



The Self That Wasn't and the Grand Illusion of Identity in Buddhism and Hume

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Abstract

Exploring the profound parallels and divergences between the Buddhist principle of anattā, or the absence of an inherent self, and David Hume's skeptical dismantling of personal continuity, this essay delivers a meticulous cross-cultural examination. Spanning vast historical and intellectual divides, these philosophies converge in their bold repudiation of an immutable ego or spiritual essence. Rooted in the ephemeral interplay of the five skandhas and the chain of conditioned arising, Buddhist thought frames the delusion of a fixed soul as the root of existential anguish, with enlightenment emerging from profound realization of experiential transience and fabrication. In parallel, Hume's empiricist lens dissects selfhood through rigorous self-examination, uncovering merely a loose assemblage of sensory flickers bereft of any persistent core. Delving into their evolutionary trajectories, core tenets, and broader ramifications, this work constructs a sturdy scaffold for juxtaposition. It further interrogates modern objections while probing the moral and ontological ripples of eschewing a solid identity. The interplay of these Eastern and Western visions sharpens insights into the enigmas of personhood and awareness, invigorating contemporary discourse across cognitive philosophy, moral inquiry, and intercultural thought.

I. INTRODUCTION

The inquiry into the nature of the self remains one of the most enduring puzzles in philosophical discourse, transcending geographical boundaries and temporal divisions. In Eastern traditions, particularly within Buddhism, the concept of a fixed, eternal self is systematically dismantled through the doctrine of anattā, which asserts the absence of any unchanging core to human experience (Gombrich, 2009). This perspective emerged as a

direct counterpoint to the Brahmanical emphasis on ātman, the immortal soul that anchors individual existence and cosmic unity. Conversely, in the Western canon, David Hume's eighteenth-century empiricism delivers a parallel deconstruction, reducing the self to a mere concatenation of sensory impressions devoid of substantive unity (Hume, 2000). Hume's famous introspection—"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other"

(Hume, 2000, p. 252)—echoes the Buddhist meditative scrutiny that reveals no enduring entity amid the flux of aggregates.

This review article synthesizes and expands upon foundational comparative scholarship to explore these resonant yet distinct critiques of selfhood. By drawing on primary texts, historical analyses, and modern interpretations, it examines how both frameworks interrogate the illusion of permanence, offering pathways to ethical and epistemic renewal (Albahari, 2006; Flanagan, 2011). Unlike prior studies that often prioritize doctrinal parallels at the expense of methodological divergences (e.g., Kapstein, 2001), this analysis maintains a balanced lens, highlighting convergences in anti-essentialism while probing tensions in soteriological aims and epistemological methods.

Central questions guiding this review include: How do the ontological commitments of anattā and Hume's bundle theory align or conflict? In what ways do their respective approaches to continuity—via karma or memory—redefine moral accountability? And how might these ancient and Enlightenment insights inform contemporary neurophilosophical debates on consciousness (Metzinger, 2009; Thompson, 2020)? To address these, the article proceeds through expanded thematic sections: historical contexts, doctrinal expositions, comparative metaphysics, critiques, and implications. This structure not only honors the original comparative spirit but integrates diverse scholarly voices, ensuring a comprehensive, interdisciplinary dialogue.

Scholarship on cross-cultural no-self theories has proliferated, yet gaps persist. Early works like those of Frauwallner (1956) laid groundwork for historical exegesis, but recent integrations with cognitive science demand fresh synthesis (Varela et al., 1991). By incorporating over fifty references from philosophical journals, this review avoids reductive harmonization, instead fostering a nuanced appreciation of how these traditions challenge anthropocentric illusions (Gutting, 2018). Ultimately, the dialogue between anattā and Humean skepticism invites a post-essentialist philosophy, where identity emerges as a fluid, ethically potent narrative rather than a static substance (Ricoeur, 1990).

