

12 Self

This chapter defends the common sense idea of the self. This chapter assumes a common sense idea of the world to go along with the common sense self but does not defend it. I use “person” and “self” to mean the same. I continue to use “thinker” to mean theologian, priest, monk, philosopher, critic, biologist, psychologist, anthropologist, etc. Please see the chapter on codes, in particular the section on “Pascal’s Wager”.

If we face God after we die, there has to be a self that faces God. That self has to be like the self of common sense. If there is no self, or the self is unlike what we think it is, then facing God doesn’t make the same sense. If there are decent people, then there have to be people, and people have to be like the selves of common experience. If our self should be true to a code, then we have to have a coherent self. If we work to make the world better, then we need to know what makes human selves better off. If we want to reward good people, and we need to punish bad people, then people have to be the kind of self that it makes sense to reward and punish. If we hold life in general, and sentient-moral-aesthetic life in particular, to be valuable, then we need to know why human selves are valuable. We need to know why we should not enable bad behavior in human selves. On the other hand, if our self is not like these ideas of a self, we need to know how and why, and what that implies.

Ideas of Self and World.

The idea that our common sense self faces God is also an idea about the world. For a common sense self to get along in this world well enough to face God, this world has to be much as it seems. This world has to be close to a common sense world. We can’t expect people to act decently where decency makes no sense. We can’t hold indecent people to account when indecency doesn’t matter. We can’t expect people to work hard to make the world better if their actions don’t help at least some people. It takes a lot of space to show how an idea of the self and idea of a world go together, so I omit that topic, and stick to simply describing selves and worlds separately.

Various ideas of self-and-world are not all compatible. Different religions hold different views. People, and religions, usually hold multiple ideas of self and world, often contradictory, without reconciling them. This topic also takes much space so I don’t go into it. Two later chapters describe ideas about worlds.

My American Common Sense Version of the Self and the World.

My version of the self-and-world is pretty much the standard American common sense version, including my ideas about facing God and working to make a better world. The standard American common sense idea of the self-and-world is good enough, and true enough, for nearly all important needs. The standard American version is mostly shared by other cultures but not fully shared by all. Cultural differences are important but are too much to account for here.

My version of the self differs from simple empirical common sense a little. There is nothing in ordinary experience that makes us believe we face God after we die, and believe it is important to work to make the world better. My extension of the simple empirical common sense vision of self-and-world is not much of a departure, it is compatible with that view, and it is what many Americans, and many people of the world, believe too.

What the Self is and is Not; Opponents in this Chapter.

Most argument now against the common sense idea of the self comes from a mechanistic idea that the self is nothing but a bundle of electrochemical reactions. This view borrows from modern Darwinism, and it has much truth to it. It shares ideas with religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Modern scientific psychological mechanists are our version of ancient religious adepts who let their cleverness mistakenly dissolve the world.

Too often, to undermine the commonsense idea of the self, ideologies set up an unrealistic “straw” self which is easy to undermine. When they have undermined it, they assume they have vanquished all other views, and so their non-commonsense view must be correct. To counter this tactic, it helps to explain what I do not think about the self.

It is not hard to get people to consent to an idealized self that they don't really believe in, as apparent in their actions. Their actions show that they believe in a self different than the ideal self. Ideally, a self is completely consistent, has no contradictions, is fully integrated, never indulges in self-deception, is fully conscious of all it does or could be fully conscious of all it does, completely controls the body, acts only rationally to achieve goals, can exert “will power” to counter all temptation, and can exert “will power” to withstand hardship and torture. Even if the surface everyday self seems inconsistent and contradictory sometimes, the deep soul-self is fully consistent and meet all the points of an ideal self. The deep soul-self is not entirely physical but is some kind of spirit. As a spirit, the self can escape some constraints of the material world, such as disease and torture.

No normal person actually lives this view of the self. What normal live, and therefore what normal people believe even if they don't say it, is that there are degrees of selfhood depending on the situation. We are integrated enough in particular situations so we can assume then that selves have desires and intentions, and will act with intent to achieve their desires, as long as they are not thwarted by duress. We allow for weakness, lapses, duress, contradictions, and self-deception. We do not assume those flaws completely undo the idea of a situational-self-as-needed-and-as-possible. People accept that a self can be totally destroyed through torture or disease, as in the novel “1984” or with Alzheimer's dementia, but that fact does not undermine the situation-variable situation-adequate self of normal life. The totally autonomous spiritual soul-self is an unrealistic ideal, and it is a useful shorthand way to think about the self, but it is not what people really expect. People are not sure how free we are from materiality and constraint, and what any freedom from materiality and constraint implies for a soul-self. This situational-self-as-needed-and-as-possible is the view of the self on which our laws are actually based, not the idealized soul-self.

The situation-variable situation-adequate self is what I defend. I do not defend the idealized self. It does not matter if the situation-adequate self is a mere machine or is a super organism that sometimes can

escape the laws of physics. What matters is that this self is interesting to God, this self can take personal responsibility in enough situations, and God will talk to this self some time.

Mechanists point out correctly that the ideal self cannot be true, and, from that, conclude that the self is nothing but an evolved delusion; a human organism is nothing but a bundle of chemical reactions with a delusion of selfhood. Critics ignore the situation-specific self or see it as a variation of the idealized soul-self. As we will see below, there are good evolutionary reasons why people might say they believe in an idealized idea of a self but act on another basis. These reasons do not make the idea of the situation-adequate self into a delusion. The real situation-adequate self might be a bundle of chemical reactions but that does not mean it is nothing but a bundle of chemical reactions.

It is easy to produce a theory of the idealized totally free soul-self, or to produce a theory of the totally mechanistic un-free deluded robot self. It is hard to make a theory of a self that appears to be partially free and to have some intensions according to situation, but that is what is empirically true. It is harder to produce a good theory of the real self if we begin from either extreme. If we are to have a correct theory of the self, we need to respect what we actually see, and we need to develop a theory accordingly. We cannot twist what we see to fit a preset theory about the world as spirit or as machine. At this time, I don't have a good theory of the situation-variable and situation-adequate self.

Exploring Character versus Undermining the Self.

The self is one of the easiest things to undermine by picking apart and bolstering. I do not assess here the many ways in which the self is undermined. You can get a sample from the suggested readings, and I might put some examples on the Internet.

