THE SELF IN QUESTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DESCARTES' COGITO AND BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

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Abstract

Descartes' cogito affirms a permanent thinking self that is foundational to modern Western thought, emphasizing rational autonomy and dualism between mind and body. Conversely, Buddhism denies the existence of a permanent self, viewing identity as a transient aggregation of experiences. This perspective underlies a broader ethical framework promoting compassion and interconnectedness. By contrasting Descartes' individualistic rationalism with Buddhist impermanence, the analysis explores how each tradition influences understandings of consciousness, morality, and human identity. While Descartes locates selfhood in rational thought, Buddhism challenges fixed identity constructs, advocating self-transcendence through meditation and ethical action.

Keywords: Self; Western; Philosophical Descartes Buddhism

Introduction

The idea of the self has been a significant area of interest in Western and Eastern philosophy, although the two traditions have very different ways of viewing it. René Descartes' famous saying "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") marks a turning point in the history of metaphysics and epistemology in Western philosophy. In this formulation, Descartes posits the thinking self as the incontrovertible basis of knowledge and existence, asserting that questioning confirms the existence of a stable, singular self (Descartes, 1996). This concept has profoundly influenced contemporary Western philosophy, shaping notions of the mind, consciousness, and individual identity.

In contrast, classical Buddhist philosophy offers a radical critique of the notion of a permanent or inherently existing self. Foundational texts such as the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* emphasize the doctrine of *anattā* (Pali; *anātman* in Sanskrit), or non-self, arguing that what we conventionally regard as the self is a mere aggregation of transient physical and mental phenomena (*skandhas*) without any enduring essence (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2001). Rather than affirming a metaphysical subject, Buddhist thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, further deconstruct the very basis of selfhood by employing rigorous dialectical reasoning to reveal the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena, including the self (Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995).

This article compares Descartes' cogito with Buddhist perspectives of the self to examine their theories of awareness, identity, and reality. This research compares Cartesian commitment to a basic, thinking self to Buddhist rejection of a substantial self to show how metaphysics and epistemological frameworks impact subjectivity. These beliefs will also be considered in modern philosophy of mind and cognitive science arguments on self-awareness, continuity of personal identity, and intersubjective knowledge. The investigation raises larger concerns regarding how introspection, meditation, and logical analysis lead to truth. Buddhist practices emphasise mindfulness and meditation insight to destroy the illusion of the self, whereas Descartes uses systematic doubt to find it.

From a framework of extreme scepticism, Descartes aimed to provide a robust basis for knowing, contending that while perceptions may be misleading, questioning or thinking affirms the presence of a thinking self (Descartes, 1996). His dualistic paradigm posits a significant separation between mind (res cogitans) and body (res extensa), implying that the mind lives autonomously and is characterised by rational reasoning and self-awareness (Kenny, 2006).

Conversely, Buddhist philosophy offers a radically different perspective on self and existence. Central to Buddhist teachings is the doctrine of *anatta*, or non-self, which asserts that what we perceive as the self is merely an aggregation of transient experiences—specifically, form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Gombrich, 2006). Buddhism clinging to the notion of a permanent self leads to suffering and ignorance, emphasizing instead the impermanence of all phenomena (Harvey, 2013). The ultimate goal

in Buddhism is to transcend this illusion and attain enlightenment or nirvana, where one recognizes the interconnectedness and emptiness of all things (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999).

The fact that Descartes believes in a permanent thinking self while Buddhism denies it opens up a lot of intriguing debates between these two schools of thought. Descartes says that logical thinking is the most important thing about existence. In contrast, Buddhism teaches that the self is not independent but part of a larger relational environment (Siderits, 2007). These differences raise important concerns about consciousness and the nature of life itself. Looking at Descartes through a Buddhist lens, you may see apparent differences and possible connections between the two ideologies. For example, both traditions value looking inside oneself, but they come to very different conclusions about what makes up the self. In Cartesian thinking, the "I" is a thinker who cannot be denied and whose existence is shown by thought. Conversely, Buddhism says that this "I" is an illusion, a temporary construct that comes from different experiences (Collins, 1998). The study shows how different philosophies are incompatible and encourages us to think more deeply about how each worldview affects how we understand human experience. This comparative study will examine how Buddhist philosophy can help us understand Descartes' cogito.

