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David Hume's Bundle Theory and the Buddha's Doctrine of Non-Self: A Comparative Philosophical Study

Dr. Kuheli Biswas

Associate Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

Shakespeare Malita

Independent Research Scholar, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

This paper provides a comparative overview of the Bundle Theory of the self as developed by David Hume and the Buddha's teaching on non-self (anattā), focusing on the modalities, distinctions and implications. Both thinkers agree that there is no permanent, unchanging self and both reject what is commonly understood to be personal identity, believing instead that our personal identity is a mass of constantly changing mental and physical processes. Hume argues that when you look inside yourself you only find a bundle of perceptions, impressions, emotions and memories, not a self-amongst them. Likewise, Buddhism teaches about the nature of humans using the concept of the Five Aggregates (form, feelings, perception, mental formations, consciousness), which are impermanent (Anicca), and have no permanent Self. Their similarities notwithstanding, their philosophies are very distinct. Hume's theory could be understood as being in the context of empiricism and epistemological skepticism, intending to explain the phenomenon of personal identity through ideas of psychological continuity and association of ideas. The Buddha, by contrast, adheres to the core tenets of the Buddhist ethical and soteriological system, namely dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), Karma, Compassion and Liberation from suffering (nirvāṇa). According to Buddhism, attachment and ignorance and suffering are the cause of believing that the self is a permanent entity. Hume argues that the self is a fiction and is supported by the memory and imagination and not a fact. However, the paper looks at the practical implications of both theories for the moral, conscious and personal identity issues, and underscores their continued relevance to current debates in contemporary philosophy, psychology and neuroscience, and cognitive science. It rounds up the contributions of Hume and the Buddha, whose answers to the question of self, though of very different intellectual and cultural background, are both strong arguments that are key to Contemporary issues concerning the nature of human identity and human consciousness

Keywords: Bundle Theory, *anattā* (Non-Self), Personal Identity, Five Aggregates (Skandhas), Impermanence (Anicca), Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), Consciousness, Empiricism; Comparative Philosophy, Philosophy of Mind.

Introduction:

The idea about the self is one of the most basic and perpetual questions in philosophy. But philosophers from various cultures have tried to account for whether the self is a thing that is always there, a mental phenomenon, or simply an illusion created by our lives. The discussion of this topic in western philosophy and Indian philosophy is different and two of the most renowned critiques of the traditional view on personal identity or soul is the Bundle Theory of David Hume and the Buddha's doctrine titled 'ANĀTTA' meaning lack of self. These thinkers were from different eras and thought realms but both attacked the belief that human beings have a permanent independent identity and suggested that human identity be viewed as ongoing and continually evolving. The Bundle Theory was introduced by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) in his "A Treatise of Human Nature". Humans never encounter a permanent self, and they only encounter a series of perceptions, impressions, emotions and ideas, according to Hume. He believes that the belief in personal identity is not based on any metaphysical substance, but on another element, namely, memory, imagination and Association of ideas. In the same manner, Buddha (c. 5th century BCE) rejected the existence of an eternal soul, as promoted by Anattā. The Buddhist philosophy refers to human life, including all of its contents, as the Five Aggregates or Five Skandhas: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā / saññā*), mental formations (*saṃskāra / saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna / viññāṇa*). All these are impermanent (*Anicca*) and take their origin in dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The attachment to the illusion of the self is considered the cause of suffering, and the awareness of the non-self is the source of wisdom, compassion and Nirvana.

This paper comparatively examines Hume's Bundle Theory and the Buddha's doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) with special reference to personal identity, impermanence, consciousness, and moral responsibility, highlighting both similarities and differences as well as their contemporary relevance.

Research Objectives:

1. Review David Hume's Bundle Theory of the self and its philosophical underpinnings.
2. Study and understand the Buddha's teaching of Anattā in reference to the Five Aggregates, impermanence, and dependent origination.
3. Note the similarities and differences between Hume's idea of self and the Buddhist concept of non-self.
4. Examine personal identity, consciousness, and continuity of human existence according to both theories.
5. Assess the ethical and practical significance of Hume's and the Buddha's concepts of morality, compassion, and cessation of suffering.
6. Evaluate both theories in modern philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science.