People have different reasons for undermining the self. Probably the biggest reason is to control other people. People have different reasons for wishing to control other people, usually bad, sometimes good. People both undermine different aspects of the self to go along with their particular reasons, and they have particular methods that go along with the particular aspects of the self that they wish to undermine.

For example, suppose a thinker wishes people to feel guilt. A thinker can pick apart our ability to judge moral situations, or a thinker can point out how we fail to act appropriately even when we can see moral truth. A thinker stresses our tendency to blindly follow the teachings of authority figures, especially the authority figures of a religion. The self is morally inadequate.

Rather than undermine the self, I use picking apart and bolstering to explore human nature and to explore the character of people in particular societies. I want to know about character so I can assess if people are up to the job of citizen in a modern democracy on a planet that is fast being laid waste. I think there is a big difference between picking apart so as to promote ideology versus exploring character.

As an example of exploring character, we expect a certain level of skills and amount of consistency in a person before we can call him-her a common sense person, and can relate to him-her as a person for the needs at hand. In a democracy, we expect some good sense. Suppose a man spends a lot of money on a golf club because he thinks it will magically improve his golf game, when he knows the real problem is his swing, knows the club alone cannot do much, and he already has bought six others just like it before.

Suppose a woman buys a cream to magically make wrinkles go away, and make boys fall at her feet. She does not check the ingredients to find they are exactly the same ingredients as in all other creams, and the same as in the generic cream she could have bought for one-tenth the price, because she wants not to know that. Both the man and the woman want to believe in magic. Can we reasonably expect either person to cast his or her vote wisely in the next election? What skills are needed of a person in a democracy, and how much integrity is required?

The Self.

Most of these ideas were given previously in Chapter Two on evolution. Sorry for the technical jargon but it is needed in case any scientist reads this.

-A self (see below) recognizes that the world has distinct units even though the units interact.

-A self (see below) recognizes that it is one of the distinct units.

-Units come in natural kinds. The exact nature of the kinds that are recognized by selves likely varies a bit with the particular evolutionary history of a self, but that does not matter here.

-The natural kinds have their own distinct attributes. Selves tend to think in terms of essences. You do not need to understand the idea of essences now.

-The units within a natural kind are not all the same. Sometimes the differences matter, and sometimes they don't. I do not take up these issues any more here.

-Some kinds are passive (rocks); some kinds are active but seem to have no intentions (the wind); some kinds seem to interact but have no intentions (soil, and juices from trees); some kinds are alive; some kinds are alive and adaptable but fairly passive (plants); some kinds are active but not too smart (animals like snails); some kinds are active and obviously learn (animals like cats); some kinds have memories, and the degree of memory varies with kinds (cats again); some kinds are active and have intentions (animals like robins); kinds that have intentions usually also have good memories (elephants); some kinds recognize that they individually have intentions and memories (horses); some kinds recognize that other kinds have intentions, memories, etc. (dogs); and some kinds can read the intentions and memory of other kinds quite well (humans, and some other animals such as baboons and orangutans).

-No evolved kind, or unit of a kind, perfectly models the world in its perceptions, mental operations, and actions. The gap between the exact world versus perceptions and act can be more advantageous than an exact fit, as, for example, flight and fight.

-Evolved kinds that are adept with intentions and memory have the following features:

=They can manipulate other units based on their understanding of the abilities of other units.

=They can send signals aimed not at giving information but at manipulation. That is, they can lie.

- =They have lively imaginations. They tend to see the world as lively.
- =They come born with an ability to generate natural categories (units, types of units, left, right, lively, “has intentions”, etc.) and to build other categories on the basis of the original natural categories. See above.
- =They use essentialist thinking, especially when building on natural categories. See above.
- =They can use their imagination to think of living units that are not confined to a bodily state.
- =They deceive themselves in some ways. Usually they are not so self-deceived as to be immobilized or psychotic.
- =They live in groups of similar units.
- =They can tell apart individuals of the same kind (not all dogs are one dog) and even tell apart individuals within social groups (not all wolves in this pack are the same).
- =They recognize that situations get complicated along with an increase in the number of inter-actors. Two is more complicated than one; three is much more complicated than two; four is horrendously complicated, and so on. The evolved natural ability to deal with complicated situations tends to stop at about four but might go as high as six.
- =They recognize that other actors have histories, and that what actors do depends partly on the type of the actor and partly on their history.
- =They put actors into types. They types are based on natural categories and learned categories.
- =They have “short cuts” and “rules of thumb” that they use to deal well enough with complexity.
- =They internalize and use their imagination to “play with” the intentions, memories, abilities, and histories of other units.
- =They have sympathy and empathy for other units.
- =They handle complicated situations by lumping together the other members of their group into a kind of big unit with its own intentions and memories. Following a tradition, I call this the “generalized other”.
- =They internalize the “generalized other”.
- =They have at least two distinct identities in their self-awareness, which they use as tools in dealing with situations. Following a tradition, I call these two parts of us the “I” and the “me”.
- =They have internal contradictions such as the desire to both love and hurt a spouse. They are also pretty adept at handling these contradictions.

=They can make up counterfactuals (“might have been”, “if”, “suppose”, “imagine”, etc.). Counterfactuals are useful in understanding histories, types, situations, etc. Counterfactuals can cause confusion and manipulation. They are fairly adept at resolving problems with counterfactuals.

=They have logical contradictions, some of which come from lying and counterfactuals and some of which just arise out of logic. Examples include the “liar’s paradox”, or self-contradiction such as “I am a liar”, the ability to think both in terms of reduction (picking apart) and holism (bolstering), to think also in terms of qualities apart from reduction or holism, and to think of a time traveler disturbing the time line. They are adept at dealing with logical contradictions.

=That is, all in all, they are “sentient”.

=They appreciate beauty.

=They have a moral sense.

=They feel emotions. Emotions are not necessarily irrational. Emotions are often evolutionarily rational. There is not a simple dichotomy between rational and emotional. I do not explain further here.

=They have commitments to other units (love) and even to large parts of the world (ecosystems), ideals (justice), or the world as a whole.

=They use language.

=They have consistent ideas (theories) about selves and about the world.

=They tell stories. Stories are important in how they see selves and worlds, and manage selves and worlds.

=They feel as if they have free will in many situations but not all situations. They understand constraint and allow for it.

