To each human animal is given, several times in its brief existence, the chance to incorporate itself into the existing subjectivity of a truth. To all, and in multiple types of procedures, is granted the grace to live for an idea, therefore the grace to live at all. –Alain Badiou, Logics of Worlds

“You can’t handle the truth!” –Col. Nathan R. Jessup (Jack Nicholson), A Few Good Men

Why do we so often blink at the truth? If it is the case, and I will argue that it is, that we are repeatedly offered the opportunity to see through our illusions and grasp truth, why do we retreat from this confrontation? What is on offer that is so very appealing that most of us would willingly turn down the opportunity to truly live? What is so harrowing about truth that simply asking that we consider it draws hostile reactions or angry dismissal?

In order to suggest a possible answer, I want to focus on one particular truth that has confronted the human mind repeatedly throughout our history, but from which we have not only flinched but fled in terror: the truth that we have no self. More specifically, the truth that we have no discrete, autonomous, self-directing “mind;” the truth that as individuals we are completely effects of a larger, collective symbolic/imaginary system of meaning. This truth returns to human thought like the Freudian repressed, and as often as it does we try to push it back down beneath the neurotic defenses of obsessive attachment to feeling or a reductive scientism of psychology or neurology.

Consider the following:

When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time
without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. . . . What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possesst of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives? (p. 165)

This is, of course, David Hume on the attempt to introspectively detect the existence of a soul, self, mind, or “personal identity.” The similarity to the process of arriving at awareness of anatta in the Pali Canon is probably noticeable to anyone familiar with Buddhist discourse:

Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every form is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

Any feeling whatsoever…Any perception whatsoever…Any fabrications whatsoever…Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every consciousness is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am’ (Pañcavaggi Sutta: Five Brethren [SN 22.59]).

When we examine the contents of our experience, we find that there is no “self” which has these experiences. The self, then, is only a useful fiction, a conventional truth, a feature of language.

There are clearly differences between Hume’s thought and the teaching of the Pali Canon, not least in that Hume cannot accept the consequences of this discovery. Hume famously rejected his own arguments from A Treatise of Human Nature, from which the above passage is taken, in an appendix added to later editions. He found that in taking empiricism to its logical conclusion, he was left with an intractable problem: his philosophical system required him to assume the existence of a “magical faculty of the soul” which his atheist materialism could not admit. In Hume’s own words: “All my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness” (p.
400). His only solution, it seemed, was to suggest that our thoughts and perceptions are united only by a faculty he calls “imagination,” which is “inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding” (p. 21). He was driven to the conclusion that the only source of a “self” is, to put it in my own idiom, in the collective socially constructed symbolic/imaginary system in which we construe and experience the world—but he could not accept that possibility. Attached as he was to the idea of an empiricist epistemology and its atomistic mind, he preferred to have “all his hopes vanish” rather than concede that the mind is collective instead of atomistic.

Why is it so intolerable to accept the possibility that our “self” is merely a designation in the symbolic order assigned to that particular bodily point of interaction with the world? The obvious answer is that it is simply contrary to our ordinary lived experience of ourselves as autonomous and persisting entities, with individual minds and wills. However, Hume had already rejected this common man-in-the-street concept as an illusion, yet he still could not accept the alternative his own argument seems irresistibly to entail.

Nor is Hume alone in this; the sheer volume of philosophical writing attempting to recover some possibility of a “self” from the devastating effects of Hume’s arguments is evidence of our desperate clinging to this illusion. And, of course, there are many other lines of thought which would lead to the conclusion that we have no coherent, unified, self which directs its own actions. Psychoanalysis is perhaps the most evident of these schools of thought, and the enormous effort to reject psychoanalytic thought, to insist that we must not even begin to try to understand it, but must reject it unconsidered, is difficult to explain except as a terror of the threat of non-self.

The possibility of the absence of an autonomous and permanent self does seem to be terrifying for most of us. I want to suggest that one reason we retreat from this truth wherever it makes its appearance is that we cannot yet think this truth in our presently existing systems of knowledge. What the rejection of anatta offers us, then, is an escape from the frightful work of thought. I will further suggest, though, that this work of thought is not as onerous as most of us seem to fear, and that, in fact, there are concepts in which to begin this effort, concepts that can serve us to force the appearance of this truth in our conceptual world.
To make this case, I would like to consider an essay by Mark Siderits, the concluding essay of a very interesting collection called *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, & Indian Traditions*. My argument will be that Siderits once again comes to the conclusion that we do not have a self of any kind, and that in fact the self is only a “useful fiction” which serves the purposes of the larger, collective, symbolic system. That is, Siderits’s interpretation of Buddhist thought leads to the conclusion that there is in fact a bigger collective mind, while each apparently discrete individual self is merely a convention which serves a function. I was initially very encouraged on reading this, because I thought I might find here an ally in the attempt to draw out this implication of Buddhist thought. However, Siderits and his co-editors are quick to point out that “most readers will find this implausible” (p. 26), and Siderits admits in a footnote that “this outlandish position was not . . . held by any Indian school” but he has “arrived at it through a combination of rational reconstruction and speculation” (p. 309). He sees it as merely an “exercise” to demonstrate the effect if we “take seriously the resources provided by the Indian philosophical tradition” (p. 309).

