

## CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

### SEARLE AND BUDDHISM ON THE NON-SELF

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this brief note I continue the discussion that I had with John Searle on the topic of the self and the possibility of continuity of consciousness after death of the body. The gist of Searle's reply to my original paper (Hongladarom 2008) is that it is logical possible, though extremely unlikely, that consciousness survives destruction of the body. This is a rather startling claim given that Searle famously holds that consciousness is the work of the body. Nonetheless, he claims that such issue is an empirical matter which could perhaps be discovered by future science. Another point concerns identity of the self or the person. Searle claims that the self functions as a unified point of view from which episodes of mental events are presented as a coherent picture. Here the Two Truths position in Buddhism differs from Searle's here. The "point of view" that Searle mentions exists only at the conventional level, but not the ultimate one.*

**Keywords:** *self, consciousness, person, identity, Buddhism*

In my paper published in the volume *Searle's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy* (Hongladarom 2008), I presented a view of consciousness and self in Buddhism and compared that to Searle's view. In the paper I contended that Searle's view that consciousness is a biological phenomenon does not necessarily conflict with that of Buddhism. The points where Searle diverges from Buddhism concerns what happens to consciousness after death. Since consciousness is a biological and physical activity--Searle's favorite analogy is digestion, it is extremely unlikely that consciousness can survive death of the body. Searle's view, however, does not logically preclude the possibility of survival of consciousness after death, though he claims in the response that this is as unlikely as digestion functioning after the death of the body. In the reply to my paper he asks a question how one is to know that the consciousness that survives the death of the body is mine. This is a very important problem, and I intend to take up most of the space in this paper to account for it. Furthermore, he also claims that there is no substantial, Cartesian self. This much

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agrees with the basic tenet of Buddhist philosophy. Searle's view is that even though we cannot find the substantial self, some kind of formal self has to exist in order to function as a "point of view" from which things appear in such a way that they make sense to the perceiver. This much is akin to what Kant takes to be the Transcendental Unity of Apperception, i.e., the formal unity of the self that works as a condition of possibility of there being a coherent picture of knowledge of the external world.

In this reply I shall take up two points which were discussed in Searle's reply to my original paper, namely the question of survival of consciousness and more importantly that of how to account for identity of streams of consciousness that putatively survive destruction of the body. Secondly, I will discuss the issue of Searle's idea that the formal self functions as a point of view or an anchor point, or in Searle's words "an essential postulate to make sense of perception." My view is based on insights obtained from Buddhist philosophy, but I don't claim that it represents the standard view of Buddhism on these issues. I doubt that anybody could lay claim to a view that purports to be the view that represents all of Buddhist philosophy. On the contrary, the views being presented here are actually mine, which naturally result from my engagement with Buddhism.

## 1. SURVIVAL OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS IDENTITY THROUGH TIME

Much of the space in my original paper was spent on detailing the views of the main schools of Buddhism on the issue of consciousness and its survival after death of the body. This is naturally a point of departure between the Buddhist and Searle. As a committed materialist, Searle does not accept that consciousness survives the death of the body, though he leaves open a small possibility where somehow consciousness can be revived in a dead body in the same as digestion is revived in a dead body. This very improbable scenario is not a logical impossibility, and Searle accepts that in the future consciousness might continue to exist after death. For him this is an empirical matter. However, all schools of Buddhism concur that survival of some form of consciousness is entirely possible, and this is a basis for the doctrine of reincarnation, which is a lynchpin of Buddhist teaching. Some philosophers such as Owen Flanagan claims that this doctrine in Buddhism is outdated and does not have to be accepted by contemporary practitioners (Flanagan 2013), who can focus instead of the message of Buddhism about getting rid of suffering without having to believe in topics that run counter to the scientific mindset.

I agree that survival of consciousness after the death of the body is an empirical matter. However, Searle seems to commit himself to two apparently contradictory views. On the one hand his biological materialism seems to commit him to the view that there is nothing to consciousness of an individual after she is dead. There will be consciousness for sure, but it is not the consciousness of that particular individual who is now dead. On the other hand, Searle appears to accept the possibility, however remote, that the consciousness of an individual might continue to exist after her death. Perhaps in the future, he says, people then might discuss the issue and find it "how hilarious it was that we all thought our consciousnesses would end with the death of

our bodies” (Searle 2008, 190). But if it is possible that consciousness could survive the body, then it won’t be a working of the brain. If consciousness is a result of a work of some material system, then that system does not equate with the biological brain, which is contrary to Searle’s own view. Or perhaps the brain is only a manifestation of some more refined material system which scientists cannot discover at the moment. This subtler manifestation works through the physical brain; if this is the case, then Searle might be vindicated after all. But in that case it is not the brain itself that is the source of consciousness, but something of which the brain is only a manifestation.