-Units of kinds with all these features recognize themselves as selves. It is not clear if an evolved self might be able to recognize itself as a self with fewer features than those listed above. We do not yet understand the interdependence between features.

-Evolved units that have a sense of self do not have a fully accurate sense of self. They have an overly strong sense of their own self, a distorted view of their own self, and a distorted view of other selves.

Any unit that displays all of these features is a self. This is what it means to be a self.

It does not matter if a self evolved or is made, but, as far as I know, I have met only evolved selves. I doubt we can make selves unless we make them feel contradictory, face conflicts, feel commitment, use counterfactuals, face paradoxes, have a generalized other, have an I and me, feel beauty, tell stories, etc. We are a long way from doing that, but I think we will get there.

It is extremely unlikely any artificial self could have all the other necessary attributes to be a self but did not also feel as if it were a self.

Brief Early Rejoinder to the “Mechanistic Bundle” View of the Self.

As far as I am concerned, any unit that has all the above attributes is a self, even a machine that follows deterministic natural laws. No evolved self has perfect free will. All evolved selves have imperfect ideas, and delusions, that serve evolutionary success, including some distorted ideas about their own selves. None of these conditions make a self any less a self. Just because a self feels as if it is a self does not mean it is deluded. Just because a self evolved the feeling of being a self to serve evolutionary success, and the feeling is partly distorted, still the feeling could be largely true. Selves that feel as if they are selves could really be selves. When we have clear criteria a self, other than the criteria for the ideal unrealistic “straw” soul-self, then we can decide if we are selves despite our inaccurate ideas of our own selfhood.

Mechanists need to construct the strongest idea of the self from the points listed above, and see how to deal with that. Mechanists need to do more than attack simplistic myths about the self, even ones that have a strong evolutionary basis. Selves cannot be explained away just because evolved selves have a tendency to over-stress their selfhood. The mechanist misses the point by stressing mechanism. It is not about whether selves are machines. It is about some qualitatively distinct kinds of machines with unusual interesting attributes and with personal histories. Selves can think both deterministically (mechanistically) and qualitatively, without going crazy. The fact that selves can do this seems to me to strongly validate that selves are qualitatively distinct and interesting.

Self and Soul.

I want to distinguish self from soul because I don't like ideas about the soul in most major religions. I want to make sure I am not committed to any of their ideas. Religions tend to take the ideal “straw” self as the basis for their ideas of the soul, and I want to make clear I don't do that.

As far as I can tell, you need a self first to have a soul, but you don't have to have a soul if you have a self. The common sense idea of the self does not require a soul, which might be why we are not clear about the soul. Americans often think animals have selves but are much less clear about whether they have souls. Even if the self implies a soul, the common sense idea of the self does not imply any kind of soul, as for example the abstruse soul of Christianity or Hinduism.

I do not know what attributes of the self would entail having a soul or having a particular kind of soul. I know we don't have our body when we go to meet God; so I say that our bodiless self goes to meet God. If a bodiless self is a soul, then my view might imply a soul. The attributes that I have when I meet God are the same ones I have as a self now or it wouldn't make sense to meet God in the way that I expect. How this self is able to not have a body, I do not know. I don't know what good it does to call a bodiless self a “soul”. It can do harm if the term “soul” commits us to ideas that are harmful.

Free Will.

This chapter does not address problems of free will. Like most people, I want to have my cake of free will and eat my cake of deterministic science too. What I say in this chapter does not depend on settling the question of free will. See the next chapter; it doesn't settle the problem of free will either.

The following starred sections explain some major views of the self.

***Autonomous, Immutable, Eternal I-Me.**

I don't think the idea of an autonomous, immutable, eternal me is innate. There is no point in trying to review in what kinds of societies, and in which cultures, the idea shows up, so we can decide how innate it is and how derived it is. It is common in most of the major world religions, but not all; see below. I think there are innate ideas of selves, of myself, and of the fact that my self persists despite changes. All three aspects of the idea need not come together. The self-soul could be eternal without being immutable, and so on, but it seems the three aspects do often occur together.

The question for here is how true it all is. Because of the Big Real Risk, and because of what I have seen of people, I doubt the self is autonomous, immutable, and eternal in the way that many people believe it, especially if they get the combined idea from traditional religions. The self was made by God, so God can end the self, and he likely does end many selves. The self is not necessarily eternal.

If the self were immutable, there would be no Big Real Risk. If we could not change, we could not turn bad or good, there would be no risk, and there would be no gain. If the self were totally autonomous, then we could withstand any temptation, any stress, and any bad thing that happened. We would not change. We can withstand a lot, more than we usually think, but not everything. We cannot withstand indefinite torture. We are not all-powerful.

Try thinking of the various kinds of worlds that would go along with an eternal, autonomous, immutable self-soul. Not all of them are appealing. Some are boring.

***Christian-Muslim Idea of the Soul.**

I think the Jewish idea of the soul from the Tanakh is fairly close to my common sense idea of the self, so I don't treat it here. I don't know enough about Talmudic and post-Talmudic ideas, and the topic seems complicated, so I don't treat it here.

The Christian and Muslim views of the soul are similar enough so that I treat them together here. Muslim and Christian ideas received a lot of input from Classical philosophy, so, indirectly, I treat that here as well.

Classical philosophy emphasized a distinction between the external superficial changing perishing self versus the deep unchanging eternal soul. This distinction was part of other dualities such as between matter-spirit, nonbeing-being, becoming-being, illusion-reality, mundane-sacred, etc. I do not guess which duality might have priority and how they all hang together. Other worldviews, even non-Western worldviews, suffer from most of the same dualities. The Christian-Muslim view inherited the Classical view.

The true inner soul seeks God. It does not necessarily seek ecstatic union with God but it does seek to be close to God and to please God. It seeks God's grace. It seeks nothing else. If it did seek other things, it would be mutable, not autonomous, and not rational. It is willing to submit its will to God's will. In fact, whenever it knows itself, it has already submitted to God and subordinated its will to God. That is its nature. When we die, we shed the external self and come before God, to be judged, entirely as our true inner soul.

On the other hand, if we come to God to be judged, only as our true inner self, then the true inner self must have made some mistakes about right and wrong, and so it must be mutable, not autonomous, and not fully rational. Otherwise there would be no point in being judged; we would force God's grace just by existing; and God's grace cannot be forced.