Why would he seem so willing to dismiss as “implausible” and a mere “exercise” the implications of his own argument?

We can see the reason for this in the very title of his essay: “Buddhas as Zombies: a Buddhist reduction of subjectivity.” The title is more than just an attention grabber; Siderits cannot conceive of the collective mind, the inter-subjectively created symbolic system, as anything but an “undead” machine running on autopilot. To become enlightened is to become a zombie or a “Robo-Buddha” (p. 329), and give up the “illusion of thought,” accepting our “ultimate ontology” as a completely determined cog in an “information processing” machine. Sidierits must reject this idea of the collective mind, because the only way he can conceive of such a form of consciousness is within a completely closed ontology, functioning only to reproduce and maintain the existing state; that is, Buddhism would then become purely an ideology of the present “state of the system,” rejecting, even preventing the occurrence of, though, truth, or transformation. Certainly a frightening prospect.

I think this essay is a fascinating example of why we have so much trouble “handling” the truth; Siderits, it seems to me, is mostly correct about the implications of *anatman*, and he highlights quite well the absence of concepts in which to deal
with this unavoidable truth. Let me briefly outline his argument here. He begins with what he calls the “outlandish claim” that “consciousness cannot be ultimately real” (p. 309). For consciousness to be “real” in the sense he seems to mean it, it would need to be reflexive, able to think itself—like the metaphors of the lamp illuminating itself or the fingertip feeling itself. Rejecting the self-consciousness of consciousness, the reflexivity theory, he argues that “the person is only conventionally real . . . a kind of useful fiction” (p. 310), and he points out the difference between this position and the eliminativist position, which would see the self as a useless fiction. The self is useful, but perhaps not absolutely necessary, for proper functioning of the “information processing system” which is the only ontological reality. The goal of Buddhism, he suggests, is to “reap the benefits of the useful fiction of the person, without paying the steep price exacted when we take it literally” (p. 312). The fiction of the subjective self is useful, he claims, because it serves to process new information, to call attention to new sensory input not already integrated into the “state of the system”:

Where we know our way about, the sensory state is taken as putting us in direct touch with the object (the cognition is transparent); where we are in cognitively new territory, the sensation is taken as producing an inner representation that may or may not be veridical, and so warrants further investigation (the cognition is opaque). We can then say that the cognizedness of the object is the mark that this yellow flag has gone up. We take perception to result in a cognition, an inner subjective state, when it would enhance the performance of the system to make perceptual content available to the fact-checker routines. (pp. 328-329)

In short, the illusion of self serves the useful function of marking as “subjective” and in need of evaluation any phenomenal experience not already fully incorporated into the information system, an indication that adjustments may need to be made to insure smooth functioning—either the new information must be incorporated, or the sensory detection mechanism must be adjusted. The ultimate goal, then, is the perfectly working system, with all possible data already incorporated, and thought no longer needed. Buddha is a bug-free operating system.

The reason I find this essay so fascinating is that it really crystallizes what seems to me to be the fundamental reason why we flinch from the truth of anatta. We lack the
conceptual apparatus to make sense of a collective, inter-subjective consciousness that is not *ultimately* real but dependent on causes and conditions. The only framework we have in which to think this is the positivist cognitive-science model of information processing. The difficulty, it seems, is that if consciousness is temporary and relative, our prevailing system of knowledge requires that it must therefore be thoroughly determined, a clockwork mechanism set in motions and bound to run its course. What is needed is a conceptual framework in which to conceive of consciousness as an emergent power of the human animal, as dynamic, expansible, and not reducible to the conditions on which it depends.

I want to suggest, though, that there are other ways to consider the collectively produced consciousness of which our selves are merely useful fictions. I'll begin with a few basic premises:

1) The “information processing systems,” the discourses and systems of knowledge with which we construct our World (in Badiou’s sense of the term), are not the same as ontology. They are, instead, our ideology, the beliefs-in-practices with which we interact with the world; when they work smoothly, as in Siderits’s Robo-Buddha, they do so only because they are effectively eliding or obscuring certain inconvenient truths.