Research Methodology:

This research uses qualitative, analytical, and comparative philosophical research methods using secondary sources. The research is based on the classical philosophical texts, books, journal articles (peer-reviewed) and other scholarly publications related to David Hume's Bundle Theory and Buddha's teaching on anattā (Non-Self). The study focuses on using the comparative philosophical approach to study the similarities and differences between Hume's view of the self and the Buddhist notion of non-self. An analytical and

interpretative approach is used to examine key concepts such as personal identity, consciousness, memory, impermanence, the Five Aggregates (Skandhas), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and moral responsibility. The analysis is based on primary texts such as Hume's "A Treatise of Human Nature" and "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" and relevant Buddhist scriptures and authoritative commentaries. The study is thus descriptive, analytical, interpretative and comparative.

Main Discussion:

1) David Hume's Bundle Theory of Self

One of the most famous thinkers in the Enlightenment, David Hume (1711-1776), presented a radical theory of the self, canvassing the belief in the eternal and uniform soul of previous metaphysical philosophers. Hume was an empiricist, which meant that the ultimate source of all "real" knowledge was the process of experience. His doctrine is that every significant thought should be deducible from an impression, or a first impression, first sensation, or observation. When there is no equivalent impression there is no dimension or empirical proof. Taking this principle to the Self as Hume called it, he came to a conclusion about the lack of any experiential evidence of the presence of a permanent self or soul. The self is best explored in the "A Treatise of Human Nature" (1739) by Hume. He tried to look himself in the mirror within the mirror of the self, anticipating to find the self which philosophers have long taken for granted. Rather, only a series of shifting perceptions – they were sensations, feelings, and wishes, and memories, and hope, and fear, and joy, and pain. But not any one of his conscious moments found in him an unchanging spiritual substance which could be called "I am". Thus, the 'self' or individual that people ordinarily think of, Hume argued, is a set or 'bundle' of perceptions which are constantly varying. This theory is known as the Bundle Theory of the Self. It is in this progression that this theory has gained traction: The mind is no longer some indiscrete unit that has thoughts and experiences but is actually just the sum of those experiences. Human consciousness is like a flowing stream of experience, in which perceptions come and go. No perception is fixed into any one's life, so no basis exists for any certainty that a human person is one and the same throughout his life. This means, the self is not a permanent substance but rather a sequence of events taking place in the mind. Hume drew a contrast between impressions and ideas in order to speculate on the process of knowledge formation. Impressions are easily seen and experienced in the present moment, while ideas are weak copies of those seen, sensed or felt impressions that remain in the memory or imagination. We cannot justify the idea of an eternal self because there is no corresponding impression ever experienced because it is a legitimate idea which must come from an impression. When people scrutinize their minds, there are only various perceptions, and no autonomous self-outside of their minds. A significant question that Hume's theory raises is about the individuality. If the Self is nothing but a series of multiple perceptions, with how then can someone assume that this self is the same person who existed throughout their lives? Hume responded to this question in terms of the roles that memory and imagination play. Memory makes a link between what is happening now and what has happened in the past; imagination makes a link between what is happening now and what you think you remember of it, by reasons of resemblance, continuity, and causal link. It implies that the possibilities to develop psychological processes make the stable identity an illusion, as there is no term left at all. Personal identity thus cannot be identified as a

separate substance to be found in some beyond-the-experiential reality, but is an expression of the default tendency of the mind to construct a unified story from the variety of experiences. Additionally, In Hume's view, there are 3 principles of association which are essential: resemblance, contiguity and causation. Forming our notion of personal identity Similar experiences are similar, follow in a temporal sequence, and are causally linked. The associations this time led to the unification of what is a flux of perceptions. Therefore, the conviction that a person is 'forever and a day' depends on a psychological habit and not on rational demonstration. It should be noted that Hume's rejection of the self is related to general philosophical skepticism. He questioned the concept of substance, causation and the Immortal Soul, which had no evidence in experience. In his opinion, philosophy must not venture beyond what can be observed and agrees with experience, but must not speculate on things that are inexperienced. Nor can a permanent soul be accepted simply because it accords to religious and/or metaphysical convictions.

However, Hume acknowledged that there is a human need for faith in personal identity beyond the skeptical point of view. Individuals recall the past, engage in planning for the future, take responsibilities for their actions and behaviors, and relate with others as relatively stable individuals. Philosophy shows that there is no self to be found, but imagination and habit will lead to the lived conviction that one remains the same person through time. So, Hume presents a concept of philosophical analysis, which dispenses with the notion of a substantial self, and an alternative mode of life in which personal identity remains commonplace. Throughout the history of philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science, Hume's theory has had significant impact. Genuine modern accounts of consciousness interpret sensations as a "constructed process," instead of a substantial object, with important sentiments that are akin to Hume's Bundle Theory. His analysis continues to be one of the most severe empirical challenges to the traditional theories of the soul, and is still being influential in ongoing debates on consciousness, identity, and the philosophy of mind.