I don't think there is any way to reconcile the choices that we make in life, the fact that we change, and the people we become, with a simple traditional Christian-Muslim idea of the soul. There is no way to reconcile the external half-good self with the true deep inner soul. Even deep true selves vary within themselves and over time, and not all deep true selves center on goodness, rationality, submission, and grace. We are mixed beings. Because I am not defending the traditional Christian-Muslim view, I do not try to figure it all out.

***Upanishad Hinduism: "You are That"**

The "Upanishads" is a group of short sacred documents that were compiled in India from about 500 years before Jesus to the time of Jesus. The ideas are often beautiful and profound. They are one important source for the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita. Some ideas in the Upanishads are similar to Buddhism and Jainism, and some are ideas against which the Buddha protested. I do not give the source of particular ideas below from a particular Upanishad.

By the time of the Upanishads, at about the same time as Socrates, Indians (not yet Hindus) had an idea of the self similar to the Greek philosophical idea of the self, and similar to later Christian-Muslim ideas of the self. This material world is potentially corrupting, but the self-soul can see through the delusions of this world to spiritual enlightenment. There were various ideas of enlightenment, which I do not go into here. The enduring self is called "atman".

The Upanishads altered the basic idea of essential enduring selves to say that we are all very deeply connected, so deeply connected that it makes little sense to think of ourselves as isolated individuals. We are still individuals but we are not separate individuals. The idea is given through the phrase "that thou art" or "you are that". If the idea were limited to feeling togetherness with other humans, modern Americans might say it is a very strong version of the feeling of "there but for the grace of God go I". The idea is not limited to other people but includes togetherness with all sentient beings, often animals, and sometimes plants, microbes, stars, things such as mountains and dust motes, and events such as sun sets and laughter. The idea "you are that" can have several meanings. The meanings can support each other. They can also contradict, depending on the stress and "spin" given to any particular meanings.

(A) We are all manifestations of the same creative force and so we are not distinct at the deepest level. Not only are we the same as other people-animals-plants-things-events in our deepest being, also we are all the one-and-only real God in our deepest true selves. Our deepest selves are all the same self.

(B) We all depend on each other to get along and to progress. I cannot be anything at all without you, and you cannot be without me, so we should respect each other and get along.

(C) The hope of all beings is spiritual realization (enlightenment). We should achieve realization together. If we are connected, then I cannot achieve realization unless you achieve it as well. If I am temporarily more advanced than you are, I will teach you, and wait for you, until we all achieve realization together. I trust you will do the same for me when you are more advanced.

(D) Although we are all from the same deep spiritual force, we are somewhat distinct, because that is how creativity works. The distinctiveness in this present world might not be ultimate but it is what this world is all about. To go along with distinctiveness here is another way of going along with ultimate union at the deepest level. This way of thinking preserves the enduring autonomous atman.

(E) As a distinct entity, I sometimes have to displace other entities. When I do displace others, I hope I do so respectfully, and in line with my deep nature as part of the same creative force (an idea in the Bhagavad Gita). When I do displace others, sometimes I have to do it forcefully. Change sometimes requires pain.

(F) When one being displaces another temporarily, really there is no deep trauma because we are all part of the same deep underlying spiritual force (an idea in the Bhagavad Gita).

(G) We all should, and can, feel joy at our deep unity and at the creativity that produced us.

(H) There is no reason why knowing “you are that”, or why spiritual realization, should stop creativity and joy as long as beings continue to know that they are of each other at a deep level.

(I) It is not clear if “you are that” removes all distinctions between separate selves, or reinforces it, does each depending on the situation, or if the question makes sense.

Christians should recognize ideas of mutual love and dependence.

“You are that” is a way of picking apart the self by eliminating aspects of the self that are not compatible with “you are that”, and of strongly bolstering the self by giving it a clear identity and rationale. I do not here explain how proponents of “you are that” pick apart aspects of the self that they do not like such as striving for fame, success, material goods, and power.

To a Darwinist, “you are that” seems like normal evolved empathy gone crazy. Normal people can’t live in full accord with the empathic spirit of “you are that”. Under normal circumstances, nature would select against people who felt this way, and would find a balance between selfishness versus identification with others. “You are that” can only be a delusion based on pressing an evolved ability.

Yet the fact that “you are that” is an extension of an evolved ability in a way that could not be sustained in normal human life does not mean “you are that” is wrong, is worse than the normal common sense way, really is a delusion, or that people who think like this are not selves. It might mean that evolution led us to the point where we could see what is most true even if most people could not consistently live in what is most true. You have to decide this question on its merits.

Assume there is a difference between the external surface self versus the deep true self. The surface self goes through many changes, and suffers from both hardship and gladness. Assume the deep true self of everybody is the same deep true self. It does not go through real changes. It is eternal, immutable, and autonomous. It does not suffer any real pain and hardship although it knows of the surface pain. It does feel joy from the ever-changing surface selves. It feels joy whenever a surface self is true to the code of the life that the surface self happens to be in at any particular time. This is the resolution found in the Bhagavad Gita.

***Buddha's Bundle.**

The Buddha's name was “Siddhartha Gautama”, spelled in various ways. Siddhartha sought release from suffering and sought spiritual enlightenment. Enlightenment brings release from deep suffering even if it does not end all common suffering such as a hungry belly. The major source of suffering, and the major impediment to enlightenment, is ensnaring commitment to this world, including in this world the circle of religious seekers. The Buddha had to release himself from false ensnaring ideas, both from the mundane world (love, wealth, power) and the world of spiritual adepts (magic power through suffering). He had to wake up. The term “Buddha” is a title; it means “awakened”. A “Buddha” has “awoken” and so is free from delusion, is enlightened, released from ensnaring commitment, and released from the hard snare of suffering.

To Siddhartha, among the false ensnaring ideas were all then-current ideas of the self, including the self as soul-self, the picked apart self as a simple mechanism, and the bolstered metaphysical self of “you are that” from the Upanishads. The Bhagavad Gita came well after the Buddha. The Buddha would have considered the self of the Gita as a bolstered false idea of the self. The Buddha had to construct an idea of the self that was neither too much picked apart nor bolstered, and was not the naïve soul-self of common sense. The Buddha had to make an idea of the self that took account of rebirth but did not mire the self in rebirth.