Another problem concerns identity of consciousnesses. In fact to talk about consciousnesses in the plural presupposes that ‘consciousness’ is, grammatically speaking, a countable noun meaning that it refers to discrete objects such as rocks and chairs. However, consciousness appears to be more a process which is much harder to separate out into chunks. If that is the case, then to talk about consciousnesses in the plural would presuppose that there are something inside of each consciousness itself that unifies it and gives it a structure in a such a way that it is *one* consciousness and not two or three. But if consciousness is a continuous process, much like flowing water in a stream rather than a rock or a chair, then there is nothing inside it to unify it in that way. In fact in our talk we usually talk about flow or stream of consciousness as if it were liquid, and if it is liquid then it cannot be separated out into chunks and is not countable. A philosophical import of this is that if consciousness is comparable to flowing liquid, then it does not make much sense to find something internal to it that unifies it in the sense that the shape and boundary of a rock identifies it as *a* rock instead of two or three. But then if consciousness does survive the body, then we cannot find anything that identifies its flow with that of the body except that a particular stream of consciousness flows out of the stream that used to reside in a particular body of a person. Even then, as Heraclitus famously said, there is nothing inside the stream that identifies it as one stream or one consciousness (implying consciousness of one particular person). A consequence is then that when the body dies, the consciousness then continues to flow on, or at least according to the Buddhist belief anyway, which we seem to take for granted at the moment. And as for whether this stream of flowing consciousness does belong to the person who is now dead or not depends on various factors such as whether the content of the flowing consciousness continue the same story, so to speak, with that of the deceased person or not, and as stories can branch out and diverge a lot, then there is a sense in which the flowing consciousness both belongs to the original person and to another person who has just been born. In fact his is the heart of the matter regarding the belief in reincarnation.

The purpose of this talk about survival and identity of consciousness here is to reply to Searle’s passage in his reply where he says: “If I am to be reincarnated by another conscious existence, then one wants to know: what fact about the second conscious existence makes it identical with me? What fact makes it a reincarnation of me? And I cannot see that he has given any satisfactory answer to that question” (Searle 2008, 189). I did not say anything about this point because I thought it was

obvious; but thinking about it right now I might have been assuming too much, for all Buddhists would not doubt how a stream of consciousness arising from a dead person could fail to be identified with that person. If a stream of consciousness contains episodes which are causally related to those within the stream of a dead person, then it is obvious that the stream somehow continues the existence of the stream that used to belong to the dead person. This goes toward answering Searle's question about how one is to tell how a stream of consciousness that exists after my death is *my* stream too.

To cut a long story short, however, there is no way to answer Searle's question satisfactorily because the question presupposes the existence of a self who claims that the stream of consciousness belongs to her, even after she is dead. But that is patently impossible. How can a dead person claim something as her own? A dead person cannot claim anything. She does not have any rights any longer. Searle asks: "What fact makes it a reincarnation of me?" But there is no way to answer this because the question presupposes that there is a self that is aware of the stream, which is impossible given the fact that the person in question is already dead. The question can only be asked in the third person, viz. "What fact makes a stream of consciousness a reincarnation of a particular dead person?" This is because the consciousness of there being a 'me' in this sense does not logically guarantee that the 'me' in one conscious episode is identical to the 'me' in another episode (Hongladarom 2016). In any case an answer to Searle's question is that if the stream contains elements which are causally related to the elements within the stream of the dead person, then the stream could be regarded as a continuation of the stream that constitutes the life history of the dead person. Being a continuation in this sense does not imply that the continued stream represents the self of the dead person, but it means that the continued stream, which could belong to another person, contains elements of the old, already dead person. Containing elements from a previous person, however, is not sufficient to guarantee that the new, continued stream represents the very self of the deceased person. The thread of memory is not sufficient to guarantee personal identity, *pace* Locke, because of the ever present possibility that the memory might be wrong. In this case, then, there being one individual person is accounted in much the same way as when we account for a river being one and the same. In case of the river we rely primarily on its location as well as its relations toward its environment. In the same way, a person is regarded as being identical to herself across time primarily on her 'location' which actually is a complex of the body and mind that, though always changing, remains constant enough for others to interact with her fruitfully. There is nothing inside the individual that accounts for her own identity. For the river we cannot go inside, such as diving into its water, in order to find out an element that is responsible for its being one and the same. What we find is only water, or perhaps some occasional fish. We instead account for the identity of the river through referring to its location, which means how the river interacts with its environment--how it divides up a city into two halves, how it merges at a particular location with another river, and so on. In the same vein, we account for the fact that an individual person is identical with herself through her interaction with others and with her

