in which our mind has been reduced to some point akin to that of an oyster. Suppose we have only one perception, let's say, a perception of hunger. Hume then asked whether we can experience anything apart from that perception, and whether we would have any notion of the self from that perception. We shall find that no such thing can be found. And even if we add other perceptions into our mind, those perceptions will not give rise to the idea of the self. It is, therefore, mistaken to regard a bundle of perceptions as the self since we do not perceive such entity in those perceptions. Hume (1739) remarked: ‘. . . (self) is merely a quality, which we attribute to them (different perceptions), because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them’ (p. 260). The self emerges as a result of imagination.

### PART III:

#### ‘The Self Illusion’

We are now entering the third part of the essay, in which we shall investigate Buddhadasa's teaching on ‘I and Mine’ and Hume's philosophical point of view in order to gain a clear insight into the illusion of the self. To begin with, both Buddhadasa and Hume agreed that the self is illusory. However, they differed in identifying the source of it.

Buddhadasa regarded ‘*avidja*’ (ignorance) as the cause of the self illusion. He maintained that there is nothing to which we can cling as ‘I’ or ‘Mine’. The teaching of *Trilaksana* (three universal characteristics of all things), which comprises impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and selflessness (*anatta*), might cast some light upon the illusion of the self. According to this teaching, if we thoroughly observe things around us, we shall find that nothing remains unchanging; all things are fluctuating and impermanent. Therefore, there is no immutable element which can be seen as the self. Buddhadasa affirmed that everything can be said to be full of *sunyata* (emptiness) – everything is devoid of the self.



Whilst Buddhadasa held that ‘*avidya*’ is the cause of the self, Hume believed that memory is considered to be the source of the self. According to Hume, our memory allows us to access the collection of different perceptions in the past with continuous succession. And it is this uninterrupted continuity that gives rise to the self. However, each memory, like a bead, which together constructs the long string of perceptions, is *per se* a kind of perception that can never be the idea of the self.

Hume’s remark on the continuous succession of different perceptions might remind us of one of the things considered to be a hindrance to the realisation of the self illusion; namely, *santati*. *Santati* is defined as continuity, which results in perceiving a false unity. It is the continuity with great rapidity that deceives us into seeing different perceptions as the self. Let us take an illustration. When a turbine consisting of three separated blades rotates with its full power, each blade appears to be united with one another before the human eye that is contemplating it. Such occurrence produces a false impression – an illusory oneness.

#### PART IV:

#### ‘The Origin of the Self’

The evolution of all living creatures, including the human creature, has taken place in such a hostile world rife with relentless competitions- struggle for existence. In such precarious environment, actions with efficacy and swiftness are called for so as to deal with the vagaries of the external world. Thus, the ability to accurately predict and comprehend the behaviour of other entities in the physical world is a *sine qua non* of survival. We might, therefore, expect our brain, which is the most complicated known product of evolution by natural selection, to be endowed with a disposition to act efficiently and fast (Dawkins 2006, p.211). Richard Dawkins (2006), one of the most renowned evolutionary biologists, suggested that something called ‘the intentional stance’, advanced by the Philosopher Daniel Dennett, could cast light on this matter.

Dennett (1987) classified “stances”, which are what we adopt in order to understand and predict the behaviour of other entities, into three different kinds: the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance. The physical stance is that what be used, under the premise that nothing can transgress the laws of physics, by physicists or chemists to predict the motion of an object or the direction of a chemical reaction. However, Dennett (1987) added that this stance is not ‘always practically available’ (p.16). Since calculating all interactions of numerous moving bodies is a time-consuming task, making a prediction of them can be very slow and therefore too late to respond timely (Dawkins, 2006).



We then switch from the physical stance, which is quite slow, to another stance, which is faster, called ‘the design stance’. This stance is more effective because the complexity of physical compositions is neglected. In lieu of focusing on the actual physical details, we predict that things will behave in accordance with its design (Dennett 1987, pp.16-17). Despite its being faster than the physical stance, the design stance is sometimes, according to Dennett (1987), ‘practically inaccessible’ (p. 17).

The last stance we adopt towards things is a better short cut, much more economical than the design stance: ‘the intentional stance’. Dennett (1987) remarked:

*Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behaviour is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goal in the light of its beliefs [1987, p.17].*

We are inclined to impute agency- a thing with a mind capable of believing and desiring- to natural phenomena with which we confront. When we have to deal with an entity, we tend to assume that there is an agent guiding actions behind that entity. For example, as Dawkins (2006, p. 212) instanced, when confronting with a tiger, the quickest course of action we take to predict its behaviour is to ignore the physical laws that govern the tiger, and overlook the design of its limbs, claws and teeth, and immediately adopt the intentional stance towards the tiger: the creature is there to have us!

However, natural selection, being a process without any foresight, has not equipped us with a mechanism wherewith the misuses of our mental capability can be prevented. Hence, adopting the intentional stance towards things can go amiss. We tend to adopt it indiscriminately. Dennett (2006) remarked that it has become our psychological disposition to adopt the intentional stance, and we find it very hard to turn it off when there is no need for it (p. 112).

We ended up aiming this stance at ourselves, and shot ourselves incessantly with a fusillade of automatic gunfire of the intentional representations. The self, therefore, can be thought of as a by-product of our proclivity to impute the intentional stances to other entities.



## RECAPITULATION & CONCLUSION

Throughout his life, the focal point of Buddhadasa's teaching was 'I' and 'Mine'. He suggested that these two feelings resulting from ignorance are illusory and considered to be the causes of all mental sufferings. The eradication of 'I' and 'Mine' is tantamount to the cessation of mental defilement- *Nibbana*. David Hume argued that the self is fictitious. He asserted that when we cast our eye over what lies inside our mind, we experience nothing but perceptions. Those perceptions appear in a rapid succession, and conjoin one another. This uninterrupted continuity creates the sense of the self. So obvious is the sense of the self, that we entertain no doubt about its existence. However, the self, as discussed in this essay, despite its vividness to our perception, is an illusion. We have never had an impression of it. The sense of self can be seen as a by-product of our psychological disposition to ascribe the intentional stance towards the world.

## References

- Ayer, A.J., & Winch, R. (1952). *British Empirical Philosophers*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited.
- Bhikkhu Buddhadasa. (1989). *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. Bangkok: Sukkaparbjai publishing.
- Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto. (1992). *Buddhadhamma*. Bangkok:
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*. London: Transworld Publishers.
- Dennett, D.C. (1987). *Intentional Stance*. London: The MIT Press.
- Dennett, D.C. (1991). *Consciousness Explained*. London: The Penguin Group.
- Doungkaew publishing.
- Hume, D. (1739). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Perry, J. (2008). *Personal Identity*. London: University of California Press Limited.