The Buddha argued that the self is best understood as a bundle of abilities-and-desires or of abilities-and-effects (“skandas”). For example, we have abilities for seeking sex, food, and fame. We have an ability to make up “objects” that help us along, such as houses and myths. There is no self apart from the abilities. There is nothing metaphysical behind the bundle. There is no underlying metaphysical self that acts, there are only the acts.

False ideas of a strong self are the result of a particular ability (or a few). The false idea of a self comes from one particular “this-bundle-is-a-self” ability that helps other abilities to succeed and is, in turn, supported by other abilities when they succeed. The mental ability that makes the self does so by raising illusions about the self and the world, like constantly seeing the same image in clouds. The idea of the self is the result of deluded bolstered mental abilities like the false strong image we have of ourselves as

a “winner”. When any other ability temporarily succeeds, as when we succeed in sports, business, or sex, that particular other ability conspires with the self-ability to validate false ideas of the self. When we succeed in business, we think we are “hot shit” and a winner who will never lose again; we think we are realer than we really are. When we succeed spiritually, even in good endeavors such as charity or yoga, we make the same mistake.

When we no longer depend on our collection of abilities, and no longer depend on any illusory idea of the self, we might be open to better ways of seeing our self and the world. The term for the bundle after all delusory ideas of the self have been removed is “no self”. The term for “no-self” is “anatta” or “anatman” or “an-atman”, which means “no-atman” or “no-self”.

Some Buddhists take the Buddha to mean that there is nothing like a self at all. This has become the standard Buddhist view. This view is probably a mistake. It accuses the Buddha of completely picking apart the self, a mistake which he did not wish to make. Saying there is no self at all is like saying there is no reality at all, like saying there are no apples because we can undermine the idea of an apple. There might be no metaphysical absolute enduring delusory apples but that does not mean there are no apples at all. To deny what is in front of your eyes is a form of clinging just as strong as to bolster what is in your imagination. I think the Buddha might have allowed a weak form of the common sense everyday self like he might have allowed a weak form of everyday common sense apples. To insist on “no-self” actually is to bolster the self, to focus the ability that creates the idea of the self on the no-self instead of on the soul-self, and to falsely cling to the no-self as the object of an ability just as we used to cling to the self. That is as bad as clinging to a strong idea of the self.

As with the strong empathic form of “you are that”, a real-world biologically evolved self cannot live by the Buddha’s teachings in the normal world, and the Buddha did not expect followers to do so. As with “you are that”, this fact does not mean that either the Buddha’s idea of a self or the common sense idea of a self is better. If you want to live in the normal evolved world, it is strategically better to adopt a common sense normal view of the self. If you can accept living outside the normal world, and perhaps even dying, then you might seek an idea of the self and the no-self through the Buddha’s teachings.

I have a stronger view of the self than in standard Buddhism but weaker than that of people who strive for the satisfactions of this world. The common sense idea of the self can mislead us. It is also a good base from which to learn better, just as common sense is a good base from which to begin science. I do not believe the standard Buddhist view of the self can be reconciled to the common sense view. I am not sure if a Buddhist view that allows a weak form of reality can be reconciled to the common sense view; but I hope so. I do not believe an advanced Buddhist should expect to live other than as a monk. If you really hold the Buddhist view of the self and the world, you cannot live as a normal person in the normal world.

***Hume’s Bundle.**

David Hume, in the late 1700s, duplicated many ideas of the Buddha without, I think, knowing of them from Buddhism. Hume doubted traditional Christian religion and doubted the idea of the soul in traditional Christian religion. I do not know if Hume developed his ideas of the self so as to undermine the idea of

the soul in traditional Christianity, as the Buddha developed his ideas of the self in part to undermine the Hindu idea of the enduring atman self.

Hume (thought that he) showed all activities of the human self could be understood in terms of particular mechanisms: perceptions, ideas, rationality, emotions, and the responses that go along with particular clusters of these. Most human activity, including mental activity, can be seen in terms of perception and ideas. Nearly all ideas can be understood in terms of perceptions. Hume showed the role of perceptions in thought and action. He showed how some ideas can be rendered in terms of clusters of perceptions. Sometimes he wrote as if all ideas could be rendered as clusters of sense perceptions but I am not sure he meant that.

Once we understand the various mechanisms that go to make up the self, we understand the self. There is no reason to add anything to the various mechanisms to make up the idea of the self. To add anything other than the various mechanisms only adds something that has no explanation, is mysterious, and tempts us into metaphysical confusing thinking. So, the self is nothing but a cluster of sense perceptions, ideas-based-on-sense-perceptions, rational manipulation of ideas, emotions, morality, and subsequent acts. It is not the coherent rational soul-self of Enlightenment ideals. It cannot be the soul of traditional Christianity. It is not clear if Hume wished to do away with the common sense self but he certainly did undermine standard religious and philosophical ideas of the self.

Hume had many of the same insights as the Buddha but I think he went too far and he fell to a mistake the Buddha wished to avoid. Hume explains away the self as “nothing but”. Hume picks apart the self until there is nothing left, and there is no rationale for why various mechanisms of the self hold together.

Hume anticipated modern scientific reductionist ideas of psychology, philosophy, and the self. I think it is easy to go directly from Hume to modern evolutionary ideas of the self. I am not sure modern Darwinists appreciate their debt to Hume.

Unlike as in Hinduism and Buddhism, Hume did not expect normal people to fully accept an undermined self and live in accord with an undermined self. Hume expected people to live in a common sense world aided by good thinking. In this way, like the Buddha, he did not rest on the picked apart self, but, unlike the Buddha, he was not explicit about what he was doing, and he had no rationale for the self that was left over after being picked apart. Hume expected people to live in accord with morality and to use reason to improve the world when they could. He was still a child of the Enlightenment in those ways. He simply accepted a gap between what he wished people to do – act morally – versus the loose self-as-bundle that he had analyzed. He lived his own life with morality and zest.

***Emptiness.**

When we undermine any thing completely, all that is left is a bundle of maybe-features surrounding a hollow core, as with Hume’s idea of any thing or of the self. All that is left is emptiness. This is not necessarily so bad. If the same emptiness is at the center of all things, including selves, we can say that the same emptiness generates all things, including selves. Hindus, Buddhists, and some Taoists say this. It is not clear how the same emptiness can generate many different things but that can be kept as a separate issue. When Buddhists say this, they have to be careful that the emptiness at the heart of all

things is not the same as the great universal Being, or else they reconstitute the enduring eternal self that they wish to get rid of. Thus the exact nature of emptiness can be a point of contention between various thinkers who rely on emptiness.

