

**A RE-CONSIDERATION OF RENÉ DESCARTES’
COGITO, ERGO SUM THROUGH A SYNTHESIS OF THE
IDEAS OF BUDDHISM, EDWARD O. WILSON, RICHARD
DAWKINS AND ANDREW NEWBERG¹**

“But how can I, an amateur, be expected to settle a question
which the philosophers have not yet ceased to argue?”
(W. Somerset Maugham. *The Summing Up*)

This essay considers the following questions: can objective science give a complete analysis of the first-person subjective experience? It discusses briefly the neurophysiological findings of Andrew Newberg and his colleagues on the role of the normal brain in the creation of the concept of “I”; can it tell us how to live our lives, how to seek virtue, how to live together? Many references are made to ideas in Buddhism because “... in the Buddhist view, both in the case of the individual and in the case of social institutions a theory of absolute identity is neither epistemologically defensible nor practically useful” (Premasiri 2007, personal communication). The central questions which many statements of Buddhist ideas address are: Is there a soul? and is there an essential relation between “I” and “Other”?

This is the perennial question, which occurred to Descartes (Anscombe & Geach, 1969. p 67, 68): “But I do not yet sufficiently understand what is this ‘I’ that necessarily exists.” Descartes ascribed it to a soul: “Further, that I am nourished, that I move, that I have sensations (sentiré), that I am conscious (cogitaré); these acts I assigned to the soul.” This essay proposes that instead of Descartes’ *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), the statement *Cogito, sed non sum* (I think, but I am not) provides a view that arises from a synthesis of some ideas of modern

¹ I am deeply indebted to Professor P. D. Premasiri (University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka) for having enlightened me on the philosophy of Buddhism concerning the notion of self and its implications.

biology and one of the core ideas of Buddhism, that of *Anatta*—the absence of a soul, that antedated these modern biological ideas by twenty five centuries.

I commence this essay with a reference to an experience of James Austin relevant to my argument.

One Sunday morning in March 19 years ago; as Dr. James Austin waited for a train in London, he glanced away from the tracks towards the river Thames. The American neurologist, who was spending a sabbatical year in England, saw nothing out of the ordinary: the grimy Underground station, a few dingy buildings, some pale gray sky. He was thinking, a bit absent-mindedly, about the Zen Buddhism retreat he was headed toward. And then, Austin suddenly felt a sense of enlightenment unlike anything he had ever experienced. His sense of individual existence, of separateness from the physical world around him, evaporated like morning mist in a bright dawn. He saw things “as they really are”, he recalls. “The sense of ‘I, me, mine’ disappeared. (“Religion and the Brain” Sharon Begley. Science & Technology section. *Newsweek*. May 14, 2001).

While Austin’s experience resides in an intuition brought about by meditation, this essay is a theoretical argument that re-interprets a similar position arising from an attempt to link the views of Richard Dawkins (1978) to the findings of Andrew Newberg *et al.* (2002) while also recalling one of the basic tenets of Buddhism – the *Anatta* doctrine – that bears on the central problem which this essay deals with—the origin of the concept of “I”.

The argument in this essay begins with the humans as a species; it then dethrones, through a refutation of the existence of Descartes’ “I”, the individual as a special autonomous entity who represents that species; and finally it considers the gene that determines the individual in the context of its strategy for having itself perpetuated, in relation to its carrier, the individual. These views were also expressed by Samuel Butler, C.H. Waddington and by Edward O. Wilson and then expanded by Dawkins in his popular work *The Selfish Gene*. Their views draw our attention to parallels between biological concepts and the Buddhist idea of *anatta* – the absence of a soul - that is discussed below.

A hen is only an egg's way of making another egg. (Samuel Butler, quoted by Wilson 1980).

The organism is only DNA's way of making more DNA (Wilson 1980, p 3.).

Survival does not, of course, mean the bodily endurance of a single individual, outliving Methuselah. It implies, in its present day interpretation, perpetuation as a source for future generations. C. H. Waddington quoted by Koestler (1978, p 171).

In a Darwinist sense the organism does not live for itself. Its primary function is not even to reproduce other organisms: it reproduces genes, and it serves as their temporary carrier. Edward O. Wilson (1980, p 3.).

Man has the seeds of immortality in him, but the gift is for the race, not for the individual. (Arthur Keith, 1947, p. 154)

These comments imply that the individual is not the primary concern in the biological world or in biological evolution.

