BUDDHA AND HARD ELIMINATIVISM

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An appropriate description for the Buddha's philosophy of persons within the frame of materialist philosophy of mind, prima facie*, would understandably be a kind of reductionism, given that the Buddha reduced the self to nothing but a collection of impersonal and impermanent psychophysical elements. In this article, I argue that this view is only appropriate for understanding the self within conventional reality, as is the term used by Buddhists, and does not tackle the other half, namely, ultimate reality. I claim that eliminative materialism provides a more accurate description of the Buddha's prescriptive practice, and although falling prey to the same problems that reductionism faces, creates a good basis for an alternative position of the Buddha as a Hard Eliminativist.*

Introduction

The Buddha's philosophy of persons has been characterized as belonging to two categories in materialism, the one being reductionism, and the other being Eliminative Materialism (EM as it will be termed for the rest of this article). Reductionism looks to explain objects and persons in the world by the smaller parts of which they are made. A cart, for example, can be reduced to its individual parts, such as the nails, the wood, wheels, etc. Take these away and we no longer have a cart. Even the parts can be broken down further into the matter that informs them, and further still into atoms and smaller particles. This is how personal identity is also sometimes understood, as the self being something reducible to smaller mental parts.

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EM is the view that there are no mental states at all, no beliefs or egos or minds, but only physical brain states. Science will eventually explain away mental states. It will eliminate the above mental language, which belongs to an incorrect psychological theory. I will argue that reductionism as a descriptive tag for the Buddha's philosophy of personal identity is lacking, and does not go far enough and that it is far more accurate and appropriate to describe the Buddha as a kind of Eliminative Materialist. I will go further by saying that Buddhism is EM in practice; that a more complete 'spiritual realization' gained by deliberate elimination of propositional attitudes with regard to the self reveals that persons are intrinsically empty. EM is, I claim, prescribed as a means to the cessation of suffering. It is, therefore, an apt description for the Buddha's praxis and prescription, and is useful descriptively only in the conventional sense. In the following sections I will focus on, first; EM proper; second, arguments as to why we can call the Buddha a materialist; third why EM is more accurate regarding the Buddha's philosophy; and finally, possible responses to the comparison. Conclusions that will be drawn include: first, that EM and Buddhist philosophy are more compatible than reductionism in virtue of their reasonable scepticism towards complete denial of mental states; second, that despite this, EM also suffers incompleteness compared to Buddhist philosophy with regard to (a) language, and (b) a differing normative basis and telos. Finally, this leads to the conclusion that: (1) EM fails in the same way as reductionism in describing the Buddha, but that EM cannot be seen as a strict descriptive designator, but as an appropriate part of the Buddha's praxis. (2) Due to the Buddha going further to ultimately eliminate physical states along with so-called mental states, he can be defined in a possible alternative way, namely, as a hard eliminativist or as an advocate of transcendent materialism.

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The Hard Eliminativism of the Buddha

EM is a position in the materialist camp within the philosophy of mind that claims that mental states do not exist. We find it difficult to explain the ontological[1] status of consciousness, or personal experience, or the soul, at least in the materialistic sense. The eliminative materialist argues that a more mature science – and especially neuroscience – will eventually explain these phenomena away. It certainly isn't only consciousness or qualia[2] that don't exist, but beliefs, perceptions and personhood as well. EM is a perspective that makes the claim that there are no beliefs, perceptions, consciousness or anything else and that our intuitions regarding these concepts make up an incorrect 'folk' psychological theory. To better understand what EM is, one would do well to understand the position that it argues against: folk psychology.

Folk Psychology

Folk psychology is composed of our common-sense beliefs and intuitions regarding internal and external aspects of our lived experience. We experience, express and describe particular physical and mental phenomena with intuitions that use a large-scale consensus built on the basis of the culture, social structures and knowledge of the time. For example, hearing voices or being possessed by demons would go on to be eliminated due to greater findings in medicine and neuroscience, discoveries that could show that we could eliminate the idea and belief in demonic possession, and replace it with knowledge of the brain states that drive a person to think that they are hearing voices. To replace common expressions with more accurate terminology is one thing, but to say that there are no beliefs or perceptions etc. is very hard to grasp. The criticisms and arguments against them will be left for the final section. With a basic introduction to what EM and folk

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psychology is, I will now focus on why it would be more appropriate to call the Buddha an eliminative materialist with regard to persons.

