

The Existence of Self

Blessed with the ability to think, we are cursed with the tendency to question. In order to discover adequate explanations for difficult questions, we must first understand the questions themselves. The complexity of most philosophical questions lays the foundation upon which contentious debates occur. Differences in interpretation, reasoning, and personal experience allow philosophers to draw divergent conclusions, as is the case with the philosophical debate regarding self and existence. In their respective works, Nāgārjuna, Descartes, and Hume assert their perspectives on the existence of self and detail the process and evidence they utilized to construct their arguments. While they employ similar thought processes, the philosophers come to varying conclusions about the existence and function of self. The order of my analysis is not only chronological but formatted based on the increasing level of complexity and necessary background knowledge to frame the ideas of Descartes and Hume.

In “Conditioning Clauses and Nirvana,” Nāgārjuna examines the concept of existence and discusses the merits of nirvana. The primary foundation for his argument is the logical understanding that existence relies on causality; an effect cannot exist autonomously because, by definition, an effect is the product of a cause: “Never are any existing things found to originate from themselves, from something else, from both, or from no cause.”¹ Using this logic, Nāgārjuna concludes that for anything to exist, it must be dependent on another element (dharma). However, if all existent things must have a preceding cause,

¹ Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika* (F. Streng, Trans.) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 1.

then nothing exists nor has ever existed, because “when no elements have originated, [their] disappearance is not possible.”² Nāgārjuna applies his reasoning to the existence of the self, perception, and sensation and determines that they abide by the same rules as objects. The self does not operate independently, nor does it originate from itself. If the self does not meet either of those two conditions, then “certainly there is no self-existence (svabhava).”³ Similarly, nirvana cannot be an existing thing since it never encounters death. Yet, it is also not a non-existent thing because for it to be non-existent, it would have once had to have existed. Thus, nirvana is the realization that everything is empty, for “nirvāṇa is neither an existent thing nor a non-existent thing.”⁴ Essentially, Nāgārjuna argues that the flawed belief in self-existence is harmful because it leads people to mistakenly believe in an indefinite permanence of objects and self that does not exist. The acceptance of nirvana and emptiness is not necessarily a denial of reality but rather an awareness that elements are dependent on each other and cannot exist autonomously.

Departing from Nāgārjuna’s understanding of self, Descartes explores the duality of the mind and body in “Meditation One” and “Meditation Two” from *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes begins by claiming that the mind is the true version of self and is separate and superior to the body. Consequently, despite being capable of thinking and being conscious of itself, the mind is still immaterial. The implications of the mind being a thinking thing is that thought proves existence. Descartes claims that whenever he says, “I am, I exist,” he is in fact existing.⁵ However, existence in one moment does not guarantee

² Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*. 1.

³ Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*. 1.

⁴ Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*. 2.

⁵ René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy* (M. Moriarty, Trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

continuous existence. We can confirm existence when we are conscious, but that does not disprove the possibility that there are moments when we lack the awareness to realize we are non-existent. While Nāgārjuna's premise leads him to focus on a causality argument to disprove continuous existence, Descartes' premise relies on the idea of essences. He declares that everything has an essence that cannot be removed from it. The essence is the means to thinking, therefore, it is also the means to conceiving the self. Descartes argues that thinking and perception are functions of the mind and presents our perception of melting wax as an example. As wax melts from solid into liquid, we consider it to be the same wax—"the wax remains"—since it still contains the same essence.⁶ Descartes highlights that objects are extendable while thought is non-extendable, and that understanding is prompted not by sensation, but by perception. We judge things not by their physical qualities, but by the mind's understanding of how the world operates: "The perception of [the wax] is not sight, touch, or imagination, and never was... it is an inspection by the mind alone."⁷ In this case, the senses alone would be deceived into thinking that the two differing forms did not constitute the same wax; meaning, our perception is only correct when based on the intellect of the mind, proving that the mind is the only certainty. Unlike Nāgārjuna's assertion that it is detrimental to seek confirmation of self-existence, Descartes attempts to establish the distinction between mind, soul, and body to increase the understanding of self. He eventually concludes that despite the mind and body being separate, they must still be interacting. However, he admits his lack of answers and concedes that there must be a God who "...is all-powerful, and by whom I was

⁶ Descartes. *Meditations*. 22.

⁷ Descartes. *Meditations*. 23.

created such as I am now” and does not deceive perception.⁸ For Nāgārjuna, the search for self was merely a distraction, but for Descartes, the mind and the self are the only confirmation of existence.

Driven by disagreement with Descartes, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings* and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume presents a negative thesis that opposes the ideas of Descartes on the form of self. Despite being the antithesis of Descartes, Hume’s reasoning is comparable to that of Nāgārjuna. He states, similarly to Nāgārjuna, that the belief that there is a self is mistakenly created by the mind. When we consider ourselves to be unchanging entities, we have no evidence other than our own transient feelings. Consequently, the proof of the self must come from an understanding of the causality that prompted the mind to develop: “The knowledge of causes is not only the most satisfactory; but also the most instructive.”⁹ The logic that Hume uses is akin to Nāgārjuna’s argument that all existing things, the self included, must stem from a cause. Additionally, although Hume and Descartes agree that the idea of self is formed based on perception, Descartes contends that the mind processes the perceptions while Hume states that the only self we have is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”¹⁰ Thus, the difference in opinion is that Hume asserts that there is no “thing” processing the bundle of perceptions. His argument is founded in his overarching doctrine that claims that all knowledge comes from impressions and all ideas

⁸ Descartes. *Meditations*. 15.

⁹ David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings* (S. Buckle, Edited) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

¹⁰ David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (L.A. Shelby-Bigge, Edited) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 134.

come from experiences we have. Simply, all ideas are derived exclusively from previous perceptions, and we can discern impressions (intuitive feelings) from ideas (intuitive thoughts) “by their different degrees of force and vivacity.”¹¹ Hume’s logic concludes that even though our memories believe all thoughts and feelings to be related and connected, there is no evidence that there is a continuous central entity that experiences them.

Although I find substantial flaws in the reasoning and conclusions of all three philosophers, I believe that Hume’s argument has the most merit to it. It rationally makes sense to me that we cannot fathom certain concepts and ideas without first experiencing them. I am convinced that thought is not an autonomous process when Hume illustrates that “a blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds. Restore either of them that sense in which he is deficient... and he finds no difficulty in conceiving these objects.”¹² While I certainly believe that the self is more than a mere bundle of perceptions, I find it reasonable to conclude that consciousness is less continuous than we perceive it to be. Logically, we would be unaware of lapses in consciousness since we would not be conscious in those moments. However, I struggle with Hume’s lack of discussion about the connection between mind and body. I agree that senses and perception can be easily deceived, yet I fail to comprehend how our bodies could either be non-existent or operating independently of our minds. Overall, I see aspects of possible truths in the philosophers’ ideas, primarily Hume’s, but the gaps in explanation lead me to discredit all the overarching conclusions.

¹¹ Hume. *Enquiry*. 15.

¹² Hume. *Enquiry*. 16.

Without the ability to produce conclusive evidence, the debate over the existence of self has myriad diverging opinions. While Nāgārjuna, Descartes, and Hume occasionally share similar thought processes and findings, their lasting contributions to philosophy differ significantly. Nāgārjuna contends that we must accept emptiness and uncertainty about self-existence, Descartes argues that the self is a thinking thing that has confirmed existence only at instances when it produces a thought, and Hume asserts that there is no existing self beyond the bundle of perceptions that stem from experiences. Overall, the very ability of philosophers to contemplate the idea of self may ironically be adequate proof of the self's existence.

Bibliography

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