

If the Separate Self Is an Illusion, How Should We Live?

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Introduction

What, if anything, makes me the same person throughout my life? This question lies at the heart of personal identity theory, and as we shall see, admits no final answer. This essay argues that attempts to establish a satisfactory criterion of self are unsuccessful, and the Buddhist doctrine of non-self offers a more productive framework for understanding suffering and ethics. When considering the self, we often default to the simple view, which proposes that we are identical with an immaterial ‘soul’ or ego that persists through change.¹ However, even if we accept this answer, we still require an account of what it means for that soul—or any proposed self—to persist over time. This is known as the persistence question, and it is typically answered by proposing a criterion of identity. Such a criterion must state the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a person at one time is numerically identical to a person at another. In other words, it should tell us the kind of changes a person survives.² It must account for numerical, rather than merely qualitative identity. Numerical identity concerns being one and the same individual, whereas qualitative identity concerns sharing

1 Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://iep.utm.edu/person-i/>

2 Olson, "Personal Identity."

the same properties. Clark Kent and Superman are numerically one individual. However, a perfect clone of Superman, despite being qualitatively identical, is not numerically the same individual. A satisfactory criterion must also be constitutive rather than merely evidential. It must provide a feature that grounds a person's persistence through time, not simply a clue that someone is a particular person. For example, a person's clothing may provide evidence of who they are, but it is not what makes them that person. It must therefore explain numerical identity over time and identify what constitutes, rather than merely indicates, a person's persistence. As we shall see, finding such a criterion proves remarkably difficult.

Locke and Psychological Continuity

Philosopher John Locke proposed the theory of psychological continuity, according to which identity consists in the continuity of consciousness, particularly in memory. We remain the same person over time because our memory of the present self is continuous with past experience. This initially sounds appealing because unlike the simple view, it avoids the unverifiable criterion of an identical soul, and provides a testable psychological criterion. However, the later philosopher Bishop Butler objected to this theory. Butler critiques Locke on the grounds of what constitutes a genuine memory. A genuine memory cannot simply be an image of the past, as surely to count as a memory it must be an event I experienced. In other words, it must be *my* memory. Memory, then, already assumes personal identity, as memories presuppose a subject whose memories they are. It is not as though memory, or any mental state, can exist without a mind to happen in. If memory presupposes identity, it cannot explain identity. Therefore, Locke's account is circular as it assumes the thing it is trying to prove. The theory of psychological continuity is ultimately implausible because while memory may provide evidence of identity, it cannot constitute it.

Reductionism and the Persistence Question

Rather than explain the persistence of self with an immaterial soul or psychological continuity, an alternative explanation is the reductionist theory. A reductionist explains the self in terms of

physical or psychological facts. They *reduce* the self to a mere collection of facts, rather than a single, unified whole — hence the term reductionism.³ When answering the persistence question, a reductionist may respond with either a physiological or psychological criterion of self. The physiological criterion asserts that a person's continued existence consists solely of the body, while the psychological criterion asserts psychological continuity as the sole cause of persistence.

However, these criteria become problematic when bodily continuity comes apart from psychological continuity. Suppose an exact psychological copy of person A is created as person B; people generally assume that B would feel psychologically continuous with A. But if person A's body is destroyed in the process of being copied to person B, there is an absence of bodily continuity — a necessary condition of the physiological criterion. Taking this further, suppose we could produce two qualitatively identical successors of A, (say) B and C; psychological continuity alone could not determine which one is the true 'you', because identity is one-to-one whereas psychological continuity may be one-to-many. Clearly then, the reductionist response to the persistence question is not satisfactory. However, it must be said, the persistence question itself is controversial because it presupposes a concept of person. It assumes there is already a determinate object—the person—whose persistence we are trying to explain. Yet there is no universally accepted definition of a person. What exactly do we mean when we say person A persists as person B? Before we agree on the object of persistence, that question is unanswerable. Consequently, we must first establish what sort of entity a person is, which is itself a deeply contested philosophical question presenting another obstacle to understanding the self and its persistence.

The Buddhist Doctrine of Non-Self

So far, we have attempted to identify a criterion of self through a series of theories. The shortcomings of these theories do not establish outright that the self does not exist. They do, however, motivate considering alternatives that disagree with the assumption of a persisting self

3 Olson, "Personal Identity."

altogether. Rather than press for a plausible criterion of self, we may consider the alternative option of non-self. Non-self, or *anattā* as it is known in Pali, is not merely the negation of self. It is a teaching used to free one from attachment to concepts of self.⁴ The Buddha's case for non-self is not a metaphysical proposition; rather, he simply points out that the five aggregates — form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness — are impermanent and cannot be said to be “mine”.⁵ More specifically, each of the aggregates lacks the property of control and does not persist through time. Thus, the Buddha's discourse is commonly interpreted as presenting the core Buddhist argument that the self does not exist.⁶

However, for most of us, non-self does not initially sound convincing because it certainly *feels* as though there is a separate doer of actions. According to Buddhist scripture, a man named Aggivessana poses an objection to non-self, saying “Form is my self, feeling is my self, perception is my self, mental formations are my self, consciousness is my self.”⁷ He claims the five aggregates as self. The Buddha responds through a metaphor of a king that does not have complete power over who gets executed, fined, charged and so forth. He demonstrates that Aggivessana's self could not possibly have total power over form. That is, the appearance of form is not evidence for a controller. In addition to this, modern psychological studies such as the split-brain experiment cast doubt on notions of a conscious self — patients whose right hemisphere was exposed to input reported no awareness, yet their left hand (controlled by the right hemisphere) could correctly identify the input.⁸ This suggests that the phenomenological objection of a self-reliant on the mental aggregates is not evidence for the existence of a separate self. *Anattā*, then, is not another theory of what the self is; it is a teaching intended to dissolve attachment to the very idea of a permanent self.