2) Buddha's theory of the self

Gautama Buddha (traditionally c. 563–483 BCE) offered a philosophical concept of the self, which was just as negative and did not assert the existence of an eternal and independent self-more than two thousand years before Hume. But unlike Hume, whose study was epistemological in nature, the Buddha formulated his teaching in a practical ethical system which sought to remove suffering. His doctrine of *anattā* (no permanent self) is one of the main principles of Buddhist thinkers' philosophy. The Buddha challenged the then prevailing notion that every human being has an unchanging *Ātman* which persists after death. It is by careful observation of man's life that man can see only continually changing physical and mental processes, he said. Because there is nothing to do that is without shifting, nothing in human roles can be rightfully said to be a permanent self.

"Sabbe dhammā anattā." ("All phenomena are not-self.")

(Buddharakkhita, 1985, p. 67) – Dhammapada, Verse 279 Clinging on to the sense of self is attachment, ignorance and suffering. The Buddha made the point that the actual entity that people call a person is actually the five Skandhas – five aggregates. They are *rūpa* (material form), *vedanā* (feelings or sensations), *saṃjñā* (perception), *saṃskāra* (mental formations), and *viññāna* (consciousness). These aggregates are all part of human

experience but not permanent and not self-determinate. All five are not permanent, fluctuating all the time and the notion of a fixed self is a fallacy.

“*Rūpaṃ anattā, vedanā anattā, saññā anattā, saṅkhārā anattā, viññāṇaṃ anattā.*”

(“Form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, mental formations are not-self, consciousness is not-self.”) (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 901–903). — Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59.

The first fundamental, *rūpa*, is the physical body and material phenomena. *Vedanā* or the second consists of pleasant and unpleasant and neutral feelings that are created with reference to the outside world. *saṃjñā* organises into the realms of recognition, perception and conceptual understanding. *saṅskāra* are those habits, intentions, emotions, memories, volitions that drive the way one acts and is directed into moral conduct. *viññāna*, then, is the consciousness which comes about because of the connection between the senses and their objects. All aggregates are dependent on changing; thus, none has permanent existence.

Anicca or impermanence is the Buddhist principle which is closely related to the doctrine of non-self(*anattā*). All good things come and go, in time. Human being is therefore a process not a thing. Your physical body gets older and older, your thoughts change and shift, your emotions wave up and down, and consciousness is fleeting and happens one moment at a time. Acknowledging this universal impermanent aspect of everything can help one free themselves of the false sense of one's own permanency that is fostered. To realize that this is universal impermanence helps to transcend a false sense of permanency that humans are cultivated. Important teachings that underlie the Buddhist concept of self are Dependent Origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The underlying principle of this is that all phenomena have a cause and conditions. Things are not permanent or individual and do not have an unchanging nature. But rather than an eternal soul, human existence is an interrelated chain of processes. Continuity of life is not the permanent self that survives unchanged from one moment to the next, rather it is the causal dependence. While not affirming an eternal soul, the tenets of Buddhism do not contradict continuity or moral responsibility. The Buddha taught about Continuity based on the principle of Karma – the idea that what we do, results in what we get! Since it is not an immortal soul that migrates from one body to another, it is not rebirth rather it is the continuation of the causal chain of karmic conditions. This is likened to the manner in which one candle lights another or the flowing water of a river changes all the time without ending its causal continuity within the Buddhist texts. The consciousness of non-self (*anattā*) is very existential in nature and has a lot of moral set. The firm belief in permanent self is the source of selfishness, desire, hatred and ignorance – these are the chief causes of suffering. As it is realized that it is impassively a bundle of conditioned processes, there is a progressive liberation from attachment and an increasing development of the right attitude of compassion, wisdom and equanimity. This insight eventually points towards *Nirvāṇa* (the Ultimate Ending of suffering). Instead of merely theoretical considerations on the subject of personal identity, the content of Buddha's teaching has an application. However, by practicing wisdom consciousness, mindful awareness and meditation, a person can witness directly that thinking, feeling and consciousness are impermanent. With this experiential awareness, one realizes that there is no 'self' that remains behind these phenomena. This means that there is no liberation through an eternal soul, that is, apart from relinquishing the conception of one. As a fundamental principle of Buddha's