Richard Dawkins' popular book (1978) *The Selfish Gene* expressed the view that the obsession of the gene is its ultimate purpose of having itself perpetuated, for which it uses us, each individual, as its carrier. While that is the fulcrum that I will use, Dawkins had a wider perspective: he posed some questions that are central to the theme of this essay – Is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man?

It is postulated here that this function of perpetuating our genes could only be achieved if the organism has a concept of "self" which seeks to perform the function of procreation. Self-preservation is the basis for this function and for the expression of this function, the body has to be so programmed. It is the assertiveness, with the drives of survival, for the appeasement of the urges of hunger and sex, that ultimately leads to the acquisition of a family, and then to procreation – and thereby, ultimately, to the propagation of the selfish genes. In the human, there are those highly individualized, sublime, notions of 'my family', 'my own offspring' and the care with which the offspring are nurtured. As Newberg *et al.* wrote: "The goal of every living brain, no matter what its level of neurological sophistication,

from the tiny knots of nerve cells that govern insect behavior on up to the intricate complexity of the human neocortex, has been to enhance the organism's chances of survival by reacting to raw sensory data and translating it into a negotiable rendition of a world"(p. 15). This is the crucial link, the creation of the notion of "I", a self, that is considered to be the obligatory pre-requisite for the perpetuation of the gene. Wilson (1980. p 3), stating Dawkins' idea in more physiological terms, wrote:

More to the point, the hypothalamus and limbic system are engineered to perpetuate DNA.... The hypothalamico-limbic complex of a highly social species, such as man, 'knows' or more precisely it has been programmed to perform as if it knows, that its underlying genes will be proliferated maximally only if it orchestrates behavioural responses that bring into play an efficient mixture of personal survival, reproduction and altruism.

Wilson's statement leads us to the work of Andrew Newberg et al. (2002).

The links that this essay seeks to establish are between the idea that Wilson (1980) expressed as "...personal survival...", the views of Dawkins (1978) on the ulterior motive of the gene, of its propagation, and the creation of the concept of "I" that Newberg *et al.* (2002) derived from their neurophysiological work, that "personal survival" can be established only through the propagation of the gene.. Through sophisticated neurophysiological exploration of the brain and its activity in Buddhist monks in meditation and Christian nuns at prayer, Newberg *et al.* (2002. p 4, 5) asserted:

[T]he primary job of the OAA (Orientation Association Area of the brain) is to orient the individual in physical space – it keeps track of which end is up, helps us judge angles and distances, and allows us to negotiate safely the dangerous physical landscape around us. **To perform this crucial function, it must first generate a clear, consistent cognition of the physical limits of the self. In simple terms, it must draw a sharp distinction between the individual and everything else, to sort out the you from the infinite not-you that makes up the rest of the universe ...** In simpler terms, the left orientation area creates the brain's special sense of self, while the right side creates the physical space in which that self can exist.....The point is

that the only way the mind can know the self, and experience the difference between the self and the rest of reality, is through the elaborate, restless efforts of the brain (emphasis added).

In the chapter on *Personality* in Lakshmi Narasu's book (1906, p 301) *The Essence of Buddhism*, published a hundred years ago, it was written: "In being conscious of myself I at the same time become conscious of something not myself. No inner perception is apprehended as such without distinguishing it from a simultaneous outer perception and setting it in antithesis to this. No inner experience is possible without the simultaneous construction of outer experience."

It is necessary in considering the unity of the body and the mind, and the integration of the psyche with physiology, to point out that the concept of "self" exists also in a physical plane. It is remarkable that this mental process of self-identification has a close parallel in the functioning of the immune system which is essentially a physical system designed to maintain the physical integrity of the individual. It is central to the organization of the immunological mechanisms through which an individual organism recognizes itself as distinct from other organisms, for the maintenance of the integrity of its physical body a function that first expressed itself in primitive organisms. While this mechanism for self-identification and self-assertion operates even in the unicellular organisms it is most sophisticated in the mammals. It features in transplantation immunology, immunological tolerance and in its breakdown that results in autoimmune diseases. The distinctiveness of an immunological self is as vital as the distinctiveness of the psychological self for the preservation of the integrity and survival of the individual. This parallel has its limits because in the immune system, the identification of 'self' is directed solely to the rejection of what is not 'self' and which could be harmful to that self. The 'self' identified by the individual's mind however externalizes this identity leading not only to aggrandisement of the 'self' and, according to Buddhism, the perpetuation of the cycle of births and deaths while it also brings one into conflict with others in society.