II. HISTORICAL AND DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS

i. Buddhist Origins: Challenging Ātman in Ancient India

The genesis of anattā can be traced to the axial age ferment of sixth-century BCE India, where the Buddha's teachings disrupted the Upanishadic paradigm of ātman-brahman unity (Olivelle, 1998). The Pāli Nikāyas, particularly the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, articulate this rejection: the five khandhas—rūpa (form), vedanā (feeling), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness)—are deemed impermanent, unsatisfactory, and thus non-self (Bodhi, 2000). This negation was not abstract but therapeutic, aimed at eradicating taṇhā (craving) that fuels saṃsāra (Warder, 2000).

Dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) provides the causal scaffold, illustrating how phenomena arise interdependently, precluding autonomous existence (Kalupahana, 1975). Commentarial traditions, such as Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga, elaborate on this to develop a meditative praxis, where vipassanā reveals the emptiness of the aggregates, fostering dispassion (Ñāṇamoli, 1991). Later evolutions in Mahāyāna, including Yogācāra's ālaya-vijñāna as a karmic repository without essence (Schmithausen, 1987), and Madhyamaka's śūnyatā (Garfield, 1995), reinforce anattā's core while adapting to metaphysical pluralism.

This doctrinal trajectory underscores anattā's role in ethical transformation, positioning non-self as a gateway to nibbāna (Hamilton, 2000). Far from nihilistic, it cultivates a relational ontology, influencing global Buddhist adaptations (Lopez, 2008).

ii. Hume's Enlightenment Assault: Empiricism Against Substance

Hume's critique unfolded amid the Scottish Enlightenment's rationalist-empiricist tensions, targeting Descartes' *res cogitans* and Locke's memory-based identity (Nidditch, 1975). In the Treatise, Hume's copy principle—ideas as faded impressions—exposes the self's idea as baseless, yielding only a "bundle" of perceptions (Baier, 2011). This aligns with his associationist

psychology, where resemblance, contiguity, and causation forge illusory unity (Passmore, 1952).

Influenced by Bayle's skepticism and Hutcheson's moral sense, Hume's denial serves epistemic hygiene, purging metaphysics of unverifiable posits (Fogelin, 1985). Unlike Buddhist soteriology, Hume's aim is descriptive, revealing belief's psychological roots (Buckle, 2001). His Enquiry Concerning Human

Understanding refines this, emphasizing custom's primacy over reason (Hume, 2000b).

Hume's legacy permeates analytic philosophy, inspiring reductionism (Parfit, 1984) and influencing existentialists like Sartre (1965), who echoed the self as nothingness.

To juxtapose these foundations, Table 1 compares key historical influences and doctrinal pivots.

Table 1: Comparative Historical and Doctrinal Foundations

| Aspect | Buddhist Anattā | Humean Bundle Theory | References |
|--------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|
| Primary Texts | Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59); Visuddhimagga | A Treatise of Human Nature (1.4.6) | Bodhi (2000); Hume (2000) |
| Core Rejection | Ātman as eternal substance; via aggregates | Cartesian soul; via impressions | Olivelle (1998); Nidditch (1975) |
| Causal Mechanism | Paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination) | Association (resemblance, causation) | Kalupahana (1975); Baier (2011) |
| Soteriological Aim | Liberation from dukkha via vipassanā | Epistemic clarity; skepticism of dogmas | Ñāṇamoli (1991); Fogelin (1985) |
| Later Developments | Yogācāra (ālaya-vijñāna); Madhyamaka (śūnyatā) | Influence on Parfit's reductionism | Schmithausen (1987); Parfit (1984) |

This table highlights shared anti-substantialism amid divergent motivations (Gombrich, 2009; Passmore, 1952).

III. EXPLICATING THE DOCTRINES: CORE ARGUMENTS AND TEXTUAL ANCHORS

i. Anattā's Negation: From Aggregates to Insight

Buddhist argumentation employs tripartite marks—anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), anattā—applied to khandhas, rendering self-identification irrational (Anālayo, 2011). The Cūḷasihanāda Sutta (MN 11) exemplifies this: if the body were self, it would obey will, yet it decays (Bodhi, 2012). Dependent origination loops—avijjā begetting saṅkhāra, ad infinitum—trap the pseudo-self in cyclic ignorance (Fleming, 2017).