2) This is the case because every symbolic/imaginary system is incomplete, and our knowledge of the world is infinitely corrigible. When we assume the “system” is correct, and all inconvenient data needs only to be incorporated into it, we are reifying our ideology.

3) There is no monolithic, hermetically closed ideology. There are multiple “logics of worlds,” in Badiou’s terms. There are as many collective minds as there are cultures, and these minds are capable of interacting.

4) The goal is not smooth functioning of a bodily machine, but expansion of the symbolic/imaginary system to interact with ever more of the ontologically real.

We must see the collective mind not as a closed and smoothly running information system, but as an open symbolic system which is riddled with aporias and contradictions. Furthermore, the symbolic system interacts with the real conditions of its existence by means of biological organisms, each of which is unique in its
capacities and each of which occupies a unique position in the collective mind of which it is part.

To conclude this perhaps too brief and cryptic essay, then, let me suggest two related reasons why we flinch from the truth.

One is ideological: like Hume, we sometimes become so comfortable in our ideology that the admission of a truth is simply horrifying. When faced with accepting it, we choose to retreat into talk of unfathomable mysteries, and prefer to reject our own thought rather than face its implications.

Another is more conceptual: we simply lack the concepts to force the appearance of a truth in our system of knowledge. The discomfort and difficulty of thinking in new concepts, however, is probably not nearly as difficult to overcome as the power of ideological reification.

In the examples I have discussed here, these two reasons for flinching are quite interrelated. Both Hume and Siderits fail to make the distinction between thought about the mind-independent physical world and thought that constructs our ideological relation to the real conditions of our existence. Hume’s epistemology requires that all “reality” is mind-independent, and all “thought” is directed toward knowledge of that mind-independent reality; when he is faced with the necessity that the habits of mind which shape our beliefs and perceptions are in the “imaginary,” are socially produced fictions, he can only insist that they are “inexplicable.” The possibility that socially produced systems are real without being permanent, and that they have causal powers, is simply unthinkable for the Tory Hume: if this were the case, we might be obliged to change our social and economic systems, instead of simply adjusting our “selves” to the world as it is. The collapse of ideology and science into one epistemological register is a necessity for Hume’s conservative ideology. Siderits makes a similar maneuver, but for apparently different reasons. Siderits can see the non-self, collective mind only as processing of sensory data, completely eliding the register of ideology and collapsing all thought to the level of describing a mind-independent world. The failure here is primarily conceptual, the result of inadequate concepts in which to think of consciousness rather than of an attachment to conservative ideology, but the effect is very much the same. When Siderits reaches the conclusion that consciousness must not be ultimately real, he
can only dismiss this conclusion as a mere “exercise” in thinking the “outlandish” and implausible.

We can get beyond this impasse if we accept that we are, as Althusser puts it, “ideological animals by nature,” that we must not only describe the world, but also construct a way of living in it. This ideology is what we must learn not to reify, and reification of our ideology is the source of much human suffering. We must also be willing, in the words of Alain Badiou once again, to “abandon all hope of finalizing truth, of incorporating all truth into ‘being as becoming’,“(p. 45) we must accept that we never have the final truth. This, ultimately was unacceptable to Hume, and remains unacceptable to most of us today, influenced as we still are by the positivism of the last century.

I will end, then, with one more statement from Badiou. I can hear the groans, but he is one of the few thinkers today who does not flinch from the non-existence of a “self.” For Badiou, we always come upon events, phenomenon that fail to fit into our World, which exist, make their occurrence felt, but cannot “appear” within the knowledge systems of our world. This is the opportunity for truth, and for a subject: “One could say that the subject is a procedure for structuring the traces of a [truth] event, of organizing its effects in the world” (p. 42). The subject is not the atomistic individual, but the collective effort to bring new truth into the often resistant World. We can do this only because we are, in fact, ideological animals by nature, and because the symbolic/imaginary system which is our ideology is not a static monolith, but a contradictory, aporetic, dynamic site of struggle.

This, I would suggest, is our real “buddhanature”: we are ideological animals who can handle the truth.

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REFERENCES

Badiou, A. (2006). Logiques des Mondes. (Paris: Editions du Seuil). Please note that the awkward translations from the French are my own; I find that Alberto Toscano’s far better translation is sometimes even more obscure than my own when passages are quoted out of context.


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