Non-Self and the Nature of Suffering

4 Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), 44.

5 Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 105.

6 Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*, 108.

7 Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*, 51.

8 Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*, 53.

According to Buddhist thought, suffering stems from the belief in, and attachment to, a separate ego. Attachment is problematic because it binds our happiness to what is impermanent, and therefore we suffer when not seeing the transience of phenomena clearly. For example, loved ones of whom we are often very attached, eventually fall ill and pass away. The same is true of ourselves. Our intense craving for this impermanence to be otherwise is the cause of a lot of grief. Unfortunately, we are prone to mistaking the five aggregates for self, assuming permanence and control without due evidence. Identification of this kind gives rise to attachment and therefore suffering.

A common Buddhist response to attachment is mindfulness meditation. It allows us to keep our distance from feelings and thoughts so as not to identify with them.⁹ Practising observing and accepting the unpleasant mental states reduces their unpleasantness. Mindfulness is effective at reducing attachment to self because “changing the relationship between your consciousness and the things you normally think of as its “contents” is, according to the Buddha’s discourse, what weakens the grip of identification to self.”¹⁰ Thus, we shift from a state of engagement to contemplation. According to Buddhist thought, liberation from clinging to self (or things in general) helps us perceive reality with less attachment, and thus, experience less suffering. That is not to say that we feel no pain or become numb to great joy. Rather, we become better at accepting suffering when it arises, which in a way weakens its force. Buddhism argues that non-self allows us to be mindful and maintain wellbeing, which is vital for living a fulfilled life.

Living in Light of Non-Self

Living in light of non-self does not require us to abandon conventional identity. Conventional identity is analogous to a mask: we need it to play our role, but we understand that the role is not the actor. Indeed, we still use names when introducing ourselves, language to express ideas and distinguish between self and others when crossing a busy road. However, after realising non-self,

⁹ Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*, 41.

¹⁰ Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*, 115.

we no longer mistake conventional identity for ultimate reality. This realisation helps us recognise the role of ego in human survival, but allows us to not be bound to it. After understanding non-self, we no longer identify with thoughts and instead become able to observe them. Suppose we experience a strong sense of anger. Before realising non-self, due to identification with thought, we are likely to be trapped in that emotional state for prolonged periods of time. After realisation, however, we notice that anger has arisen, or whatever mental state, for that matter, and understand it as a transient phenomenon. This shift in perception increases our capacity to let go of negative mental states. The transition from automatic identification with thought to conscious observation results in a substantial change in the emotional texture of our experience. Non-self, then, changes our relationship to thought, and invites us to consciously observe our emotional states.

Ethical Implications of Non-Self

If none of the earlier criteria of self proves fully satisfactory, and we accept non-self as a way of life, the question remains how ought we to behave? Generally, we can agree that promoting human wellbeing is worthwhile and increasing human suffering is unskillful. There are contextual caveats (such as extreme utilitarianism) to this principle, but for now we shall not concern ourselves with such cases. Understanding non-self reframes our view of ourselves as interdependent, rather than independent persons. This in turn redirects our ethical orientation from self-interest toward impartial care, as the wellbeing (or suffering) of others becomes deeply intertwined with our own.¹¹

Consequently, our understanding of moral responsibility is affected as generally “we assign responsibility when we take an action to have been free, and so we withdraw assignment of responsibility when we see that action to have been caused.”¹² If we are inclined to only punish people for acts made of free will, does the absence of a self not then challenge the notion of ‘free will’? If a person’s actions are due to prior causation, and not free will, we must exercise caution when holding someone morally responsible. This means our practices of assigning moral

¹¹ Jay L. Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 125.

¹² Garfield, *Losing Ourselves*, 127.

responsibility, through praise and blame, may be best informed by determinism. Of course, this poses complications in legal settings, as we would not want to exempt criminals from punishment. Therefore, rather than abandoning legal convention, we should shift our ethical focus from self-interest toward impartial care. Doing so encourages greater compassion for our fellow human beings. To behave ethically, then, is to act with altruism rather than egoism.

Conclusion

We began examining competing theories which ultimately suggested that the search for a persisting self may itself be misguided. Rather than answering the persistence question directly, the Buddhist idea of non-self reframes it, shifting attention from identifying what persists to understanding why attachment to persistence generates suffering. Whether or not one accepts Buddhism, this represents a significant contribution to debates about personal identity. If the separate self is indeed an illusion, then the practical task is not to discover what the self really is, but to live with less attachment, greater compassion, and a clearer understanding of our interdependence.

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