**Is Buddhism True?**

Robert Wright’s book, *Why Buddhism is True*, is the latest in a growing number of works authored by prominent Western intellectuals promoting a Buddhism stripped of supernatural trappings and recommending meditation. I support both of these causes. As I’ve remarked elsewhere, I think Buddhism is the only ‘religion’ which still makes sense when considered apart from its supernatural elements, and when so considered, no longer even qualifies as a religion. Meditation is also a worthwhile venture with many practical benefits, especially when the mystical and new age dimensions have been pruned.

Although the initial premises as I have outlined them above are beneficial and ‘true’, in my opinion the central themes of *Why Buddhism is True* are less so. As the title suggests, Wright’s central argument is that Buddhism provides the tools which allow us to pierce the illusions our naturally selected brains create for us, see things as they really are, and thereby, alleviate suffering. I will argue against this. But before going on the offensive it is definitely worth dwelling on what is good about *WBIT*.

The Good

Wright’s writing style is very pleasant to read. He writes with a casual, conversational tone and injects a nice amount of humour throughout the book. He is also refreshingly humble and moderate in many of his claims. This can go either way. It can be off-putting if one wants an authoritative account from someone who has been to the top and seen what lies there. However, it can also be nice to read a book written by someone like me (at least more like me than a Buddhist monk who has spent ten years meditating in a cave). At no point in the book does one feel that one is receiving a sermon from on high, with all of the attendant (possibly self-aggrandising, and almost certainly hard to believe) claims that tend to come with such a delivery. Wright comes across as someone who believes in the path (a secular Buddhist path that can free one from suffering), but someone who is still very much on it. He presents his ideas as opinions and caveats them where appropriate, making the book engaging and accessible.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I also find the secular, more Western approach to Buddhism appealing. Wright is wary of the less plausible aspects of certain forms of Buddhism and steers clear of them. Ultimately, his Buddhism is more like a practical philosophy than a religion. At several points in the book he even recommends putting the metaphysical claims, already significantly minimised, to the side and simply enjoying the practical benefits of meditation. The essence of the Buddhism Wright advocates here is that life as normally lived by human beings is full of dissatisfaction (*dukkha*, usually somewhat inaccurately rendered as “suffering” in English), sometimes felt more acutely than at other times, and meditation (basically nothing more esoteric than watching/calming the mind) can alleviate this. If this was where Wright had left it, the next section would be unnecessary… but he didn’t, and so it isn’t.

The ‘Less’ Good

The core argument at the heart of *WBIT* is that Buddhism reveals two illusions we typically labour under without even being aware of. The first is the illusion of self and the second is the illusion that external things are ‘really’ out there. In other words, Buddhism lets us see the ‘truths’ of not-self and emptiness. I will examine these in turn.

*Not-self - Wright*

This is an old Buddhist chestnut that is getting a lot of press these days because scientists, starting from the premise that the universe is completely explicable in crude materialistic terms, are almost unanimously drawing the same conclusion.

The Buddha thought any self worthy of the name ought to have (at least) two characteristics. First, it ought to persist through time, and second, it ought to be under our complete control. The first quality does in fact appear to be an illusion and few people these days would argue for an unchanging, permanent ‘self-core’.

So what about the second quality? We do think we have complete control over ourselves. In what sense can my self be a self if I don’t have control over it? The Buddha approached this question by first outlining what he called the five “aggregates”, which Wright analyses as; form (physical body), feelings (not emotions, but a kind of basic ‘tone’ accompanying emotions which makes them pleasant or unpleasant), perceptions (sensory impressions), mental formations (emotions, thoughts, inclinations, habits, etc.), and consciousness (something like ‘awareness’). Then, he asked whether we have control over each of these. Do you control your physical form? Can you change it in any way you like? How about the feeling (or sensation of pleasantness/unpleasantness) that you get from things? Can you arbitrarily change this? The answer is no in both cases. Nor can we control our perceptions or awareness, both of which seem relatively passive. The fourth category, mental formations, is a bit trickier. As Wright describes it, I think I probably can change, at least some of the elements that make it up. I can direct my thoughts and change my inclinations/habits (meditation is nothing if not changing or exerting control over these things). Walpola Rahula, in *What the Buddha Taught*, describes this category as being made up of “volitional activities”, such as will, concentration, desire, determination, etc. But this doesn’t help much because I still feel in control of these things (again, if I wasn’t, it seems something of a mystery how anyone can meditate, an activity which explicitly requires exerting control over all of the above). I think perhaps the idea here is that none of us have *complete* control over these things. After all, if we did, we would never find ourselves dwelling on unpleasant experiences or constantly reliving unpleasant incidents in our minds or desiring things which we know are bad for us and on some level we wish we didn’t want.