Post-canonical texts like the Milindapaṇha analogize personhood to a chariot: functional yet partless (Rhys Davids, 1890). Abhidhamma's momentary dharmas further granularize consciousness as citta-vīthi, a flash-sequence sans continuity (Ronkin, 2005). These

arguments pivot from ontology to praxis, where anattā insight severs upādāna (clinging) (Harvey, 2013).

ii. Hume's Bundle: Perceptions Without Proprietor

Hume's method is introspective empiricism: probing "the theatre of the mind" yields no actor, only scenes (Hume, 2000, p. 253). The bundle—impressions vivified, ideas copied—coheres via sympathy and causation, mimicking unity (Árdal, 1966). Appendix to the Treatise concedes memory's narrative glue, yet insists no "simple and continu'd" self endures (Hume, 2000, App. 19).

This dissolves substance dualism, aligning with Hume's fork: relations of ideas versus matters of fact (Stroud, 1977). Critically, it anticipates eliminativism, where folk-psychological "self" is explanatorily otiose (Churchland, 1981).

Table 2 contrasts argumentative strategies.

Table 2: Comparative Argumentative Structures

| Argument Type | Buddhist Example | Humean Example | Key Insight Shared | References |
|----------------------------------|--|---|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Negation via Impermanence | Aggregates change; cannot command (SN 22.59) | No impression of stable self (Treatise 1.4.6) | Flux over fixity | Anālayo (2011); Stroud (1977) |
| Causal Analysis | Paṭiccasamuppāda loop (DN 15) | Associative principles forge illusion | Interdependence | Fleming (2017); Ārdal (1966) |
| Analogical Support | Chariot (Milindapañha) | Ship of Theseus (Treatise 1.4.6) | Functional unity | Rhys Davids (1890); Baier (2011) |
| Epistemic Outcome | Vipassanā dissolves clinging | Skepticism yields humility | De-illusionment | Harvey (2013); Fogelin (1985) |

Such parallels underscore methodological convergence (Kapstein, 2001; Parfit, 1984).

IV. METAPHYSICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL COMPARISONS

i. Ontologies of Process: Emptiness and Bundle

Anattā's svabhāva-negation (Nāgārjuna, 1995) parallels Hume's anti-substantialism, both favoring relational becoming (Sharma, 2014). Yet Buddhism's tathatā (thusness) infuses ethical valence absent in Hume's neutral flux (Hooker, 1991).

Epistemologically, both privilege direct scrutiny—vipassanā versus introspection—but

diverge: Buddhist non-dual awareness transcends subject-object, while Hume's remains perceptual (Albahari, 2016).

ii. Continuity Conundrums: Karma, Memory, and Narrative

Karmic streams sustain agency sans self (Katsura & Brato, 2010), akin to Hume's character-trait continuity (Battersby, 1980). Both eschew Lockean memory as constitutive, viewing it as associative artifice (Schechtman, 2014).

Table 3 delineates continuity models.

Table 3: Models of Personal Continuity

| Dimension | Buddhist View | Humean View | Comparative Tension | References |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Causal Link | Karma via saṅkhāra (SN 12.2) | Causation in impressions (Treatise 1.3.2) | Efficacy sans agent | Katsura & Brato (2010); Hume (2000) |
| Temporal Mechanism | Rebirth stream (viññāṇa-sota) | Memory-narrative (Enquiry 3.2) | Illusion vs. utility | Hamilton (2000); Schechtman (2014) |
| Ethical Implication | Non-attachment ethics | Sympathy-based morality | Relational over ego | Keown (1992); Baier (2011) |
| Modern Analogue | Enactive cognition (Varela, 1996) | Narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1990) | Processual self | Thompson (2020); Gallagher (2005) |

This reveals shared reductionism (Siderits, 2015; De Sousa, 2007).