The Buddha and Hard Eliminativism

The Buddha saw persons as a collection of interconnected, impersonal psychophysical elements that we believe to be a unique underlying essence that persists over time. According to the Buddha, this view is not only incorrect but also undesirable. The above view runs counter to the prescription of the Buddha who sees such attachment to this kind of view as an obstacle to liberation from the treadmill of karma and attainment of Nirvana. Such views of a persisting self are argued against in various sections of Buddhist texts that make up part of the canon and beyond. For current purposes, it will only be necessary to refer to the emphasis of the three marks of existence, the four noble truths, specifically the second and third truths, and finally, the eightfold path to enlightenment, which is, I claim, the prescriptive claim for eliminativism for the purpose of enlightenment. The Buddha claims that a spiritual awakening generated from deliberate efforts will eliminate folk psychological beliefs. The five aggregates, or skhandas (Sanskrit *pañcaskandha*), are the psychophysical elements that the Buddha believed were responsible for creating the illusion of an impermanent self. They consist of:

> *Rūpa*: Anything corporeal or physical. V*edanā*: Feelings, sensations of pleasure, pain, and indifference. S*aṃjñā:* Perception, Those mental events whereby one grasps the sensible characteristics of a perceptible object. *Saṃskāra:* Volition, mental forces responsible for the bodily and mental activity. *Vijñāna*: Consciousness.

The above skhandas represent mental states posited by common sense. As per eliminativism, these posits do not

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exist, as per the Buddha, these states do not exist, therefore, eliminative materialism is similar to the Buddha's views regarding mental states. This can be referred to as the basic argument for why it is more accurate to refer to the Buddha as an eliminativist regarding persons, as it takes two basic understandings of (1) eliminativism, and (2) Buddhist philosophy, and shows that they are similar in their claims. Next, we visit The Four Noble Truths, which are as follows: (1) There is suffering. (2) The origin of suffering is craving. (3) The cessation of suffering is possible. (4) The way to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The second truth is of particular interest for the purposes of this article, as it points out exactly what it is that ought to be eliminated. It is said that the origin of suffering is craving, but this has a few varying translations, such as desire or attachment. In any event, the claim is that the ceaseless grasping of transient things traps us in an endless cycle of suffering. In this regard, the 'transient things' referred to are the skhandas, which are transient insofar as they are interdependent and impermanent and intrinsically empty. This reference to the four noble truths looks to create a parallel between folk psychology and the skandhas. This would be with the goal of showing that what should essentially be eliminated on both sides are the same. Below is now a basic list of mental states posited by common sense:

1. Beliefs and desires: believing that it will rain, having a desire for dark chocolate.
2. Knowledge and thoughts: knowing that $1 + 1 = 2$, thinking that $3 > 2$.
3. Mental images: imagining being in heaven.
4. Emotions and moods: hoping that one will pass the exam, fearing failure, feeling peaceful, being irritable, being long-winded.
5. Perceptions and sensations: seeing a cat, feeling pain, hearing voices, having hunger pangs, being thirsty and tired.

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Both lists are essentially identical, if not only different in wording or order. Eliminativism holds that the problematic nature of these mental states gives reasonable grounds for denying their existence and that advances in neuroscience through deliberate undertakings will provide us with the knowledge and even new and innovative means to express the complex inner workings of the material brain. This seems very compatible with the Buddha's claim concerning how to eliminate suffering, by recognizing the reality of these mental states. This realization was also brought about by very deliberate efforts in the form of meditation, used as a means of understanding the true nature of the mind. So a first argument can be made from what needs to be eliminated, and both views prescribe eliminating mental states.