On the topic of *Personality*, Lakshmi Narasu (1906, p 291) wrote: the '...man inside the man is the soul, a view that, in one form another, is accepted by Brahmanism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam. These religions teach that a man's personality or self is his soul'. ... While the existence of a substantive, changeless and enduring self is summarily rejected by Buddhist thinkers, the 'self' as 'person'

and what it stands for ... are variously conceived in the major schools of Indian Buddhism.” In discussing these interpretations K. Ramakrishna Rao (2006) writes: “What the Buddha was rejecting is not so much a metaphysical self but the psychological self with the primary functions of the ego; the metaphysical self was a concern of the Hindu thinkersin the over all architecture of the universe” (Rao 2006). The Buddha rejected the notion of a metaphysical self too. He pointed out that there is no self in any one of the five aggregates or apart from them (Premasiri 2007, personal communication). Buddhism as a philosophy “...transcended ritual and polytheistic veneration involving the worship of anthropomorphic deities, and turned towards a search for the inner reality of the individual self and its predicament in a world characterized by change and mutability” (Premasiri 2006). It is for this reason that Buddhistic ideas are relevant to the themes of this essay. A predominant idea in Buddhism is that of *Anatta* (An = without; Atman = soul). The Buddha’s reasons for this view are that nothing is permanent, that epistemologically, a person cannot know that a substantial psychological entity within himself exists. In Buddhism a practical reason for denouncing the view of a permanent ‘soul’ is that it is a hindrance to liberation from the cycle of births (Premasiri 2007, personal communication). There are several problems that need to be resolved if the idea of the absence of a soul is valid. Such resolution is akin to the validation of a scientific theory; the theory must explain observations that appear to refute it, if it is to be sustainable as a valid theory. One problem that needs consideration is that of re-birth that is implied in the Buddhist doctrines.

There is found in several places in the Buddhist canon the following formula-

1. On account of ignorance, the sankharas
2. On account of the sankharas, consciousness
3. On account of consciousness, name and form
4. On account of name and form, the six provinces (of the six senses)
5. On account of the six senses, contact
6. On account of contact, sensation
7. On account of sensation, craving
8. On account of craving, attachment
9. On account of attachment, becoming

10. On account of becoming, birth (Rhys Davids, 2002a. p 84, 85).

These form the idea of Dependent Origination, *Paticca Samuppāda*, which is in agreement with the ideas of Newberg *et al* on the origin of the idea of the 'self' by sensations derived from the external world. Eventually, those various independent functions—thoughts, emotions, intentions, actions and memories—are all categorized as a single, distinct, meaningful, construct. In other words, they become reified into the specific, familiar, enduring and highly personalized “self.”

On the idea of the dependent origination of the personality through the six senses, Narasu (2006. p 295) quotes the response of a Buddhist Bhikshuni: “...personality consists of the five elements of life impulse...” and further says that “Man is an organism built up of the five skandas, namely rupa, vedana, vignana, samjna and samskara. Each of these skandas is a group of psychical processes. Rupa represents the totality of sensations and ideas pertaining to one’s body; vedana the momentary emotional states; vignana the thoughts; samjna the conceptions and abstractions; and samskara the dispositions, inclinations and volitions.” Premasiri (2006) points out that this analysis of a person “...differed from that of the materialists who considered an individual to be identical with the physical body which was merely a collection of material elements”. It is on *Rupa*, the physical body, with which the five senses interact recalling the similar view of Newberg that the delusory “I” is created by sensory inputs into the circuitry of the normal brain. Narasu (2006. p 301) quotes Kant in this regard: “... whenever I contemplate what is inmost in what I call myself, I always come in contact with such or such special perception as of cold, heat, light, or shadow, love or hate, pleasure or pain. I never come unawares on my mind existing in a state void of perceptions”.

The ever-changing personality of the individual suggests again the absence of a permanent entity, the “I”. This again is in line with the Buddhist view; Rev. K. Dhammananda (1981) interpreted the Buddhist view in similar terms; what we take as an unchanging identity is really an ever-changing psycho-physical force or energy (*Panchaskanda*) but that, while Buddhism does not deny the continuity of this process, it denies the existence of a permanent unchanging entity.