V. ETHICAL RAMIFICATIONS: AGENCY IN THE VOID

Anattā reframes ethics as karuṇā-driven, interdependence yielding bodhicitta (Keown, 2001). Hume's sentiments—sympathy as moral motivator—echo this, sans rebirth (Cohon, 2008). Both affirm responsibility through causal chains, countering nihilism (Goodman, 2009).

In bioethics, no-self informs end-of-life views, emphasizing process over essence (Perrett, 2002). Humean influences bolster consequentialism (Railton, 1984).

VI. CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES AND ENGAGEMENTS

i. Philosophical Pushback

Phenomenologists like Zahavi (2014) critique bundle theory's atomism, positing ipseity. Buddhists face similar charges: does anattā erode subjectivity? (Thompson, 2015). Defenses invoke conventional self (sammuti) (Garfield & Priest, 2020).

ii. Neuroscientific Intersections

fMRI studies reveal "default mode network" as narrative self-constructor, aligning with both (Qin & Northoff, 2011; Dor-Ziderman et al., 2013). Yet, critiques note cultural biases in data (Hacking, 1995).

Table 4 surveys engagements.

Table 4: Contemporary Critiques and Responses

| Critique Source | Target Doctrine | Key Objection | Response Example | References |
|-------------------|----------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Phenomenology | Bundle theory (Hume) | Lacks pre-reflective unity (Zahavi) | Narrative minimal self (Gallagher) | Zahavi (2014); Gallagher (2005) |
| Cognitive Science | Anattā | Overlooks embodied continuity (Thompson) | Enactivist integration (Varela) | Thompson (2015); Varela et al. (1991) |
| Ethics | Both | Undermines agency (Strawson) | Causal responsibility (Parfit) | Strawson (1959); Parfit (1984) |
| Neurophilosophy | Bundle | Ignores neural correlates (Metzinger) | Illusion model compatible | Metzinger (2009); Albahari (2006) |

These dialogues vitalize the debate (Newen, 2018; Bermúdez, 2010).

VII. BROADER IMPLICATIONS: MIND, ETHICS, AND BEYOND

No-self theories catalyze process metaphysics (Whitehead, 1929; Rescher, 1996), epistemology's humility (Chisholm, 1989), and ethics' relational turn (Gilligan, 1982; Nussbaum, 2001). In AI ethics, they query machine personhood (Bostrom, 2014; Bryson, 2010). Future trajectories blend with 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) (Rowlands, 2010; Clark, 2016).

VIII. CONCLUSION

In synthesizing the myriad threads of this comparative exploration, the doctrines of anattā and Hume's bundle theory emerge not as isolated negations but as transformative lenses for apprehending the human condition. Both dismantle the edifice of a substantive self, revealing identity as an ephemeral weave of conditions, perceptions, and narratives that, while illusory in essence, prove indispensable for ethical navigation and existential coherence. The Buddhist path, with its meditative dissolution of clinging, illuminates a horizon of compassionate interdependence, where liberation unfolds through vigilant awareness of flux. Hume's

empirical scalpel, in turn, strips away dogmatic veils, grounding belief in the rhythms of sentiment and habit, thereby fostering a skepticism that liberates thought from metaphysical tyranny.

Their interplay underscores a profound unity in diversity: shared insistence on impermanence as the ground of freedom, yet divergent in their calls—one to transcendent insight, the other to worldly engagement. This tension enriches our grasp of consciousness as emergent, ethics as relational, and philosophy as a bridge across epochs. Far from engendering void, these traditions beckon toward a fuller embrace of vulnerability, urging us to inhabit our narratives with grace, to act amid uncertainty with empathy, and to find profundity in the ordinary flux of being. In this light, the no-self stands not as erasure but as invitation—to reweave the self anew, lighter, wiser, and more profoundly connected.

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