Descartes' Cogito and the Concept of Self

René Descartes' popular assertion, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), represents the end of his philosophical search for the essence of self. It is more than just a statement about existence; it is a turning point in the history of philosophy when the self becomes the focus of deep thought and study. Descartes' epistemology is based on his cogito, which says that thinking is evidence that you exist. This way, Descartes builds a dualistic framework that separates the mind (res cogitans) from the body (res extensa). He suggests that genuine knowledge and identity come from the thinking self. It discusses how his ideas have influenced current philosophical discussions and compares them to other views, especially Eastern philosophies like Buddhism.

Descartes starts his exploration with severe scepticism, which means he questions everything that can be questioned. He doubts the accuracy of his senses and even the presence of the outside world, which makes him think that a wicked demon may be tricking him. However, even if he is doubtful, he knows that the act of doubting means that there is

a doubter i.e. himself. This realisation leads him to the well-known conclusion: "Cogito, ergo sum" (Descartes 1996). At this point, Descartes says that the ego is intrinsically linked to the mind; to think is to be which goes against prior philosophical ideas that tied existence to outside proof or divine authority.

Descartes' "cogito" has effects beyond just being; it changes what it is to be oneself. Descartes argued that the self was more than just a thinking thing; it was also an object that could think. He says the core of the self is its power to question, comprehend, affirm, reject, will, and fantasise (Descartes 1996). This idea of selfhood stresses independence and reason, making the person an independent thinker who can get knowledge from within instead of relying on outside sources. According to Ilario Colli, Descartes' idea that reason is the centre of one's essence marks a significant change in philosophical thought: "The self no longer needed God for its ontological validation" (Colli, 2022). Also, Descartes' dualism makes an important difference between the mind and the body. He says that the body might be doubted and tricked, but the mind is always certain and apart from the body (Kenny 2006). This division significantly affects how we think about who we are as people. It argues that our actual selves are not bound to physical events but live in a domain of thinking and awareness.

Buddhism, have a different view on selfhood than Descartes, who stressed reason and individualism. The idea of anatta, or "non-self," is at the heart of Buddhist teachings. It says that what we consider a permanent self is an illusion made by experiences that come and go (Gombrich, 2006). Buddhism does not see identity as fixed or inherent; instead, it focuses on impermanence and how everything is connected. Buddhism teaches that attachment and desire can cause suffering, similar to the idea that holding on to a fixed sense of self can cause suffering (Harvey, 2013). This difference brings up important questions about what consciousness and identity are. Descartes says that the self is independent and based on rational thought, but Buddhism teaches that identity is changeable and depends on many things (Siderits, 2007). From a Buddhist point of view, Cartesian dualism is wrong because it says that consciousness can be separated from its relational context. Instead, it says that consciousness comes from interacting with others and the environment. Even though there are differences, there are some interesting ways in which Descartes' cogito and Buddhist thought overlap. Both traditions think that looking inside oneself and thinking about oneself

are good ways to learn about consciousness. Descartes's meditative practices are a form of contemplation similar to Buddhist mindfulness techniques (Sangiacomo). On the other hand, Descartes concludes that individuals exist through rational thought.

In addition, Descartes' study of identity makes us think about what it means to be authentic and fake in our sense of self. He knows that outside forces may change how someone sees himself, so he goes on an epistemological trip to break down his old ideas and build a new identity based on reasoned reasoning (Colli, 2022). This technique is similar to Buddhist teachings that help people see and let go of attachments that make it hard to see things as they are. Descartes' "cogito" is a significant turning point in philosophical thinking on the idea of self. He sets the framework for current ideas about identity based on reason and independence by saying that thinking is the same as being. However, we need to put this point of view in the context of larger intellectual traditions that question its fundamental ideas, such as Buddhism's focus on impermanence and non-self. As we go through these different ideas about identity and awareness, we learn more about what it means to be human in Western and Eastern philosophy.