Next, Wright considers what modern psychology has to say on the question of self. The first almost unanimously accepted finding is that there is no place in the brain where we find a CEO calling the shots; the proverbial homunculus or ghost in the machine. Secondly, a variety of clever experiments have demonstrated that *we* are less in control than we typically think we are. For example, patients who have had their corpus callosum severed, thereby separating the two hemispheres of the brain, and have the word *nut* exposed to their left visual field, i.e. the right hemisphere of their brain, report no awareness of this (since speech is usually a left-brain feature). However, when given a box of objects and asked to select one with their left hand (controlled by the right hemisphere), they will choose a nut. Even more strikingly, patients whose right brain is given the command to “walk” will indeed get up and walk but when asked where they are going, the left brain, which was not privy to the command, will invent a reason. This phenomenon is called *confabulation* and Wright (and many psychologists) have concluded from this that a cohesive self is an illusion.

One way to make sense of this is what is called the modular model of the mind. Rather than viewing the individual as a single, coherent, conscious self, this model holds that there are actually a number of modules at work in the brain and only the ‘strongest’ (Wright suggests intensity of feeling might possibly determine this) makes it to conscious awareness.

Wright sees two dimensions to the illusion of the self; the internal and the external. The former is the way we identify our selves with some inner phenomenon, e.g. thoughts or feelings. Meditation dispels the inner illusion because while one is trying to focus, on the breath for example, unwanted thoughts and feelings interrupt this concentration, meaning that *you* cannot be the “intruder” thoughts. Experienced meditators even claim that they are able to detach from, and observe, their thoughts and feelings arising from the void, as it were. Thoughts think themselves, or as Wright says, “modules think thoughts.”

The external dimension of self concerns the fictional boundary we imagine our selves to be enclosed within. The idea here is that we typically think of everything inside our bodies as being part of our selves and anything outside, as separate from us. Again, meditation can dissolve this artificial boundary, a boundary which only exists because evolution selected for it. Wright recounts an experience he had in meditation of just such a phenomenon when the sound of a bird singing appeared to be just as much a part of him as the tingling sensation he had in his foot.

In one last example of how the self is an illusion, Wright notes how natural selection has evolved us to each think we are special. We each treat ourselves as if we were more important than anyone else. You might want to disagree with this intuition but no matter how much you give to charities or how nice you are to others, it is true. It must be. To you, you are the most important person in the entire world.

Wright thinks he can prove this is an illusion because it contains a logical contradiction. Everybody thinks they are the most important person in the world but logically this cannot be true; everyone *cannot*, logically speaking,be the most important person in the world. Therefore this intuition, that I am a separate, special individual, is false.

*Not-self – My Response*

First, Wright argues that the self ought to be an unchanging, permanent thing persisting through time. Since there is nothing we can point to in us that corresponds to such an idea, the self must be an illusion. I agree with the first part of that sentence while not agreeing with the second. True, there is nothing fixed and permanent in the human body or mind. To the extent that we think this, this is an illusion. But the leap from there to the self being an illusion is a bit extreme. Why can’t there still be a self, just one that changes over time? An evolving, fluid *me*? There doesn’t seem anything problematic about this unless one dogmatically insists on a permanent, fixed self.

Second is the idea that the self, whatever it is, ought to be under our complete control. I would answer this in a similar way as I did the first point. Must the self be absolutely and completely within our control, a causal island insulated from all external (or internal) influences? To the extent that we think this, I am happy to grant that this is an illusion. But again, the leap from this to the self being an illusion seems unjustified.

While it is true that all the things that comprise me are beyond my total control (even in the mental realm anyone who has tried to meditate can testify to the unruliness of the mind and the thoughts it apparently ceaselessly generates), yet, we (whoever or whatever ‘we’ are) are not completely without control either. I can’t alter my physical form *any* way I choose, but I can move it, put it in certain positions, use it to interact with the world, etc. I don’t control my feelings (pleasant/unpleasant sensations toward things), but I can do things and put myself in situations where those feelings may alter over time. I don’t control *how* I perceive the world, but I can direct my perceptive faculties so I perceive certain things and don’t perceive others. I don’t control my conscious awareness (it is always aware of whatever it is aware of without concern for whether I wish it to be aware or not), but I can choose to be aware of certain things at certain times. Finally, I can’t control every thought, desire, or inclination that arises in my mind, but I can exert some control over these things, or surely meditation would be impossible.