On this topic Pallis (1980, p 134) posited: “If the existential dream we are all engaged in living, with its persistent urge towards self-affirmation, be that which binds us to the wheel of birth and death in continually renewed succession... it is that self-affirmation which is expressed by the ‘I’”. Conversely, as the Buddhists

believe, liberation from this delusion of the “I”, and the termination of the cycle of re-birth, is brought about by the Buddhist path, notably that of meditation: “During the intense concentration of meditation, you prevent the brain from forming the distinction between self and not-self” (Begley 2001).

The absence of an essential, real identity for the “I” would thus be in line with Buddhist thought. It appears that believers in Judeo-Christianity and Abrahamic religions have *literally* accepted the idea of a creator God, and a soul: “The greatest obstacle, therefore; to the emancipation and deliverance of mind proclaimed by the Buddha, is the Self, that unitary and coherent Soul which Christians, Moslems, Jews, and Hindus believe to be a permanent and eternal entity” (Jacobson 1966, p 84). But is it possible that the allegories in Christian teachings when re-interpreted or restored to their pristine state, do actually imply, as Buddhism does, that the soul is a mere construct that should be de-constructed if ‘enlightenment’ is to be attained?: Pallis writes: “the most suggestive parallel with the anatta teaching to be found outside Buddhism is perhaps Jesus Christ’s declaration that ‘if any man would come after me, let him deny himself’. The word itself as commonly used has become so impoverished as to be near to contradicting the Gospel phrase from which it originated” (Pallis 198, p 134).

To complete the historiography of the idea of the absence of a permanent soul, it is necessary to interpolate here some statements of Jacobson (1969) who discussed parallels between the ideas of David Hume, the Scottish philosopher (1711 – 1776), and that of the Buddha who lived 2500 years ago: “this position on the illusory nature of the self is also found in David Hume who was oriented to the philosophizing of the classic Greek and Roman tradition and had no knowledge of Buddhism at all; ...there is no thinker but the thoughts, no perceiver but the perceptions, no craver but the cravings.... The similarity is striking” (Jacobson 1966, p 84).

A reference to this Buddhist idea of *Anatta* becomes necessary when considering the views of Newberg *et al.* that (a) the concept of “I” is an artifact that arises from the functioning of a normal brain, and that (b) the concept of “I” arises from sensory inputs into the brain, as stated in Buddhism. These ideas are expressed in the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination that was referred to earlier.

Before discussing the implications of the doctrine of *Anatta*, another matter that is relevant to the existence or non-existence of a soul needs to be mentioned, and that is the putative existence after death of the intact memories and personality of a

deceased, or *discarnate entity* as termed by James Alcock.. This has been cogently documented by the researches and writings of, for example, John G. Fuller, the physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, and the case records in the *Society for Psychical Research, London*. Despite the impossibility of direct scientific exploration, it is my opinion that, as with comments on other putative paranormal phenomena by eminent investigators such as Nobel Laureate Professor Brian Josephson of Cambridge University, Professor Alan Turing, Professor Arthur Eddington, Jessica Utts, Professor Hans Eysenck of University of London, and John Beloff, such phenomena cannot be dismissed as nonsense, mistakes or fraud, but need to be explored with a proper scientific attitude. My question is, what is this '*discarnate entity*' in relation to Descartes' "*soul*" or the Buddhist "*Skandas*"? The psychic or psychological aspects do not lend themselves easily to conventional scientific exploration, while of the material aspects, R. Smith wrote (The Mind-Body relation; *Dictionary of the History of Science*, MacMillan, London. Eds William Bynum *et al.* 1988. p 271): "Materialist solutions to the mind-brain problem were therefore popular for a while, but many scientists recognized their ignorance of the physical basis of psychological processes and the size of the philosophical problems in formulating a coherent materialism".

The Buddha's view of *anatta*, is next discussed in the context of another idea in Buddhism, the cycle of births. It is the notion of the identity of the self that, according to Buddhism, leads to the cycle of re-becoming or rebirth. The term *reincarnation* or *transmigration* which implies the rebirth in another body of a previous soul is considered invalid in the Buddhist doctrines. Lakshmi Narasu (1906. p 301) wrote: "Without a soul there could be no recompense for one's deeds by metempsychosis; and without transmigration how would it be possible to account for the differences between man and man in endowments, character, position and fate?" W. Somerset Maugham used the popular but incorrect term *Transmigration* when he wrote in his *The Summing Up* that an explanation that "appealed equally to my sensibility and to my imagination" was the doctrine of the transmigration of souls and that in such a process an integral basis is that of Karma, though he said he could not understand how it operates. Karma is of course an integral part of the idea of rebirth. This is the most difficult point to explain in relation to the idea that a permanent soul does not exist. It could be speculated that the cumulated force or energy of one's life (*karma*)—the actions, the thoughts—are stored in some form, to find re-expression in another physical life. This is comparable to energy being