However, the context must be set in order for there to be parallels drawn between EM and Buddhism. If we are speaking about the Buddha's philosophy of self, we are speaking of one of the two views of reality, conventional and ultimate. So arguments must be made always within:

1. The province of philosophy of mind and persons; this will be the presupposition for both views.
2. Considerations must be made within ultimate reality.

With this in mind, a basic argument can run as follows:

Eliminative materialism is the denial of the existence of mental states.
Buddha denied the existence of mental states.

Therefore Buddha is an eliminative materialist.

Talking about personal identity, we would intuitively say that we are each unique with regard to our memories, appearance, personality, etc. But introspection would result in using a combination of these mental states to reinforce the

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belief. Again, these do not exist, as per EM. There are, however, many problems to grapple with by making this comparison, such as whether we can just accept unconditionally the presupposition that the Buddha was a materialist at all. Or whether EM falls short in the exact same ways that reductionism does. These are the challenges I wish to tackle in the next section.

Differences between EM and Buddhism

Above I described the similarity of EM with Buddhist thought, based on the similarity of the claim that mental states do not exist due to constituting a false/undesirable theory. But it could be argued that EM would fall prey to the same arguments that were made against reductionism, namely that the theory is incomplete from two possible perspectives. First, the presupposition that the Buddha was a materialist; second, the kind of language used in its arguments, and finally, the prescriptive and teleological aspect. Prescriptive in the sense of why we ought to believe and practise eliminativism, and what remains after elimination, or what do we have beyond folk psychology. The preliminary response, for now, is to reiterate the claim that EM is more compatible with the Buddha's philosophy compared to reductionism insofar as it is part of the traditions practice. Secondly, that Buddhism presents what I call a hard eliminativism. Which is not a theory at all, but a deliberative prescriptive method to be used conventionally, and not an ultimate descriptive designator.

This article from the beginning works from the presupposition that the Buddha is a materialist, which is always going to be controversial, as the Buddha was certainly not concerned with any descriptive label regarding his teachings. But it can be argued that the materialist description is one that is still very much appropriate to him, with regard to Brahmanism acting as a first jumping-off point for Buddhism, and secondly the Buddha's

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mission of liberating individuals from their suffering in a *this-worldly* fashion. This is stated quite well by the Buddhist monk Nicheren (1222–82) in a paper by James Shields:

> A person of wisdom is not one who practices Buddhism apart from worldly affairs but, rather, one who thoroughly understands the principles by which the world is governed. The true path lies in the affairs of this world. (Shields 2013: 462)

Starting with the first point, Brahmanism, and later Buddhism, maintained that nothing fell outside the natural and moral laws that governed the universe. The framework of both spiritual traditions has always been a very natural one, with Gods, mortals, animals, etc. being subject to karma and causality. This is the first case to be made for a materialist grounding to the Buddha's philosophy. The second comes from activities and processes that come from being and acting in the world, and the knowledge of ourselves that comes from this. For the Buddha, the prescriptive task was dependent on finding a middle path between lived conventional reality and potential ultimate reality. The Eightfold Path contained the personal and societal duties necessary for enlightenment, these being part of living effectively within a particular community. It is through this gradual process that one would go on to discover what Shields (2013) referred to as the three bodies of the Buddha. The first is *nirmanakaya*, which is the body unaware of the true causes of our experience. This is interpreted as Saṃsāra in Buddhist terms. The second body is *sambhokaya*, the body that becomes aware of these causes of our experience and begins to represent the different stages of Buddhahood through deliberate elimination of the causes of *samsara*. This prepares for the final body, the *dharmakaya* or 'body of truth'. This is enlightenment, the result of understanding and eliminating causes of Saṃsāra and full realization and understanding of the true

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nature of the mind. In Spinozan terms, it is the experience of eternity; it is the end point of the Buddhist labour of practice. In his paper 'A Life between the Finite and Infinite: Remarks on Deleuze, Badiou and Western Buddhism', Simon O'Sullivan sums this up in the following way:

> The *dharmakaya*, like Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, is an experience of eternity (or, again, more precisely, *sub specie aeterni*) that is discontinuous with time but also coterminous with it. It is in this sense that Buddhism is not exactly an eternalism (believing in an immortality of the soul or, as it were, an afterlife for that soul), but rather, like Spinoza, posits an eternity that is here and now, albeit occluded. (O'Sullivan (2014: 269)

So Buddhism can justifiably be called a materialist philosophy, or at least a kind of materialist one in virtue of the historical grounding of the Brahmin tradition that it opposed, along with its own overall naturalistic world-view, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the knowledge that leads to a process of realizing different 'bodies' through accumulation of knowledge and deliberate practice, by way of knowledge of this world and participation within it.