Thus far, we have compelling reasons for rejecting some illusions we have about the self, but nothing yet that would go so far as to suggest the self *itself* is an illusion. What about modern science and the failure to find a ‘place’ in the brain from which the conscious subject manages his or her domain? This again dismisses a notion that certainly feels real. It does feel as if “I” am a manager sitting somewhere behind my eyes, running the show. Science, supporting Buddhism, tells us this is an illusion.

How about the experiments that demonstrate how our sense of control over our behaviours and thoughts isn’t as complete as we might think? These aren’t new findings by any means but I remember being absolutely stunned when I first read about them a few years back. I was on a bit of a science buzz at the time and this research dropped me over the deep-end smack dab into determinism and the belief that saying “*I* did such and such” is completely misguided. It made more sense to me to say, “My brain did this” and, “My brain said that”, rather than attributing my actions to an *I* that didn’t exist.

With the wisdom granted me after a few more years’ worth of experience it now seems as if this is making two subtle errors. First, it is assuming, like the Buddha, that only total control qualifies one to be a self, and second it is looking for the self in the wrong place. The experiments show that people don’t always know the reasons for what they do and, if necessary, will even confabulate (conjure up stories) to make sense of their behaviour. The interpretation of these experiments is that since certain behaviours are effected without any conscious input (e.g. the patient chose the nut without being aware of the real reason behind the selection), the self is an illusion. However, this only follows if you are looking for an independent ‘cause-of-behaviour’ self, or as Wright says, the self as CEO.

What if, instead of looking for an independent ‘CEO-self’ in complete control of its domain (a thing which doesn’t exist), we factor in all of the findings and insights offered from Buddhism and science, and look at the problem with fresh eyes? Considering all we know about the brain, mind, and body, what is the self? Who am I?

Well, I know that I *feel* like a coherent self. Now, you may baulk at this. We are, after all, discussing whether or not the self is an illusion, and to be an illusion something illusory must *appear* in the first place. Indeed, Wright is precisely arguing that it is this feeling, or experience, which is an illusion. The problem with dismissing this felt sense of self so quickly is that the experience of being a self is different from other experiences (which may or may not be illusory) in one crucial sense. The *seeming to be* is, in fact, a guarantee that it actually is. It is the one thing I just *can’t* be mistaken about. Descartes captured this sentiment in a pithy phrase, as true today as it was when he first formulated it over three hundred years ago; *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. Even if I am being deceived about absolutely everything, even if the entire universe is an illusion; the one thing I can know for sure is that *I* exist. If *I* didn’t exist, who could be labouring under the illusion?

Of course, I can be mistaken about *what* that ‘I’ (or self) is like (I might think it is a permanent, fixed entity, or something independent from external events, or a non-physical soul, etc.), but I can’t be mistaken about my *experience* of being a self. This is worth emphasising. Even if there is no actual, physical self or no collection of neurons in the brain that corresponds to an “I”; if I experience myself in this way, it is not an illusion. It can’t be. An illusion needs a self to be an illusion for. *Feeling* like a self is enough to *be* one.

If my feeling of being a self, even one stripped of all its permanent and independent bells and whistles, isn’t an illusion, then the next question is what can we be sure of regarding this self? Well, at the very minimum, we can be sure that the self is the experiencer of my experiences, the first person subject for whom everything is an object.

But hold on. A Buddhist (or scientist) might immediately call into question such a flimsy conception by looking for some *place* this self is or some *thing* to identify it with. In fact, that is precisely what we have seen Buddhists (and scientists) doing in this article up until now. Where is this self? Which neurons or neurotransmitters make up the self? Is it your thoughts? Your body? If it’s no place and none of these things, then it must be an illusion. This is too hasty and is precisely what I mean when I say Wright is looking for the self in the wrong place. To ask these types of questions is to try to impose outdated notions of the self on reality rather than looking and acknowledging what we find there.

Absolutely this sense of self is ‘flimsy’, in the sense that it is ‘insubstantial’ or ‘ephemeral’, but this doesn’t make it illusory. Indeed, slapping an adjective on it precisely renders it non-illusory. The self isn’t a thing or an entity we can tangibly grasp or see, but that doesn’t make it an illusion either. What is it, then? It’s a felt sense which lies behind every experience we have, and that fact alone makes it very much real, in fact, it might just be the most real thing in the universe.