stored, unseen, as potential energy in a body at a height, or as electrical energy in a battery terminal, which is expressed when the opportunity arises and some visible work is done; or to a record of a script or picture on a computer disc which can be reproduced to be seen or heard. I have to speculate again; if the accumulated *karma* is stored in some form of energy for re-activation later, then Bagley's comments (2000, personal communication) on the work at the PEAR group at Princeton University, are probably relevant: "The theories of electromagnetic influence which flow from and between individuals also provide a possible model for astrological researchers who try and explain how and why small electrical forces can influence neonatal development at crucial periods of growth". This comment is particularly relevant to, and might even explain the cases described by Ian Stevenson as showing physical characteristics which seemed to have been a carry-over, or an operation of *karmic* consequences of former deeds in a previous birth (see Arseculeratne 2001).

According to Buddhism, it is possible to end this cycle of birth and death through the paths described by the Buddha that lead to liberation from the delusion of 'self'. In parallel terms: "During the intense concentration of meditation, you prevent the brain from forming the distinction between self and not-self" (Begley, 2001) which is the prescribed goal in Buddhism. The idea of re-incarnation was apparently entertained in early Christian thought (Gruber & Kersten 1995, p 90, 91). In the early Christian communities "... belief in reincarnation was taken for granted until it fell victim to historical error in 553, being declared to be a heretical belief at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople, and remained banned from the Christian faith up to the present day.... In later centuries the church devoted great efforts to suppressing all New Testament references to the idea of reincarnation without being able to eliminate them completely".

The question, then, is what is it that is re-born, if there is no soul? This problem has occurred to others as well: "When asked once by one of his Western students puzzling over Buddhist teachings of egolessness, 'Well then, if there is no self, what is it that reincarnates?' the Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa laughed and answered without hesitation. 'Neurosis'" (Epstein 1998, p. 86). But the lama's reply does not enlighten me. "Nevertheless, the absence of a belief in a soul does not preclude Buddhism from accepting a human being who has past and future Samsaric existence and whose tenure in Samsara is not terminated at death" (Tilakaratne, 1997, p 155). Omvedt (2003, p. 4) recorded that B.R. Ambedkar was also bothered by this quandary; Ambedkar "asserts that a 'terrible contradiction' exists between

the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and the Buddha's denial of the existence of the soul". On this quandary, Rao (2006. p. 14) too commented: "What about personal identity, the self-sameness. Is there no enduring agent of action, how can we attribute merit and demerit and account for their consequential influence and effects on one's being and behaviour, as Buddhists believe?"

The following is from a commentary (Arseculeratne 2001) on Ian Stevenson's studies : "*The contribution of certain congenital abnormalities to the mind-brain problem*": "Story in his essay 'The case for rebirth' (1973) also wrote: 'The thought-force of a sentient being, generated by the will-to-live, the desire to enjoy sensory experiences, produces after death another being who is the causal resultant of the preceding one. Schopenhauer expressed the same idea when he said that in re-birth, which he called 'Palingenesis', 'it is the will, not an ego-entity which re-manifests itself in a new life'Buddhism maintains that the physical universe itself is sustained by this mental energy derived from living beings, which is identical with their karma". It is the *Kamma Niyama* that refers to the order of action and result which is one of the five *Niyamas* that determine a life. As pointed out above, Maugham provided a view that expresses this need of procreation that results in Dawkins' view of the perpetuation of the gene through the cycle of births: "...[i]t is the craving within me, which is in every man, to preserve in my own being; it is the egoism that we all inherit from that remote energy which in the unplumbed past first set the ball rolling; it is the need of self-assertion which is in every living thing and which keeps it alive" (Maugham 1938. p 171).