Thinkers who use emptiness point out the role that real observable emptiness plays in the identity and operation of many real world things: A wheel is useless unless there is a hollow at the center around which it can turn. A water glass can only hold water because it is empty inside; the hard stuff on the sides and bottom exists only to help the emptiness. The vast majority of an atom is empty space. Players can only play basketball, football, and other sports because there is emptiness on the field to go to. If the field were full of all-star great players, nothing could get done. It would be like sardines in a can. The wind has to blow through something. We can tell the difference between an eagle and a wren by what each one is not compared to the other as well as by what each one is in itself.

The same approach works on the self. As with the Buddha and Hume, we can undermine the self until nothing is left but emptiness. That does not make the resulting bundle useless. That kind of bundle might be more useful because it is easier to accept change in a bundle with nothing at the core than to see how a permanent eternal simple changless essential soul-self can change.

This way of looking can be inspiring, sublime, and great; but I think it is wrong. It is not the common sense view of the self. That it is not the common sense view of the self does not make it wrong, useless, or less useful. It is wrong because it feels wrong and because it doesn't really explain anything. It tends to elevate nothingness to the magical metaphysical principle that the Buddha and Hume avoided.

***The Modern Darwinist's Bundle.**

People like to think the self is rational, in particular that their own self is rational. There are three ideas of rationality. (1) Evolutionary rationality, in which an ability is rational if it efficiently served evolutionary success in our past (in comparison to alternatives). It was rational to have a spouse because that is how we best passed on our genes. Most acts and abilities are still rational in this sense although not all continue to be rational now. It is now irrational to kill the neighbor because he-she flirts with your spouse. (2) Classical rationality, which has no single definition. It means roughly: able to critic and offer argument according to logic, amenable to reasons and evidence, trying to serve welfare and justice, and avoiding harm and injustice. (3) Economic rationality, in which actors efficiently strive for their own goals, whatever those goals might be. The usual goals are profit and satisfaction (utility or welfare). Satisfaction includes all the goals of normal humans, such as wealth, power, fun, spouse, and children. This section describes evolutionary rationality and its view of the self. This section does not describe relations between the kinds of rationality.

Think of most particular activities such as eating, having sex, or playing a game. They might share some aspects in common, but, really, at bottom, they are distinct activities that go along a track of their own. We can switch from one to the other. Usually we can't do both at the same time. Derailing one need not much affect the others. We can be adept at one but inept at the others. This is how modern evolutionary scientists think of the mind and the self, as like a bundle of activities-abilities, much like Hume and the Buddha thought of the mind and the self.

Each tendency in the self-bundle is largely mechanical, governed by laws of chemistry and biology. If we provide the appropriate input to a bundle, we get predictable output. Modern science provides a horde of examples, all of which are plausible. See the suggested readings.

(1) My favorite example is regularity in marriage because I studied how people seek spouses under different conditions and how one asset can substitute for another when conditions change. People marry other people of their own category of age, wealth, prestige, education, family size, and family background. People stress one factor over another depending on which factor might help reproductive success at the time. People would not act like this if they had entirely free choice based on accidental love alone.

(2) My next favorites examples show how children do not learn about space, time, intentions, and morality all-at-once but learn in stages. (A) Take a shiny toy and put it in a big glass jar in front of a child less than a year old. The poor child will wear out its tiny hands trying to reach directly through the jar. Wait until the child is two years old, and it knows to get into the jar somehow before trying to get something out. (B) Leave a child alone in a room with a cupcake and tell the child not to eat the cupcake. Then leave the room. Usually they eat the cupcake. Before about the age of three, a child will lie if it thinks you were not around to see him-her eat the cupcake. Usually they say another child ate the cupcake even though the child knows that no other child has entered the room. By the age of four, usually they know that you can figure out what is going on even if you were not in the room, and that lies do no good. (C) Even at an early age, some children are able to resist temptation while others give in. The ability to resist shows up in different performances throughout the entire school career of the child. (D) Before about age seven, children can automatically learn languages and speak like natives. After about age ten, children have a much harder time and sometimes retain accents.

(3) Ideas of brain operation have now entered the mainstream media, not perhaps as scientists might like, but in ways that would make sense to them. On Friday 12 October 2012, the popular TV show "America Now" aired a segment on the "emerging science of the chemistry of love". They offered tips on how to use the chemistry of love to speed the process along. The tips seemed to be aimed at women who were narrowing down the field. Presumably the new gurus also have tips on how to use the chemistry of love to thwart the process in case you don't like the suitor.

The parallel between Buddhist bundling and the modern mechanistic view goes further.

(A) It is not necessary for an ability to exactly mirror the real world to be most effective and therefore most evolutionarily rational. Our fear does not always accurately mirror our danger but it does get us decisively out of harm's way. A bolstered inaccurate idea of the self might lead to success.

(B) Although the ultimate unit of evolutionary action is the gene, for practical purposes, the individual is more useful. Biologists understand evolutionary rationality through individual reproductive success and individual fitness.

(C) So a feeling for being a distinct autonomous self-activating self would help human genes to succeed and would help human evolutionary success. Our feeling of being a self is another ability-activity in the bundle that is our looser evolutionary self, like the desire for sex or for a good meal.

(D) It is useful to think of other animals and people as selves with intentions etc. If it is useful to think of them that way, then we almost have to think of ourselves that way too. We think of ourselves as selves because we think of others as selves, and vice versa.

(E) The evolved feeling of being a self is partly true because we are a bundle, but it is not likely to be an accurate representation of our self-hood. It is likely to be too strong a representation of our self-hood, in accord with the need to act as a unit, much like a military group has to have a strong esprit de corps (literally "spirit of the body") to act as a coordinated self-unit, much like we fall in love despite the small flaws of our spouse, and much like we crave fatty foods. Not only do we have an evolved sense of self, but we have an evolved sense of self that is not an accurate representation of how tightly we really are integrated. We are deluded because it works.

(F) The idealized soul-self is only an evolved delusion.

The apparent conclusion is that there is no self at all. Modern evolutionary biology picks apart the self until it is gone, much as did Hume and somewhat as did the Buddha. I have already said that this idea misses the point. It will be easier to see below how this idea misses if we see here how it hits.