teachings, the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) is one of the most characteristic and unique philosophical disclosures in the world. It questions the theories of personal identity in metaphysics and offers a whole ethics system based on compassion, wisdom and liberation. Beyond its cultural roots in Buddhist practices, its impact has reached a level that resonates with recent philosophical and psychological explorations into the nature of consciousness and personal identity, evolving areas of the cognitive sciences, including neuroscience. *Anattā* is related to the Buddhist principles of *anicca* (impermanence) and *pratīyasamutpāda* (Dependent Origination). In accordance with the Buddha's principle, everything is caused by something and conditions; Nothing exists independently, all phenomena are empty of inherent existence. Because both physical and mental states are induced and in perpetual flux, there is no essential self that is the root of human beings. This is not made using an eternal individual soul, but by the causal continuity of actions (*karma*) and conditions. In this way, the Buddhist conception of a personal identity is not substantial, not metaphysical, but dynamic, relational and process-based. The practical meaning of the doctrine of non self is related with ethics and spiritual purposes. Buddha is engaged in teaching these three, craving, ignorance, and suffering, as coming from belief in a permanent self. Even as we become aware of the impermanence and selfless nature of life, we repeat a simple mantra that is chanted during times of difficulty. While practicing mindfulness, meditation and wisdom, we discover the impermanence of life and its selfless nature, and we repeat a simple mantra chanted when things get tough. Eventually thus one realizes *nirvāṇa* which is the end of suffering. In this sense the doctrine of *anattā* is not just a metaphysical theory but a line of practice to liberation; it is one of the most original and profusely developed parts of Buddhist philosophy on the topic of personal identity and consciousness.

The Similarities and Differences between David Hume's Bundle Theory and the Buddha's Doctrine of Non-Self:

Similarities: This is something that both David Hume and the Buddha both deny the existence of. Their theories have some similar important theoretical philosophical concepts despite their conceptual origins being different and in different historical and cultural settings.

1. Rejection of a Permanent Self: For both philosophers there is no eternal and independent self. In Hume's mind the only thing that is seen in introspection is a "chain of perceptions," and no "I" is visible there. Likewise, the Buddha's teaching is that of non-self (*Anattā*), that there is no fixed "self" that lies beyond human experience.

2. The Self as a Collection of Changing Elements: According to Hume's Bundle theory, the self is a bundle of continually shifting perceptions, impressions, memories and feelings. Similarly, Buddhism teaches that the human being is composed of the five *skandhas* (Aggregates): form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. In both perceptions the self is not static, but dynamic.

3. Emphasis on Impermanence: Both views see humanness as if it were a passing show. Nothing remains the same in our minds (Hume), and in Buddhist thinking nothing is permanent, even physical phenomena (*Anicca*).

4. A rejection of Metaphysical Substance: Neither Hume nor the Buddha holds to the old beliefs of an immortal soul, of a metaphysical substance that sustains one's personal

identity. Both are opposed to speculative metaphysical motivations which can't be proven by a direct experience.

5. Importance of Experience: It is evident that experience is a key element of both philosophies. The approach of Hume is the method of empirical observation and introspection, while the Gautam Buddha's method is to meditate and experience.

6. The rejection of a permanent self: In both cases the thinkers believe that the notion of self is ultimately false. The illusion is said to be caused by memory, imagination and association by Hume and ignorance and attachment by Buddhism.

7. Impact on Modern Ideas: These theories have had a great impact on modern-day philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and cognitive science, with an emphasis on the body rather than the self as an object.

Differences: Although Hume and the Gautam Buddha were similar in some ways, they had significant differences in their philosophical goals, their approaches and their results.

1. Purpose of the Theory: Hume's theory is mainly epistemological as well as philosophical. He aims to describe subject-matter and individual identity in objects, through empirical study. Buddhist non-self, however, is behavioral, with the intent of resisting evil and experiencing salvation in the form of *nivāṇa*.

2. Method of Inquiry: Both the facts and the inferences involve in each of Hume's conclusions are of the empirical, introspectionistic and philosophical skeptical type. Gautam Buddha reaches the concept of non-self via meditation, Buddhist discipline and direct experience.

3. Explanation of Personal Identity: Memories, dreams, and ideas, or association of ideas, are the sources of identity that Hume discusses. Buddhism sees continuity in terms of cause and effect, namely the concept of "karmad Eva" that of Dependent Origination (*pratityasamutpāda*), but no "self" is assumed.

4. Context (responsibilities and values): As a theory, Hume is primarily a secular, psychological theorist. Buddhism is rooted in the non-self tenet, and incorporates the concept with a fully elaborated ethics and religion: karma, reincarnation, compassion and liberation.