Nyanatiloka in his lucid essay "Essence of the Buddha's Teaching" (p. 13 – 16) provided insights into resolving this quandary:

In the absolute sense (Paramatta) no individual, no person is there to be found, but merely perpetually changing combination of physical states, of feelings, volition and states of consciousness...that which we call a 'being' or 'individual' or 'person' is nothing but a changing combination of physical and mental phenomena, and has no real existence in itself.....The words 'I', 'you', 'he' etc are merely terms found useful in conventional or current (vohara) speech, but do not designate realities (paramattha-dhammas). For, neither do these physical and mental phenomena constitute a reality, an absolute Ego-entity, nor yet does there exist, outside these phenomena, any Ego-entity, self or soul, who is the possessor or owner of

the same. Thus, when the Buddhist scriptures speak of persons, or even rebirth of persons, this is done only for the sake of easier understanding, and is not to be taken in a sense of ultimate truth. This so-called 'being', or 'I', is in the absolute sense nothing but a perpetually changing process. Therefore also, to speak of suffering or a 'person', or 'being' is in the absolute sense incorrect. For it is not a 'person' but a physico-mental process that is subject to transiency and suffering.

Thus it is said that Buddhism on the one hand denies the existence of the soul, while on the other hand it teaches the transmigration of the soul. Nothing could be more mistaken than this. For Buddhism teaches no transmigration at all. The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth – which is really the same as the law of Causality extended to the mental and moral domain – has nothing whatever to do with the Brahmin doctrine of re-incarnation, or transmigration. There exists a fundamental difference between these two doctrines.... According to Brahmanical teaching, there exists a soul, independently of the body, which after death, leaves its physical envelope and passes over into a new body, exactly as one might throw off an old garment and put on a new. Quite otherwise, however, it is with the Buddhist doctrine of Rebirth. Buddhism does not recognise in this world any permanent existence of even mind apart from matter. All mental phenomena are conditioned through the six organs of sense, and without these they cannot unendingly exist. According to Buddhism, mind without matter is an impossibility. And, as we have seen, the mental phenomena, just as all bodily phenomena, are subject to change, and no persisting element, no Ego-entity, no soul, is there to be found. But when there is no real unchanging entity, no soul, there one cannot speak of the transmigration of such a thing.

How then is rebirth possible without something to be reborn, without an Ego or soul? Here I have to point out that, even the word 'rebirth', in this connection, is really not quite correct, but used as a mere makeshift. What the Buddha teaches, is correctly speaking, the Law of Cause and Effect working in the moral domain. For just as everything in the physical world happens in accordance with law, as the arising of any physical state is dependent on some preceding state as its cause, in just the same way must

this law have universal application in the mental and moral domain too. If every physical state is preceded by another state as its cause, so also must this present physico-mental life be dependent upon causes anterior to its birth. Thus according to Buddhism, the present life-process is the result of this craving for life in a former birth, and for craving for life in this birth is the cause of the life-process that continues after death.

Nothing 'transmigrates' from this moment to the next, nothing from one life to another life. This process of perpetual producing and being produced may best be compared with a wave on the ocean. In the case of a wave there is not the smallest quantity of water that actually travels over the surface of the sea. The wave-structure that seems to hasten over the surface of the water, though creating the appearance of one and the same mass of water, is in reality nothing but a continued rising and falling of continued but ever new masses of water. And the rising and falling is produced by the transmission of force originally generated by wind. Just so the Buddha did not teach that it is an Ego-entity, or a soul, that hastens through the ocean of rebirth, but that it is in reality merely a life-wave which, according to its nature and activities, appears here as man, there as animal, and elsewhere as invisible being.

After death, it is not the "I" as a distinct personality that is re-born; rather, the forces generated by karma create another, but not identical, being. T.W. Rhys David's views are relevant here: "In the Buddhist adaptation of this theory, no soul, no consciousness, no memory goes over from one body to the other.... It is the grasping, the craving, still existing at the death of one body that causes the new set of skandhas, that is, the new body with its mental tendencies and capacities, to arise. How this takes place is nowhere explained. (Rhys Davids 2002b, p. 78).