So, the self isn’t an all-powerful CEO standing on a mountaintop in our minds choosing thoughts and directing our behaviour, but neither is it a useless passenger just along for the ride. This, I believe, can be inferred from the fact that human consciousness is self-reflective. This remarkable feature of our minds means that we are never *merely* our thoughts or behaviours, rather we are *consciousness* *of* those things. Thoughts don’t merely arise and dissipate in my mind; they appear to consciousness. This *appearing* creates a certain distance between ‘me’ and those thoughts. In some sense, inasmuch as they appear due to the activity of *my* brain, I *am* my thoughts, but I can’t wholly be them precisely because I am always consciousness *of* them. This is perhaps the most remarkable feature of consciousness. Not only does it somehow direct itself towards external objects (an activity wholly inexplicable in a purely materialist framework, by the way), it also somehow turns back on itself, creating an apparent duality within a totality. It is this curious and implausible aspect of consciousness, this ability we have to take a position with reference to ourselves, which makes the experiencing self more than an epiphenomenon.

Now that we have an understanding of self that seems to do more justice to our actual experience, what can we say about the modular model of the mind? Well, the first thing to say is that it is a model, which is to say, it is almost certainly not a literal description of reality. Scientific models seldom describe reality *as it is*; they are merely ways of organising information which allow us to understand something. A classic example of this is the theory of quantum chromodynamics which assigns a ‘colour’ charge (in addition to an electric charge) to particles called quarks. Now, the ‘colour’ charge isn’t literal. If you could see quarks under a microscope, you wouldn’t see little red, green, and blue particles. It’s just a model, a way of thinking about the world, but a way which allows us to make sense of the experimental data and form working theories about quarks and their interactions. Similarly, I doubt anybody believes the brain is actually partitioned into modules, only one of which can appear in consciousness at any given time. Given this, it is tremendously ironic that, in a book whose principal stated aim is to dispel illusions, a fictional model of the mind that likely doesn’t actually reflect reality features so prominently.

Secondly, although it is invoked by Wright to explain how thoughts arise without a central self thinking them (in order to dispel the illusion of the CEO self), he still slips what we have concluded is a real, meaningful self in the back door by declaring that the module with the strongest feeling “enter[s] conscious awareness.” This “conscious awareness” is precisely what we have concluded the sense of self is; not some independent, fixed, metaphysical (or physical) entity, but an experiencing subject who lurks behind every conscious experience, because if it wasn’t there, you couldn’t have the experience in the first place.

I should note that I don’t have anything against the modular model of the mind (I have just read an excellent account of it in David Eagleman’s book, *Incognito*, where he calls it the “team-of-rivals”), in fact, the experimental evidence behind it is very compelling and its implications are disconcerting. Indeed, they ought to throw into question many of the assumptions we had about our ‘selves’, but this is not the same thing as jettisoning the whole concept in disgust. My basic point here is that rather than jumping from the findings (the validity of which I am not questioning) to a literal interpretation (“I am legion”) or a hasty conclusion (there is no self – a classic example of throwing out the baby with the bathwater), we would be better off reassessing the (sense of) self in light of them and marking changes in our understanding where appropriate.

What about Wright’s internal and external aspects of the self? The internal is simply the tendency we have to identify our ‘selves’ with our thoughts and feelings, a tendency Buddhist meditators claim to have overcome. There are three comments I want to make regarding this. First, in a way, they are right. We aren’t our thoughts or feelings or any other inner phenomena, but not because the self is an illusion; rather we aren’t our thoughts or feelings because we are always consciousness *of*… those inner phenomena, that is to say, we are able to take a position on them and thereby open a gap between us and them. In a way that only makes sense within something as counter-intuitive as consciousness; we both are (they arise from my brain), and aren’t (I have them), them.

Second, the Buddhist meditator claims to have seen through the illusion of self because, at certain times under certain conditions, she is able to watch her thoughts arise without her consciously thinking them. This leads to the following chain of reasoning: If *I*, as self, am not in control of my thoughts, then I guess the self is redundant… and perhaps, if it is redundant, it doesn’t even exist. The problem with this is that it fails to ask one very important question; who is watching these thoughts arise? Curiously, Wright notes this objection but completely fails to resolve it. Indeed, he somewhat sheepishly admits that the Buddha’s suggestion that freeing yourself from the illusion of the self will liberate you, is paradoxical because one can always ask, exactly *who* will be liberated if there is no such thing as a self? The best Wright can do is recommend one either embraces the paradox (but this would seem to legitimise all religions), or just ignores it if Buddhism works; i.e. if you feel calmer, less stressed, etc. Again, not such a great conclusion to reach if we are determined to overcome illusion.