Now that I have presented reasons for justifiably referring to the Buddha as a materialist, I will proceed to the second area of contention: language used between the two positions. In the philosophy of mind, the interaction problem, which is the problem of finding out how the mind interacts with the brain, is an important foundational puzzle in the discipline. EM is seen as, for one thing, a solution to the problem, insofar as it doubts the existence of any problem, in virtue of mental states not really existing, but existing only within a theory that will be replaced. Taking the example from Paul Churchland's paper 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' (1981), mental states such as consciousness, qualia and the soul

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constitute the theory known as folk psychology, as has already been mentioned. Churchland proceeds by arguing for why it constitutes a theory, before going on to argue why it is most probably wrong.

> Not only is folk psychology a theory, it is so obviously a theory that it must be held a major mystery why it has taken until the last half of the twentieth century for philosophers to realize it. The structural features of folk psychology parallel perfectly those of mathematical physics; the only difference lies in the respective domain of abstract entities they exploit – numbers in the case of physics, and propositions in the case of psychology. (Churchland 1995: 158)

> Given that folk psychology is an empirical theory, it is at least an abstract possibility that its principles are radically false and that its ontology is an illusion. With the exception of eliminative materialism, however, none of the major positions takes this possibility seriously. None of them doubts the basic integrity or truth of folk psychology (hereafter, 'FP'), and all of them anticipate a future in which its laws and categories are conserved. This conservatism is not without some foundation. After all, FP does enjoy a substantial amount of explanatory and predictive success. And what better grounds than this for confidence in the integrity of its categories? (Churchland 1995: 159)

From this, we can already point out a difference in language and intentions. EM looks to exciting advancements and discoveries with the help of an advanced neuroscience, which will lead to the dismantling of a false theory, which is holding the full potential of our rationality back. Taking the first point of difference, subject matter, the Buddha was not concerned with solving the interaction problem, but rather, eliminating the aspect of the human

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experience that creates continuous suffering, his intentions lying in obtaining enlightenment for himself, and helping others to find enlightenment too, within the material constraints of conventional reality. EM, or advocates of it, uses what I will call a language of probability, which is to argue for the probable falseness of folk psychology and propose possible outcomes after its elimination. The Buddha used a language of certainty, which was to say with certainty that mental states do not exist, and ought to be eliminated in favour of enlightenment. So while eliminativists hold that there are mental states that will be subject to elimination and found to be just physical brain states, such as the will or the soul or the self, the Buddha claimed that attachments even to these physical brain states is a part of the problem. So given that a half is not the same as the whole, and EM commits itself to the existence of physical brain states in conventional reality by the *probable* falseness of folk psychology, it is also incomplete regarding the Buddha's philosophy of persons. Next, taking prescription, the eliminativist could claim that eliminating folk psychological theories is good in realizing our full potential as rational agents, and possibly removes walls that restrict us from innovative methods of thinking and expressing ourselves, and as such we ought to eliminate folk psychological theories. Here lie the primary differences between basic eliminativism and the Buddha's eliminativism. The Eightfold Path to enlightenment serves as the means of what can be called prescriptive elimination. Herein lies the case for a different kind of eliminativism regarding the Buddha, and this lies in deliberate methods of meditation, and making teleological considerations, in other words, the ends around which meditation is organized. Teleology refers to an endpoint towards which deliberate efforts are aimed, and these are capable of having both a divine and a secular nature. The Buddhist telos lies in the attaining of Nirvana, a state of supposed perfect wisdom that is obtained from deliberate methods to make suffering cease by eliminating the very causes of it, namely, desire,

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ignorance, and attachment. The telos of EM is not entirely clear, which leaves another difference. Carrying on from the argument from language, EM uses a language of possibility, not only with regard to its analysis of folk psychology as a theory but also with the telos of EM. I once again refer to the work of Paul Churchland (1995: 169–71) in briefly sketching the possible ends which the elimination of folk psychological beliefs could bring.