If the self is a construct of pre-determined causes, then there are limits to the choices that it could make. This brings us to a consideration of the question, or as Gilbert Ryle termed it, the dilemma, of Free-will versus Determinism. This topic was the subject of a Dialogue of the Society for the Integration of Science and Human Values. Free-will is the state of mind which enables us to choose a particular course of action when other courses of action are available to us; we claim to be free to choose whatever course of action we take. Determinism implies on the other hand that we have no Free-will of this sort and that our actions have been determined by a

variety of causes. This dilemma relates to the behaviour of an individual in his society. In the ultimate sense what is thought of as our Free-will could therefore be subject to a very fundamental consideration—the principle of causality. This is indeed a fundamental philosophical debate; are mental states, like physical states, subject to the laws of causality, beginning with genetic determinants and later conditioning which is a basic biological fact of life? We need to go back to Dawkins at this point. Dawkins wrote: “Be warned that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish”(p. 3). This statement underlines the view that I discuss later on, the seeming predominance of Determinism in ourselves, in this case genetic determinism and conditioning that biological entities are subject to. We have to de-condition ourselves, free ourselves by deconstructing our ego, and the Buddhist path, discussed above, might be the path through which this could be achieved. The artefactual nature of the self, the “I” entails the question whether this entity has any degree of autonomy which would equip it to make free choices in ethical decision making. The Buddha engaged in a dialogue on this question when he was asked—If there is no self, if the body is not self, if sensations are not self, if volitions are not self, then what entity is involved in questions of moral responsibility? It is a question that tries to draw implications that are not warranted from his teachings, and the Buddhist tradition gives a logical answer. Moral responsibility becomes a problem only if there is a persistent self entity, eternally pure; and then there is nothing to do about it. If it is a permanent, defiled entity then nothing one does can make any difference. The possibility of moral transformation of a person can be conceived only if there is a changing self (Premasiri 2007; personal communication).

The resolution of this dilemma of Free-will versus Determinism, however unsatisfactory, lies with the concept of “Compatibilism” (Searle 1984), wherein a degree of Free-will is accommodated within a larger frame-work of Determinism. The evidence from many sources indicates that, basically, Determinism predominates with determinants ranging from foetal life through genetics, to infancy through conditioning—the sort that J. B. Watson spoke about—to social determinants ranging from religion to politics or whatever. The idea of Determinism is abhorrent to many, as it was to the late Professor Ian Stevenson (Department of Psychiatry, University of Virginia), despite the cogent evidence I gave him that events in the

lives of contemporary people had been foretold centuries before. So it was to Sir Arthur Keith (1947. p 154): "If by determinism is meant that we have no power to do this rather than that—that man has no power to choose—then I am not a determinist. For every day—almost every hour—alternative modes of action arise; after due consideration, I take the one way rather than the other. The choice is often ethical in its nature—as to whether I should satisfy self or sacrifice self. It is sophistry to say that my choice was already determined." These views were also discussed in the presentations on Free-will and Determinism at a Dialogue of the Society for the Integration of Science and Human Values at the University of Peradeniya, and despite the evidence that indicated a predominance of Determinism over Free-will, it was tempting to accept, as appealing and desirable, the option of Free-will in the choices we have to make.

On this problem A. J. Ayer wrote (1965): "It seems that if we are to retain this idea of moral responsibility, we must either show that men can be held responsible for actions which they do not do freely, or else find some way of reconciling determinism with the freedom of the will." Searle's (1984) question is topical here: "[I]s it ever true to say of a human being that he could have done otherwise? Is all behaviour determined by such psychological compulsions?"[p. ?]. Searle answers the second question negatively; and therein lies the hope that individuals are flexible enough to cope with the stresses and strains in society, because there could be scope for Free-will as well if one considers the successes of hypnosis, counselling, psychotherapy, courses in anger management and above all, meditation, in the de-conditioning of individuals. This hope is what Dawkins expressed. "We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of selfish replicators" (p 215). Rao (2006) expressed a similar view: "We are told [in Buddhism] that we can overcome congenital ignorance, break the simmering samskaras in the unconscious and act free to know the truth and conquer suffering. We are not born free, but we can grow to be free" (p. 2). If this debate is intractable to resolution, could at least the compromise of "compatibilism" (Searle 1984. p 88, 89) give us some relief, though Searle thought it was an inadequate solution to the problem. In relation to the causative determinants referred to above, and the possibility that there exists some degree of free-will and autonomy, it is encouraging that Ayer (1973. p. 235) considered that: "The formation of his character may narrow his freedom; he may, through physical or social conditioning,

or as the consequences of his own free actions, be deprived of the power to make choices that he was once able to make: but except, when the man ceases to be a responsible agent, **his freedom of choice never vanishes altogether**" (emphasis added).