surroundings, such as how others perceive her, how she is called, what role she plays in her community, and so on. This is important because when it comes to putatively surviving consciousness, what accounts for it coming from a particular person (we cannot account for it being identical to the person before she is dead because consciousness, like a river, is always flowing) is ultimately its relation to others in the way described earlier. Memory cannot fully help here because memory is found inside consciousness and cannot be relied on to account for the identity of itself. Thus, a way to recognize that a particular stream of consciousness comes from a particular person and not others is to see how it retains some features that are characteristic of the deceased person. (Remember that we are now talking in a very speculative manner here.) Suppose it were possible to observe a stream of consciousness coming from someone after she is dead (through some very sophisticated scientific device, for example). The only way to recognize that this stream comes from this person is to see how similar it is to the stream that used to exist before the person is dead. The similarity can be greater or lesser, but it can never be identical to any episode of the living consciousness. This means that there can be no absolute guarantee that a stream of consciousness is exactly identical to that of a living person. In other words, identity of consciousness is always *constructed*.

## 2. IDENTITY OF THE SELF AT A TIME

What I have just discussed above concerns identity through time, what is commonly known as the problem of personal identity, though here there is the added twist of personal identity, or identity of consciousness after death. However, in his reply Searle mentions another, related kind of identity, that is identity of the formal self. The idea comes from Kant's view on the Transcendental Unity of Apperception (B131-132). The 'I think' must be able to accompany all of my representations; otherwise I cannot have any coherent understanding of the world around me at all because everything would be mumbo jumbo where nothing can be constructed together to create a single point of view or picture. Searle fully endorses the Kantian position here. As mentioned earlier, the idea is that in order to maintain a coherent picture of the world where understanding and knowledge of the external world is possible, there has to be an 'I think' or self-consciousness that ties up all the different episodes coming to the mind. Searle is careful in pointing out that though he believes in the formal self in this sense, he does not believe in any substantial self. The difference between the two is that the former is purely formal; that is, it does not exist as an entity in the world, but is only posited as a necessary ingredient in understanding. A way to understand this might be to compare it with the latitudes and longitudes on the surface of the world. They do not exist, but they are regarded as existing in order to aid in navigation. In the same vein, the formal self does not actually exist but is only regarded as existing in order to aid in navigation too, in this sense navigation of the mental space.

Buddhism does not explicitly recognize the formal self in this sense. On the contrary Buddhism recognizes two senses in which the self might be understood. This

is the famous two Truths doctrine: Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth. Basically speaking Conventional Truth is the ordinary kind of truth that we are all familiar with, such as “The sun rises in the east,” and so on. Ultimate Truth, on the other hand, is unique to Buddhism and it points to the view that in the ultimate sense things are “empty of their nature;” that is, things have the properties they have (such as an apple is red) solely because of extra factors not available within the apple itself. In other words, the redness of the apple is a function of other factors such as our eyes and the light condition, and is not the responsibility of the apple alone. In fact Buddhism goes much deeper than this, for it contends that in this sense even the apple itself does not exist (hence it is empty). This is because the existence of the apple depends on various causes and conditions and without them we cannot justifiably say that it exists. The Ultimate Truth does not say that an apple, or anything else for that matter, does not exist, or that it is an illusion. The apple is still there and (in normal case) is not an illusion, but since its existence depends on various causes and conditions it cannot exist alone by itself, hence it is ‘empty’ in Buddhist parlance.

As for the self, though in the ultimate sense it does not exist, it makes much practical sense to regard, as an instance of Conventional Truth, that it exists because it would be much easier to refer to others as if they have their own selves instead of looking at them in the ultimate sense, which means that everything is dissolved into everything else. In the ultimate sense the self does not exist because it depends on various factors, much like rainbow is dependent on light and water droplets and does not exist on its own. (In fact Buddhism regards *everything* to act like rainbows in this way.) But the difficult this raises in ordinary living makes it necessary that we have also Conventional Truth, which is about ordinary perception and language use. In the conventional sense, the self can be far more than the merely formal one mentioned by Searle. It can have its own substance, if talking about substance is necessary for achieving some purposes in communicating. In such a communication, the self would be treated as actually substantial, but when it comes to ultimate analysis, the very same self here would be analyzed away and its existence found to be as insubstantial as a rainbow. Furthermore, latitudes and longitudes can be as substantial and objective as possible; they are very useful in navigation and in finding things on the map. But they are not there, essentially speaking. And so with the self.

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