Finally, just because a meditator can witness their thoughts arising without a thinker while sitting in lotus position doing nothing, doesn’t mean that the self is an illusion. It seems quite plausible to me that in the state of mind engendered by lengthy meditation the sense of self and agency could be suppressed. It also seems quite likely that the brain, a physical organ that is almost always engaged in some kind of neuro-electrical activity, would be capable of generating thoughts ‘on its own’, as it were. We already know that stimulating certain parts of the brain can produce thoughts in human subjects. But just because the self can be subdued in this way while the brain remains active during these extraordinary moments (and after significant, deliberate, wilful effort, I might add), doesn’t mean that the brain *always* thinks thoughts without a thinker. Why should experiences in meditation take precedence over everyday life experiences when we are actively engaged in the world, taking focused and deliberate action, thinking explicit and directed thoughts? If you ask me, it is the monk in the cave, rejecting the ‘ordinary’ world of experience, subject, and object, who is failing to experience life as it ‘really’ is.

The external aspect of self refers to the ‘illusory’ boundary that we imagine marks the edge of our ‘selves’ and separates us from the external world. In meditation, Buddhists claim this can be overcome to the point that a birdsong, for example, feels no less a part of the self than a tingling in the foot. Again, I would question whether this experience, experienced in the highly unusual and abnormal context of meditation where the mind has been deprived of external stimulus for hours or even days, represents a ‘truer’ account of reality than the experiences of normal life. Isn’t it much more likely that it is the meditator who is experiencing the delusion, rather than the ‘normal’ person going to work, coming home to the kids, and paying the bills?

Of course, if this insight is presumed to relegate the self to the status of an illusion, we are once again permitted to ask, exactly who is it who is experiencing the birdsong and the tingling of the foot? Even as one aspect of the self is cast into doubt (its boundary), another, more fundamental aspect, is brought into stark relief.

The last point regarding not-self is the ‘illusion’ of specialness. The logical contradiction Wright spins here is a bit of a red herring. No one actually believes that they are the most important person in the world. What we believe, and is in fact true, is that we are the most important person in the world, *to ourselves*. There is nothing logically contradictory about this.

However, there is something else in this argument which is worth lingering on a little longer; namely, the evolutionary perspective Wright frequently adopts. This perspective has, in fact, been lurking in the background this entire discussion and makes up one of the central themes of the book. Wright argues that we are wired to think we are ‘special’, independent, fixed CEO-selves because our distant ancestors who were wired this way were fitter, evolutionarily speaking, than their peers who didn’t, and thus had more babies who also thought they were ‘special’, independent, fixed CEO-selves. Now, this seems eminently reasonable to me and is quite probably an accurate description of the way we evolved. As an organ which evolves according to natural selection, the human brain isn’t interested in the truth, that is to say, the way the world *really* is. If an illusion gives one member of a species an evolutionary advantage and that illusion is, in turn, passed on to successive generations, that illusion will spread throughout the species until it becomes the norm. Since we think we are selves only because this belief enabled our ancestors to have more children than other members of the species, just the fact that we are wired to have this belief can no longer be taken on its face as being true.

This is all fine. There is nothing wrong with Wright’s argument, per se. The problem only rears its head when we start talking about ‘the way the world *really* is’. If Wright wants to claim that Buddhism gets closer to *the* truth than natural selection, we need to know how we are defining ‘truth’. After reading the book, it seems fairly obvious to me that Wright is arguing for a scientific, objective conception of truth; i.e. a truth that is assessed predominantly in physical terms. The problem with using this yardstick for your measure of truth is that Buddhism doesn’t go far enough because all that *really* exists in that case are particles interacting with each other. That is ultimate truth when viewed through a spectrometer or radio telescope. Sure, there’s no self from that angle, but there’s no not-self either. These concepts mean nothing in a world reduced to its ultimate, physical truth.

The root of my problem with this attitude is the division Wright creates between human perspective and reality. For Wright, the way humans have evolved to think about and perceive things is an illusory veneer overlaid upon an objective, true reality, which is coherent and meaningful in itself. Reality good, illusion bad. The error behind this approach lies in the mistaken belief that something can be said about reality independent of the perspective of some perceiving consciousness. Absent a perceiving consciousness, there just is no meaningful reality.