If, on the one hand, there be some degree of Free-will through which choices in ethical behaviour can be made, and on the other hand social and cultural determinants contribute to the conditioning of an individual, a further problem arises – that of Moral Relativism or one aspect of it, Cultural Relativism, which if valid, would influence moral choices; this would make it unreasonable to question alternative codes of behaviour across different cultures. Cultural Relativism too was the subject of a Dialogue of the Society for the Integration of Science and Human Values. It was pointed out that the identification of a Universal Code of Ethics might encounter difficulties given the reality of Cultural Relativism, that we recently showed as existing across Asian and Western societies, in medical ethical decision-making, confirming many opinions in the literature from the East as well as the West that presumed, without proof, the existence of Cultural Relativism. It needs to be mentioned that despite the reality of Cultural Relativism in ethical opinions, there is the possibility, as Levy (2002) pointed out, that the acceptance of its reality is a matter of concern to persons who view as unacceptable, the actions of other groups of people who would justify them according to their own standards of morality.

The denial of a soul in Buddhist philosophy "...was not considered ... to involve a renunciation of moral responsibility. Most of the practical teachings of Buddhism were concerned with self-improvement and self-development and the improvement of the social institutions within which an individual is a significant element." (Premasiri 2006). The reason for this approach was that Buddhism considered "Notions of identity [that] created strong craving and clinging [that] were considered as the source of conflicts both within the individual self and in the larger society in which the individual was an essential component" (Premasiri 2006). The question posed at the beginning of this essay, whether an analysis of the first person tells us how to live together, brings us to the societal implications of the delusion of the self-identity as discussed in Buddhism. Premasiri (2006) considered this question: "...notions of self-identity did not seem to be confined to interaction between individuals. They were clearly seen to manifest in the form of group identities as well.... The Buddha was aware that human beings lacking in insight were prone to conceive of social entities in the same way in which they conceived

the self. According to the Buddha, social identities such as caste, class, race, ethnic group, religion etc., (and one can extrapolate this to the clash of civilizations that Huntington wrote about) were a product of dependent arising (that was described earlier). The Buddha pointed out that there were no absolute distinctions among human beings and whatever distinctions they had made among themselves were based on convention.... Whoever became a victim to such psychological dispositions (the obsession with the ego), acquired the tendency to come in conflict with others..."; the route through which this obsession interferes with the individual's peaceful co-existence in his society is because "The tendency of the human mind is to create an absolute dichotomy of self and not-self, resulting in extremely acquisitive tendencies expressed as an intense urge to expand as much as possible the domain of what belongs to the self. It generates greed, craving, miserliness, and insensitivity to the needs and desires of others" (Premasiri 2007, personal communication). As Rao too (2006) wrote: "A person's self-concept has profound implications for her behaviour and how she experiences the world and participates in it. It has equally far reaching implications for society, culture, and all kinds of interpersonal relationships"(p. 4). The concept of a self identity is enlarged with a social identity of many sorts and the complexities of social identity especially in multi-cultural or pluralistic societies was discussed by Rao (2006); and in view of the interactions of personal and social identity in a multicultural society, he suggested, as an intervention measure, "... strategies for the development of multicultural competence at an early age" (p.11).

If there is great controversy that provides us with no clear or ready answers to the problems which confront us, that are referred to in this essay, what should be our individual stance in life and in our interactions with fellow beings in our social contract? I finally turn to the views of the biologist Arthur Keith. He confessed that he, as did "...most inquiring biologists" who have arrived at the conception concerning the structure of the brain and the nature of mind and thought" , had to turn away from his early beliefs and having been a biologist who considered the findings of science in contradistinction to orthodox religious beliefs, wrote (1947): "Once we have accepted our humble origin and the heritage it has brought us, we are prepared to discipline ourselves and to behave with tolerance, sympathy, and charity to all others."His words might imply the hope of a Universal Ethic but perhaps the reality of Cultural or Moral Relativism might throw some doubt on whether Keith's idealism might work out at all. A. J. Ayer (1973, p 235) also

considered this question that is related to this essay's themes that include religion and morality, and the question of free-will that is now added to these in this discussion: "... can life be seen as having any meaning? The simple answer is that it can have just as much meaning as one is able to put into it. There is indeed, no ground for thinking that human life in general serves any ulterior purpose but this is no bar to a man's finding satisfaction in many of the activities which make up his life, or to his attaching value to the ends which he pursues....". More succinct was Bryson's (2003. p. 408) reference to the apparently pointless life of lichens on which he quoted Attenborough: "They simply exist". Bryson commented: "It is easy to overlook this thought that life just is. As humans we are inclined to feel that life must have a point".

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S.N. ARSECULERATNE