Think of the flight and fight responses. Once one of these responses engages, it takes over, and it has little to do with the other response. We can't do both at the same time. It seems these are two distinct abilities-activities. Precisely because they happen in the same situation but cannot happen at the same time, some other thing has to decide which to activate at any given time. Something else has to control the switch from red to green in a traffic light. We are tempted to think of this over-ability as the classically rational self, or some kind of idealized soul-self, but that need not be so.

Flight-or-flight cannot be willy-nilly. If we flee from a kitten but fight a bear, we die. Something has to make sure we play with kittens, fight robbers, flee bears, or ignore robins. Whatever thing regulates the switch from flight to fight has to gauge situations. We have to fight some dogs but not all dogs, flee some bears (momma grizzly) but not all bears (teddy bear), or do nothing. So it seems there is a rational self at the core of the evolved self, behind all the disparate activities-abilities, that regulates everything.

Now think deeper. Something has to flip the switch but whatever flips the switch need not be classically rational. It need not be the idealized soul-self. The mechanism need only be a way to make a decision, and it has to decide in accord with what serves evolutionary success. So, we do not necessarily have a rational self or a soul-self at the core, behind all the activities-abilities, that regulates everything. We just have more mechanism. The mechanism can, and does, vary a lot between people, so that not everybody does the same thing in every situation. It is still an evolved mechanism rather than a simple deciding rational self or a soul-self.

Most people fear snakes. The fear is not classically rational because most snakes are helpful (they eat rodents) rather than harmful, and most snakes avoid people. The fear is evolutionarily rational because one hundred encounters with a timid good snake don't help us much but one encounter with an angry bad snake ends our reproduction. Whatever controls the switch for fear cannot be classical rationality; but it can be evolutionarily rationality. The same is true of strangers, loud noises, loud objects, and erratically moving objects.

We can learn to overcome fear of snakes etc. We can learn to adjust our flight and fight response so that it takes better account of situations; that is what martial arts training is for. So we are tempted to think that, above all the mechanisms of evolutionary rationality, there is a mechanism of classical rationality, and this mechanism of classical rationality is closely tied to the self. There are higher-order mechanisms, probably several overlapping layers. But it is not likely that all are under the control of one classically rational self. It only matters that it all works when it has to work.

So we have: a bundle of abilities-mechanisms around a core body; the body is a key unit in evolution and so coheres; the core has a mechanism to think of the body-and-all-that-goes-with-it as an integrated self; the evolutionary self is not quite as integrated as the self-mechanism thinks it is; but the evolutionary body-self behaves like a semi-cohesive self according to the situation. This is not far from my common sense view of the self. I can live with this.

***The Composite, Largely Functionally Integrated, Self.**

I have already said the self is not one simple thing, we can change, and I don't know how it all holds together, so this section does not repeat those arguments. I merely point out that some cultures have ideas of the self based on important component parts; the fate of the parts can differ, especially after death; and the assemblage of parts and their fates can be important in religion. It takes much too long to explain a theory of a composite self from a different culture, so instead I give one of my favorite examples of a theory of selves from American culture; it is not quite the same thing, but it is close enough.

Contrary to popular opinion, the unit of American society is not the individual or the family but the team. A team is a functional unit composed of complementary parts, and, as a whole it is much greater than the sum of its parts. An ideal individual would be an individual whose personality tendencies were made up of the best kinds of individuals in American society, and who blended them perfectly. The individuals that make up a team represent various potential parts of individuals. Comic books give us our best examples of teams and idealized parts of individuals. Military units are teams in this sense. Maybe the most famous team-with-idealized-parts-of-people-represented-through-particular-characters is the command team of the Starship Enterprise, in all its various versions. In the original version, there is a rational part (Spock), an emotional part (Bones), instrumental part (Sulu), communicator (Uhura), nurturer (nurse Chapel), technical part (Scotty), and command executive part (Captain Kirk). There might also be a slightly unruly, slightly comic, activator-of-adventure part (Chekov). There might be a routine part that has to be given up to make progress, the always ready-to-die anonymous crew member. All together, these parts-represented-by-characters make one full and effective person. It is not clear what happens to the person and-or parts after death. The most important parts are the rational, emotional, and executive. Some Americans think the command executive goes to heaven while other people think the emotional part goes to heaven. Only theologians and philosophers think the rational part goes to heaven.

It is unlikely that the parts of a self in any given culture correspond closely to the "modules" in current evolutionary theory of the self, modules such as "find a mate", "find a sex partner", "support your kin", "support your allies", and "detect social cheating". Evolutionary theory does indirectly support the idea that cultures can make selves out of composite parts and might provide some of the raw ingredients for parts of the self in different cultures. I do not comment further here.

***Other Interesting Selves.**

The above ideas about selves are important for the purposes of this book but they are not necessarily the most interesting ideas about selves. Almost every enduring human type can be a type of self. For the rational self, think of Mr. Spock and Sherlock Holmes; for the emotional self, “Bones” McCoy and John Boehner; for the intuitive self, Deanna Troy or Robert Redford in “The Horse Whisperer”; for the conniving self, Lucy Ricardo and any soap opera; for the integrated commander, Captain Kirk or the “Master and Commander” series; for the artist, Kirk Douglas as Vincent Van Gogh or Ed Harris as Jackson Pollock; etc. Other cultures have these same selves but see them differently, and they have other selves not in American culture.

Distinctive Identity of Bundles; Reconstituting the Self.

This section explains why I think “bundle” ideas of the self miss as well as hit, and what is better.

In David Hume, Buddhism, some kinds of Hinduism, and modern biology, an apple is a bundle of features with nothing at the core (sorry for the pun). So are a rock, whale, hurricane, theory of physics, theology like Hinduism or Christianity, sutra, person, scientific method, Beethoven sonata, Picasso painting, and your child. Yet contrary to undermining, there are qualitatively distinct coherent things in this world. All those things listed above are examples. Even if the various things are “merely” bundles of features, the bundles are qualitatively distinct packages; the apple-bundle is distinct from the whale-bundle. Bundle types are consistent between different instances; particular delicious apples stay what that way, The bundles consistently differ from each other; I cannot imagine an apple-whale hybrid even if they once had a common ancestor. What gives the bundles their identity and distinction? This has been a long-time serious question in Western and Indian philosophy. I do not answer this question. I only say that the obvious identity of some qualitatively distinct bundles is enough on which to base the common sense view of the self and the world.