Buddhist Perspectives on Selfhood and Consciousness

The idea of anatta (अनात्मन्), or "no-self," is at the heart of Buddhist philosophy's study of selfhood and awareness. It says that there is no permanent, unchanging self or essence in anything, which goes against the idea of a unique, lasting identity. The Buddha's teachings, especially in texts like the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, make this point clear by stressing that what we think of as the self is just a collection of five aggregates: form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (sankhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa) (Gombrich, 2006). It indicates that our experiences and perceptions are intricately connected to our self-perception.

The idea of anatta does not entirely deny the existence of a self; instead, it changes the way we think about it. Scholars Richard Gombrich and Alexander Wynne say that early Buddhist texts do not deny the existence of a self; they criticise the idea of a permanent self (Wynne, 2002). The Buddha's teachings suggest that even though we feel we have a self, it is made up of constantly changing experiences and an illusion. As the Lankavatara Sutra says, "Things are not what they seem... Deeds exist, but no doer can be found" (Majjhima Nikaya

192). Buddhists believe that while actions happen, they do not come from a fixed self but from a complex interaction of conditions and causes. Buddhist philosophy says that holding on to the idea of a permanent self-causes pain. This pain comes from being attached to your identity and wanting things to stay the same in a constantly changing world. Peter Harvey says that the Suttas say that ideas of an everlasting self are wrong, but they recognise an enlightened person as someone whose empirical self is very well developed (Harvey, 2006). This paradox argues that being enlightened means seeing the self constantly changing while developing a sophisticated awareness of one's own experiences. To better understand how this works, we need to look at how awareness works within this framework. Buddhism uses three words that overlap to define consciousness: vinnana (विज्ञान), which means fundamental awareness; manas (मनस्), which includes cognitive processes; and citta (चित्त), which means emotional reactions (Gethin, 1998). It is clear from these definitions that consciousness is not a fixed thing but an evolving process influenced by many different things. Because of this, the feeling of self does not come from a fixed essence but from the constant flow of experiences and consciousness.

The connection between awareness and selfhood in Buddhism may be juxtaposed with Cartesian perspectives expressed by thinkers such as René Descartes. In Cartesian philosophy, the cogito—"I think, therefore I am"—creates a definitive separation between mind and body, asserting a persistent thinking self as fundamental to existence (Descartes 1996) This dualistic paradigm emphasises reason and individualism, situating the self as an autonomous thinker capable of independent cognition. The notion that the "self" is an illusion corresponds with modern insights in psychology and neuroscience about identity development. Jack Engler observes that examining one's deepest identification demands via meditation results in sensations of "emptiness" that deconstruct the concept of a stable individual essence (Guenther, 1974). Meditation is an important part of getting these insights about who you are and what awareness is. Practitioners use methods like Vipassana meditation to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings without being attached to them. As practitioners watch their experiences without becoming caught up in them, they see that everything is temporary. Henepola Gunaratana says that mindfulness helps people view

everything without using words like "me," "my," or "mine." This helps them realise themselves better (Gunaratana, 2011).

Zen Buddhism goes beyond simple differences between self and no-self by urging practitioners to reach a more profound understanding that includes both points of view. Anatta has philosophical ramifications beyond individual practice and affects how Buddhists think about ethics. People are urged to develop compassion and empathy for others by realising that the idea of "self" is an illusion. The idea that all living things go through this temporary experience together makes people feel more connected and less likely to be selfish or proud. As **N**ā**g**ā**r**juna says in his Madhyamaka thinking, genuine knowledge is understanding emptiness (**ś**ū**n**yat**ā**) the realisation that clinging to a personal identity is a delusion that leads to bondage (Nagarjuna, 1995).