5. Idea of Karma and Rebirth: Hume denies that speculation on the Immortality of the Soul is philosophical, nor does he agree to the notion of Karma or rebirth. But even without the notion of an eternal soul, Buddhism sets out to explain the continuity of human existence by the principle of Karma and rebirth.

6. Ultimate Goal: For Hume, ordinary life is possible through natural habits and imagination, and at the same time they deepen his philosophical understanding of what the self is. Understanding the nature of non-self is an important step in becoming free from suffering and attain enlightenment in the Buddha's teachings.

7. Role of Imagination: Hume gives the imagination a major part in giving rise to the delusion of self in order to protect his theoretic interpretation of moral virtue. Hume confers a large part of personal identity to the imagination, so as to ensure his moral-theoretic explanation of moral virtue. Ignorance (*avidyā*), craving (*tṛṣṇā*) and attachment are the main causes of the illusion of self in Buddhism, and are chiefly recognized as ignorance, rather than imagination.

8. Practical Implications: Nevertheless, Hume concludes that while personal identity is not a philosophical reality, it nonetheless has a very real and practical need for ordinary living.

The ultimate focus of Buddhism is the turn away from the ego by practicing meditation, mindfulness and moral living.

9. View of Compassion Hume: builds on the concept of sympathy as the grounds for morality and social interaction. Buddhism has not given as much attention to universal compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving kindness (*mettā*) as virtues for alleviation of suffering.

10. Philosophical Orientation: When looking at their differences, Hume embodies the tradition of occident philosophies and skeptical philosophies, while Buddha stands for a combination of philosophical and spiritual concepts, containing metaphysics, ethical practice, meditation and practical psychology as all on a unified path to liberation of the Indian tradition.

While Hume's theory came up with in his era, long before the Buddha, both doctrines question the traditional notion of a permanent self and validate the dynamism of human life. While Hume's Bundle Theory provides a scientific and psychological account of personal identity, and the Gautam Buddha's Buddhism provides a moral and spiritual blueprint to the end of suffering. Both theories played a crucial role in modern discourse on personal identity, consciousness, and the philosophy of mind, through their conviction that human beings do not have a fixed personal identity.

Conclusion:

Bundle Theory of David Hume, and the Buddha's doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) were two of the most influential philosophical attacks on the traditional belief in a permanent self. Their histories, cultures and ideas, while different, all deny the existence of an eternal soul and they both say that personal identity is not something fixed or stable but an evolving process. Hume understands human subjectivity as flux and change of perceptions linked together by memory and a connection of ideas, whereas Buddhism explains human existence through the Five Aggregates (*Skandhas*), the law of impermanence (*Anicca*) and dependent origination (*pratityasamutpāda*). There are important distinctions between, however, their philosophical goals. The investigation of Hume is basically epistemological and empirical, concerning the process that humans undergo in coming to the concept of personal identity through experience. In contrast, the doctrine the non-existence of Permanent self is closely related with the ethical and spiritual practice which can result in the end of suffering and reach *Nirvāṇa*. Buddhism turns the doctrine of non-self into an exercise of wisdom, compassion, mindfulness and moral conduct, while Hume, offering a skeptical description of the self, makes the non-self-seem like a curious object of study. The comparative analysis illustrates the way both theories both refute essentialist views on personal identity and continue to shape ongoing discussions within the current philosophical discourse in the fields of philosophy of mind, psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience. Their theories play an important role in the overall understanding of human consciousness, personal identity, and the human experience. To sum up, Hume's Bundle Theory offers an empirical and philosophical view of the self that relies on experiences, introspection and perceptual association to claim that there is no permanent, substantial self. In contrast, as for the Buddha, his teachings on *Anattā* provide both a philosophical and practical avenue to the realization that no self exists, and through wisdom, mindfulness, and moral conduct, one attains *Nirvāṇa*. Although the two theories have different historical and philosophical backgrounds, both still have an impact on the

current controversies around personal identity, consciousness, philosophy of mind, psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience.

Future Research Aspect:

The present study is a comparative analysis between the Bundle Theory of David Hume and the Doctrine of Non-Self (*anattā*) of Buddha. A future study could build on this comparison by considering other western philosophers who have doubted the existence of a permanent self, such as Heraclitus, Gorgias, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Jean-Paul Sartre, Derek Parfit, Daniel Dennett and Thomas Metzinger. Comparative study could provide a wider perspective of the personal identity concept from various philosophies and historical eras. Theories related to these may also be investigated in the context of current philosophical concepts, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence in the hope of enriching the discussion of consciousness, self or human identity.

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