You might object that these are overblown, ego-centric ravings. After all, a rock still exists even if no one is around to see it, doesn’t it? Actually no. What is a rock? In truth, it is nothing more than a collection of atoms and molecules. Those atoms are in turn made up of other smaller particles. As far as we know, this is what ultimate reality actually is. It isn’t rocks and tables and chairs; it’s particles, or perhaps strings. Now, a collection of particles on their own is completely meaningless. It’s only when an observing consciousness opens up a specific perspective on those particles that they attain qualities that enable there to be meaning.

This doesn’t mean that reality is subjective in the sense that whatever I choose to imagine becomes real, but it does mean that it is subjective in the sense that there is no stand-alone, objective reality independent of a witnessing perspective. Bringing things back to the original point, this therefore means that ‘truth’ is not a concept we can divorce from a perceiving consciousness which in our case is a human one. So, Wright’s Buddhism, in attempting to strip away the human perspective, which has evolved according to natural selection, is definitely not getting closer to reality *as it really is*, because reality *as it really is* arises only at the intersection of objective (but meaningless) matter and a subjective (but meaning-laden) consciousness.

This has taken a slightly abstract turn. Let’s bring the discussion back to earth by using Wright’s own birdsong experience. He claims that in physical reality, as it really is, there is no ‘self’ bounded by the body and separated from the ‘exterior’ world. Everything is one, not in a mystical, obscurantist sense, but in an objective, physical one. Now, of course this is true, as we have just seen. Physical reality is just particles and strings. Any boundaries or divisions we imagine we perceive amidst all this matter have merely been created and reinforced for us by the way our brains have evolved over millions of years. *But this doesn’t make those boundaries false or illusory*. It *does* make them contingent, not absolute; i.e. they could have been otherwise, but it doesn’t make them false. It just makes things the way they are.

So, what’s wrong with just going some of the way, then? What’s wrong with the more modest claim that Buddhism encourages us to take a moment and consider the world free from the narrow, self-interested perspective of a contingent, evolved animal; just enough to facilitate a more expanded and less self-centric appreciation of that world? Absolutely nothing. It *is* good to step back from our constant engagement in the world (with all the naturally selected accoutrements that come with that), consider our position in it, and investigate other perspectives. That’s how we learn and grow. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that this is getting closer to reality *as it really is* because this is a chimera.

*Emptiness - Wright*

If not-self is the ‘truth’ behind an internal illusion, emptiness is the ‘truth’ behind an external one; the illusion this time being that the external world is real. The idea here is that reality is constructed, not perceived. We don’t perceive what is *really* there; i.e. the raw sensory data; rather, this ‘pure’ data gets altered in such a way that by the time we apprehend whatever it is, it now includes a whole host of subjective (and therefore illusory for Wright) baggage. This baggage creates the impression that the things we perceive have fixed essences that actually, and accurately, describe them.

An example Wright gives is hearing the sound of an aeroplane. As soon as we hear the engine roaring overhead, we don’t merely hear a loud sound; rather, we immediately place that sound in a wider context; that which surrounds an aeroplane, a form of transportation, a machine which operates according to the laws of aerodynamics, travelling at X km/h, safer than cars, etc. All of this happens prior to conscious inspection. You don’t actually deliberately think about the aeroplane or recall the speed they fly at or envision a hangar, but because these things are so closely associated with your idea of what aeroplanes are, the *essence* of aeroplanes, just hearing the engine automatically arouses all of this baggage.

It’s not just facts which we incorporate into the *essences* of things external to us, but feelings and judgements as well. You have always been afraid of flying so aeroplanes also arouse a feeling of apprehension, and this means that aeroplanes are ‘bad’. Again, you might not consciously bring these associations to mind every time you hear an aeroplane fly overhead but they are all there bundled up with your idea of what an aeroplane is.

Wright’s claim is that this ‘aeroplane essence’ you have constructed is an illusion that doesn’t accurately reflect reality. So, every external object has one of these essences, which we have concocted and which make the thing what it ‘really’ is, and without our even being aware of it, every perception or thought of them automatically engages this baggage which then covers over ‘pure’ reality. Disengaging from these *essences* is what Wright means when he talks about “emptiness”. The world isn’t empty in that it has nothing in it; it is empty because it doesn’t have any essences in it.