Buddhist views on selfhood and awareness challenge traditional concepts of identity by highlighting impermanence and interconnectedness. The philosophy of anatta encourages people to profoundly examine their experiences while acknowledging that the perceived "self" is composed of transient aggregates. By engaging in activities such as meditation, individuals may develop awareness that surpasses fixed identities and promotes compassion for others. Ultimately, these findings promote a more sophisticated understanding of consciousness that recognises its relational essence while deconstructing ties to rigid concepts of self.

Comparative Analysis: Western vs. Buddhist Perspectives on Self

Looking at selfhood and existence, we see that Western and Buddhist philosophies differ, especially regarding how they think about the self. In Western philosophy, especially from the point of view of philosophers like Descartes, the self is generally seen as a permanent, logical being that exists on its own and is not affected by anything else. Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, opposes this idea with the concept of anatta (अनात्मन्), or "no-self," which says that the self is an illusion made up of temporary experiences. This comparative examination examines these two different points of view and how each tradition thinks about the essence of self and life. Ultimately, it shows how these ideas affect our understanding of identity, morality, and awareness.

Plato, Augustine, and Descartes have significantly impacted how the idea of self has developed in Western philosophy. Plato's theory of forms says every item has an ideal essence, including the self. Plato believed that the soul is eternal and apart from the body. This led to a dualistic perspective in which the authentic self goes beyond physical existence. Augustine builds on this notion by connecting the ego to divine creation and everlasting truths. He stresses that looking within and using reason are methods to comprehend who you are (Augustine). However, Descartes is the one who most clearly expresses a contemporary idea of self in his famous saying, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). Descartes says that thinking is evidence that you exist. Hence, the self is closely connected to awareness and logical thought (Descartes, 1996).

On the other hand, Buddhist philosophy has a very distinct point of view. The Buddha taught that what we think of as the "self" is just a collection of five things: form (r**ū**pa), feeling (vedan**ā**), perception (saññ**ā**), mental formations (sankh**ā**r**ā**), and awareness (viññ**ā**ṇa) (Gombrich, 2006). This point of view is similar to what David Hume said: when you look within yourself, you do not discover a permanent self but a collection of perceptions and experiences that make it seem like there is one (Hume, 2000). Buddhism agrees with Hume that holding on to a permanent self-causes misery, but it goes further by saying that this attachment is wrong in the first place. The Lankavatara Sutra says, "Things are not what they seem..." "Deeds exist, but no doer can be found" (Suzuki, 1970).

These different ideas of selfhood have moral ramifications as well. Much Western moral theory, especially Kantian ethics, links moral agency to an independent self that can make decisions based on reason. According to Kant, moral acts come from responsibility and following universal moral principles that reason sets (Kant, 1997). In this view, people are considered responsible agents whose acts come from their rational will. On the other hand, Buddhist ethics stresses compassion (karuṇ**ā**) and loving-kindness (metta), which come from realising that all creatures are interrelated. Not believing in a permanent self creates a moral framework where acts are based on empathy instead of selfish goals. Peter Harvey says, "Buddhist morality comes from mastering our ego and desire" (Harvey, 2006).

The Buddhist idea of pratītyasamutp**ā**da, or dependent origination, further supports this moral position by showing how all things come into being connected. This concept says

that nothing exists independently; everything depends on several causes and circumstances (Siderits 56). So, in Buddhism, being ethical is being aware of these connections and responding in ways that benefit everyone instead of just yourself. The link between awareness and selfhood also diverges significantly between these two traditions. People in the West generally think of consciousness as a stable thing linked to who they are. Descartes' dualism makes a clear separation between the mind and the body. Because of this, awareness is the same as rational thinking and individual identity (Kenny, 2006).

On the other hand, Buddhism says that awareness is not a single thing but a changing process that many things affect. How the five aggregates work together shows how awareness comes from interacting with mental processes and sensory experiences. In addition, modern cognitive research has started to agree with Buddhist views on consciousness. Researchers say that how we feel like we are distinct from the world around us daily is wrong. Instead, they say, awareness comes from how we relate to others (Hasenkamp, 2022). This idea is similar to what Buddhists say about how everything is related. People who think that "I" am distinct from others are regarded to be under the spell of habitual patterns of cognition.