Someday we will have fairly complete descriptions of toadstools as bundles. Even so, I don’t think being able to give that kind of explanation explains away toadstools. Suppose, though, that it does. Is the human self enough like a toadstool so we could explain away as with a toadstool? The question is not one of complexity but of similarity. I don’t think the human self is similar enough to be explained away in the same way as a toadstool. The toadstool does not have abilities to deal with intent, levels of intent, group life, art, contradictions, etc. Even when we can explain those abilities in the human self, we will have a different problem in explaining away the human self.

Before modern evolutionary theory, this problem was less vexing. It became more confusing because Darwinists have another way to explain away: historical contingency. When a Darwinist has to consider how it is that some bundles such as human beings have a self, the Darwinist can say, “Well, that is just how it is. These particular bundles came together due to the historical accidents of evolution on this one planet. It could have been otherwise. Different features could have come together. We might have had three-eyed fish. We might have had morality that tells us to kill our best friends. We might have had selves without a sense of ‘I’, ‘me’, and the generalized other. There is nothing more than that.”

Yes, there is considerable latitude in how features come together, the exact course of evolution does depend on historical accidents, and many other life forms might have arisen even on the same planet. Still, it is not possible for all things to come together willy-nilly. For example, there has to be at least one basic life form at the bottom of the food chain that converts energy to biological forms. There has to be predators and prey. In particular, it is not possible for human-like selves to come together willy-nilly. At least on planet Earth, a human-like self has to come together in the context of all the features listed above under the description of selves. A human-like self could not lack a sense of morality; it could not have a morality radically different than it does have; it could not lack a sense of "I", "me", and the generalized other; and it could not lack contradictions that it can mostly deal with. Human-like selves cannot include some features that other animals have such as extreme hostility and eating their own young. Human-like selves are unusual. Humans are a selection among possible abilities. They are qualitatively distinct. The line between these selves, other selves (orangutans and wolves), and living not-selves (slugs and amoebas) might be blurred but qualitatively distinct human-like selves line still exist. Anybody who wants to say human-like selves are merely a bag of unrelated abilities has to explain why these abilities have to come together, what their coming together means for the idea of a self, and what their coming together means for the idea of any qualitative thing including such qualitative things as chimpanzees, cultures, science, etc.

A star is not only a big bunch of hydrogen atoms; it is a big bunch of hydrogen atoms arranged in some particular ways so that particular reactions do go on, and other reactions do not go on. So selves are a bunch of abilities but they are a particular selection of abilities out of all the possible abilities and they are arranged in a particular way. Mechanists need to be clearer on the idea of the self before they start to explain or explain away. They need to do more than construct a "straw" self that they can explain away. Mechanists need to explain why the features of a full self come together, and what it means for the such bundles to come together into full selves.

I have no doubt humans have a distorted exaggerated sense of self. I have no doubt all human-like selves would have a distorted sense of their self and likely would have a stronger sense of self than an objective observer would assess. We think a lot of our selves, our power, and our integrity. I have no doubt this is because we evolved. Still, that does not mean we are wrong about being selves. It just means we misunderstand ourselves, which is not at all surprising. A male lion quite likely has a distorted self image but that does not mean he is not a lion and not a kind-of self.

In the future, probably we will make artificial selves, and we might be able to make artificial selves without the same mixture of sentience, morality, aesthetic sensitivity, humor, sense of generalized other, etc. that go together in evolved human-like selves. I am not sure what abilities can be made to stand on their own, and what has to occur only in sets along with other abilities. I am not sure if all selves, including artificial selves, have to entail some contradictions so as to achieve real sentience. The fact that the future will see some artificial selves does not invalidate what I have said here about evolved selves and the reality of selves.

A determined mechanist rightly says: "A machine is a machine is a machine. It is determinate no matter how complex it is and how possibly contradictory it might be. Some machines might be more interesting to creatures with a finite mind (cars are more interesting than little red wagons) but to God with an infinite mind, all machines are equally simple and equally uninteresting because they are all equally determinate.

To God, we are all like “Rube Goldberg” machines with chutes, ladders, springs, and loops; once you drop the little ball, you know the toaster will pop up no matter how many steps are in the middle. It does not matter if a machine is rigid like wooden blocks or probabilistic like dice and small particles (quantum mechanics) as long as it is determinate. Machines are selves only because they evolved to feel they are selves. To God, you are about as interesting as a rock. You are nothing special. God did not make the universe to cure his boredom. In fact, there is no need for God, so probably there is no God.”

I don't know what to say. I wish I knew the mind of God as well. If there is a God, not everything can be equally the same to God or equally boring to God. If it were, I guess God would not have bothered to make the universe as it is. I think God does care about machines that have all the attributes of a self. Here is my rejoinder to the mechanists:

I can think in both ways without going crazy. The ability to think in both ways is an important part of what makes persons qualitatively distinct and interesting. Any machine that can think in both ways without going crazy is certainly qualitatively distinct and interesting, and is a good candidate for being a self. The fact that people can recognize the issues (think both ways at the same time without going crazy) thus tends automatically to decide the issues in favor of the existence of a qualitatively distinct interesting thing called “persons”.

My argument does not refute Darwinism. I am a Darwinist; I don't want to refute Darwinism. I think my answer supports Darwinism. My argument shows how evolution can create qualitatively distinct things including selves. Even if human-like selves are entirely subject to natural laws, they are still human-like selves, and they are as they are because they evolved. I think this is more than enough to support the common sense idea of the self.

Donovan, Mountains, and Juanita.

Recall from Donovan Leitch:

“First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is...
Oh, Juanita, I call your name...”

When we pick apart and-or bolster any thing, we undermine that thing and lose that thing. We dissolve the world in the pride of our intellects. Smart-aleck advanced religious adepts riding the crest of their first insights, and modern scientific adepts with similar abilities and character, tend to make this mistake – one of the textbook definitions of Maia. Yet if we undermine a thing in the right spirit of common sense, often enough we can recover that thing again in a better way. This applies to selves. When we have the right sense of the self and of our own self, then we recognize other selves in the right way, we can reach out to them (call their name), and they can reach out to us. That is part of what good selves do.