There are a couple of arguments Wright to back up this claim. The first one starts out by noting that the judgements people make about the same objects are all different, which is to say, they are all relative. Since they are relative to an individual perspective, they are obviously not absolutely true. Secondly, Wright comes at the position from an evolutionary stance. Since it is our feelings, more often than not, that generate the essences we imagine things in the world having and since our feelings evolved by natural selection not to seek the truth, but to ensure the survival of the species, to the extent that we can’t trust our feelings we also can’t trust the essences we have constructed from them.

All of this leads Wright to embrace the “point of view from no particular point” as being the truest. In other words, perceiving reality free from a contingent, individualistic perspective ensures that one is getting at reality *as it really is*.

*Emptiness – My Response*

I largely agree with Wright’s account of human perception. We never perceive raw data; rather, every perception immediately appears asa perception *of* something and slots into a wider world in which that thing has an artificial meaning and significance. Reality *is* constructed, not perceived. However, Wright’s leap from ‘not a part of objective, physical reality’ to ‘illusion’ is unjustified for the reason I argued for at the end of the ‘not-self’ section. What he calls *essences* aren’t a part of material reality, but they *are* a part of human reality. This means, of course, that they aren’t permanent or fixed, but why should they have to be? As we’ve already noted, nothing about human reality is fixed. Why would we demand this of our perceptions? Of course, to the extent that we *think* these essences are fixed and unchangeable, *that* is an illusion. But the perceptions (essences) themselves aren’t illusions.

Wright describes hearing a buzz saw while he was meditating one day. Now, a buzz saw is a particularly grating sound (essence equals ‘bad’) and it was disrupting his meditation practice. In detaching from this tendency to describe the world in essences, he claims the annoying screeching of the buzz saw became “beautiful” and “like music”.

Now, the obvious first rejoinder is that Wright hasn’t stripped the buzz saw of its essence, he’s just substituted a positive one for a negative one. But the bigger, and more important, thing to note is that if, assuming this is even possible, Wright had somehow managed to hear the buzz saw the way a mechanical recording device would ‘hear’ it (that is, as just a meaningless, sequence of tones), the only thing he would have succeeded in doing is rendering himself completely unable to function in the world. This might be a liberating feeling when you’ve got your eyes closed and have absolutely nothing to do, but obviously life can’t be lived this way. In the book Wright recounts people he has met who *do* claim to live this way. Quite frankly, in my opinion, this is a logical impossibility. You just cannot reduce everything to raw perceptions and still function in the world. To give just one example of how impossible it would be, if a car doesn’t sound like a car, that is, a thing that moves fast and is heavy, how would you know to get out of the way of one? Perceptions must appear *as* things or the entire world would be *truly* empty, not in the sense that it doesn’t have essences, but in the sense that it doesn’t have any*thing* in it.

With this said, both of Wright’s arguments crumble. The first, the argument from relativity, fails because individual perceptions of things, while not being absolute, are nevertheless valid and true for the individual and that is enough to make them real and meaningful. There is no truth ‘out there’ in the material world, divorced from a perceiving consciousness.

The second, the evolution argument – we can’t trust that our feelings are true because they evolved to ensure survival – loses its force because our feelings don’t get their truth from corresponding to some ‘true’ external reality. They are true because we feel them, which doesn’t mean they must be the same for everyone or can never change.

*Other - Paradox*

Wright has a somewhat disconcerting tendency to fall back on paradox when explanation fails. He even gives a caveat at the beginning of the book warning that if you are uncomfortable with paradox, you ought to stop reading because things are going to get paradoxical. This should to be an immediate red flag. We don’t accept the ‘paradox’ defence in Christianity when they try to write off mysteries such as how Jesus could be both wholly human and wholly divine at the same time, or how ordinary crackers and wine can mysteriously transform into the flesh and blood of Jesus despite retaining all of the properties of normal food and drink, and we shouldn’t accept it in Buddhism, either.

Wright tries to diminish the sting in his willingness to resort to paradox by comparing it to the paradoxes we accept in quantum physics, such as light being both a particle and a wave. We do accept those paradoxes in physics but only because they are the only ways we can currently make sense of experimental results. Light sometimes behaves like a wave and sometimes like a particle. We can’t explain *how* this is possible but we know that it is so. The results of experiments come first and then we create theories that try to explain them.