Buddhism's meditation techniques help us understand these ideas about who we are and what awareness is. Mindfulness meditation and Vipassana methods help people become aware of their thoughts and feelings without being attached to or identifying with them. This method helps people see that their experiences are temporary, breaking down inflexible ideas of who they are. Jack Engler says that meditating on your deepest aspirations for identification may lead to feelings of "emptiness" that contradict long-held ideas about what it is to be an individual (Guenther, 2011).

It is also important to look at the moral issues arising from these different ideas about selfhood. Buddhists believe that understanding that the ego is an illusion makes them more compassionate towards others. The Bodhisattva ideal expresses this concept by favouring communal freedom above individual accomplishment. As Charles Goodman notes, "Since there are not ultimately any experiencers... it cannot matter who experiences particular burdens and benefits" (Goodman, 2019). This point of view encourages selflessness based on an awareness of how everything is interrelated rather than on personal benefit. Conversely, Western ethics typically grapples with balancing individual liberty with communal duty. When

you think about the rights of individuals vs. the group's well-being, focussing on human agency might lead to moral problems. Kantian ethics focuses on obligation to others based on reason, but it may not consider the relational dynamics important in Buddhist thinking. Even though these two ways of thinking about selfhood and existence are different, they have certain things in common. Both traditions encourage looking within oneself to learn about one's identity, but they come to different conclusions about it. Descartes says we have a solid thinking self via logical reflection, whereas Buddhism tells its followers to go beyond ideas of individuality.

In conclusion, the comparative comparison of Western and Buddhist views on selfhood and existence shows substantial disparities based on their underlying beliefs about identity. Western philosophy frequently stresses a permanent rational self-tied to human action and moral responsibility. On the other hand, Buddhist philosophy opposes this idea with its teaching of anatta, which stresses that impermanence and interconnectivity are important parts of life. These diverse ideas drive ethical frameworks within each tradition—where Western ethics may promote individualism at times potentially at variance with social well-being—Buddhist ethics develops compassion founded on understanding shared experience. Ultimately, connecting with these different viewpoints deepens our knowledge not just of philosophical research but also of human experience itself.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of selfhood and existence from Western and Buddhist viewpoints highlights significant philosophical differences and subtle connections. Descartes' declaration, "Cogito, ergo sum," establishes a constant, rational self as the basis of life, influencing Western concepts of identity, autonomy, and moral accountability. By contrast, Buddhism's doctrine of anatta posits the self as an impermanent, relational construct arising from transient aggregates, promoting a worldview focused on interconnectedness and compassion. Each tradition provides significant insights: Western philosophy underscores rational individualism and personal agency, whereas Buddhism promotes awareness of the self's fluidity and advocates ethical responsibility rooted in collective experience. These differences invite deeper inquiry into human consciousness, revealing how introspection, whether through Cartesian reasoning or Buddhist meditation, yields diverse yet complementary paths to understanding existence. This comparative study underscores how

diverse perspectives on selfhood can collectively enhance our understanding of identity and ethical relationships in human experience.

The comparative study of Descartes' Cogito, ergo sum and Buddhist philosophy reveals contrasting views on selfhood. Descartes posits a permanent, rational self as the foundation of existence, emphasizing autonomy and mind-body dualism. Conversely, Buddhism's doctrine of anatta (non-self) views the self as an impermanent aggregation of transient experiences, promoting interconnectedness and compassion. While Descartes relies on rational introspection to affirm the self, Buddhism uses meditation to deconstruct it, highlighting impermanence and relationality. These perspectives deepen understanding of consciousness, identity, and ethics, with Descartes emphasizing individual agency and Buddhism advocating collective empathy. Both traditions value introspection but differ in their conclusions about the self's nature, enriching philosophical discourse on human experience.

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