1. Research into the activity of the brain yields a new kinematics and correlative dynamics for what is now thought of as cognitive activity. This new kinematics gives us a wider scope for tackling complex abstract problems of which folk psychology is only capable of scratching the surface and providing superficial interpretations.
2. Further research into the brain reveals sophisticated mechanisms that allow for the construction of a new verbal communication that exploits more of the complex machinery of our brain than natural language ever could. Guided by our new understanding of those internal structures, we manage to construct a new system of verbal communication entirely distinct from natural language, with a new and more powerful combinatorial grammar over novel elements forming novel combinations with exotic properties. The compounded strings of this alternative system – call them 'übersätze' – are not evaluated as true or false, nor are the relations between them remotely analogous to the relations of entailment, etc., that hold between sentences. They display a different organization and manifest different virtues.
3. Finally, Churchland proposes a very radical possibility of communication without language at all. At least not spoken language, but direct

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> communication between two brains. This theory is built on the phenomenon of two hemispheres of the brain communicating without the need of the cerebral commissure – the corpus callosum, which is a giant cable of neurons connecting them. In some cases, the cable is absent from some individuals at birth; however, the two hemispheres manage to make use of other ways of communicating. In Churchland's words, the hemisphere learns to make use of the information the cerebral commissure deposits at its doorstep.

These serve as very short summaries of Churchland's suggested outcomes of the elimination of folk psychology, but the point was to show that the language that is used is a language of possibility, a possibility which can be applicable in some sense to an enlightened Buddhist. For example, in connection with to the second and third of Churchland's possible outcomes, famous texts tell of the Buddha's refusal to speak at times when being asked certain metaphysical questions concerning enlightenment, Nirvana etc., due to the questioner's inability to grasp the concepts and language afforded to the Buddha upon full enlightenment. The Buddha no longer only thinks in true or false, but, as per Churchland, has a new kinematics that cannot yet be comprehended or understood. We could argue that the Buddha and EM are similar in being ahead of their time, both advocating a deliberate investigation of the potential of the brain by way of historic knowledge. The possible results of elimination, at least regarding EM, would still require further elimination in the Buddha's view. The further frontiers that the proposals of Churchland suggest may result in enlightenment comparable to that of the Buddha's, but then again, they may not. The above-mentioned frontiers require the continued desires and attachments to other theories, beliefs, and attitudes, and in the end will not get one closer to Nirvana. Both approaches

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find common ground in emphasizing the potential of human agents in realizing the full abilities of the complex workings of the brain, albeit through different methods. But while the desire is the same, the extent differs between the two. The former still requires various theoretical frameworks, indeed, a trust and belief in the advances in neuroscience in order to bring us to these incredible avenues of human potential. The latter sees these new avenues as further barriers that still require elimination.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the view that the Buddha is a reductionist is one that is only accurate prima facie and that upon further inspection of his philosophy of the self it becomes clearer that there is something else at work. While the Buddha reduces the self to the five psychophysical elements, these five aggregates are also impermanent, which therefore means that there is no self or five aggregates, only the psychophysical elements that give the illusion that process selves are substance selves. Therefore it is more accurate to characterize the Buddha as an eliminative materialist with regard to the self, rather than as a reductionist. I then argued for the more appropriate description of EM. This was subjected to the same scrutiny as the reductionist position with regard to incompleteness, and we noted that the Buddha's brand of eliminativism is not merely theoretical but part of the practice necessary for enlightenment.

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Notes

[1] Ontology refers to the study of what is real.

[2] Qualia are individual subjective conscious experiences, such as the subjective feel of a pain.

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