The paradoxes Wright asks us to accept in Buddhism aren’t of the same kind as those in physics however. Take the paradox concerning who will be liberated if there is no self. The process which leads to this is nothing like the process in physics which gives rise to the paradox of wave-particle duality. There are no results the theory of not-self is an attempt to explain. Rather, all we have are two suppositions about the world that are mutually exclusive; one can be liberated, and there is no *one*. In truth, there is no paradox here; just two propositions that cannot both be true.

*Other – Sartre and Heidegger*

While reading *WBIT*, I found myself thinking of some ideas in existentialism, specifically regarding Heidegger and Sartre, which I think are worth noting. First, concerning the idea of not-self. Sartre talks about two kinds of consciousness; reflective and pre-reflective. The former is our normal, everyday mode of consciousness, where we are actively and explicitly thinking about (reflecting on) something. The pre-reflective is a prior mode of consciousness that is something like a background awareness. It is this that ensures we never completely ‘lose ourselves’ in an activity, no matter how absorbed in reflection we become.

Imagine you are completely engrossed in reading a novel. You have no active awareness of reading or the fact that *you* are reading. Your consciousness is entirely ‘full’ of what is happening in the novel. Now, just as you put the book down to take a break, someone asks you what you had just been doing. What would you say? Would you be at a loss for words because you were completely absorbed in (i.e. conscious only of) the book? Of course not. You would say you had been reading, and you would know this precisely because you were pre-reflectively conscious throughout the whole experience even though you weren’t explicitly reflecting on either yourself or your action (reading) at the time.

The idea of pre-reflective consciousness isn’t just a groundless supposition or a flight of fancy; rather, it is the *only* way to explain how we can be aware of who we are and what we are doing, despite not spending every moment of every day explicitly reflecting on ourselves and our actions.

How does this tie in with not-self? Well, in mindfulness meditation as I understand it, the aim is to simply observe. Sartre would call this ‘reflection’, which means nothing more than directing one’s attention towards. In fact, Wright often talks about how he observed external things like sounds and textures, and internal things like emotions and thoughts, in great detail, analysing them until he was able to see them for what they ‘really’ were. In reflecting on things in this way, two things happen. First, the meditator/reflector loses the felt sense of being an observing self. With their attention completely directed towards, and absorbed in, these objects (be they external or internal) and our normal conscious operations (judging, assessing, complaining, etc.) silenced, the sense of being a self drops away. Second, the very act of observing detaches the meditator/reflector from the object being observed. Wright calls this shrinking the self. As I observe my feelings, I note that, in being able to take up a position external to them, I am not them. Directing my attention to my thoughts, I also note that they arise and fade without any conscious intervention on my part so in watching these thoughts come and go, I realise that I am not my thoughts either. Such a process of detachment plays out in the mind until there is nothing left for the meditator to identify with and ‘not-self’ is supposedly attained.

As regards the first situation, Sartre would resist saying the self has been jettisoned just because the pre-reflective consciousness is obviously still operating in the background. Sure, your focus and inner calm may leave you *feeling* completely detached from any first-person perspective, but it goes without saying that someone is still having the experience, and that someone isn’t *any*one, it’s *you*.

The second situation is a little more delicate. It is true that bringing objects before your awareness in reflection creates distance between you and them; Sartre calls this ‘transcendence’ although there is nothing mystical or metaphysical about this. It just means that having a particular perspective, and being able to take a position, on an object, means that one is not that object, one has *transcended* it. This is unproblematic when we are dealing with ordinary external objects but when the objects we present before ourselves are our own thoughts or feelings or beliefs, we run into a strange situation. While it is true that I am *not* my belief (because I can step back from it and look at it, question it, reassess it, etc.), it must also be true that I *am* my belief (because otherwise whose belief is it?). This apparent contradiction arises only because consciousness is capable of self-reflection, meaning the object I transcend is at the same time myself. This is a very interesting topic in Sartre but this is not the place to pursue it further. The bottom line is that the distance one creates between the *reflected* self and the *reflecting* self in self-reflection doesn’t mean there is no self. It only means the self is more complicated than we had previously imagined.

Turning now to emptiness, both Sartre and Heidegger have something interesting to contribute to this discussion. Wright’s claim is that external things have no essence. The subjective (read ‘illusory’) add-ons we freight things with only distort the thing as it truly is in reality.

Heidegger takes a position on this when he talks about what he calls the ‘referential totality’, which is basically the interconnected web of relations to which all external things belong and that provides a framework in which our understanding of the world is structured. These relations connect the thing not just to other things but also to projects we might hope to eventually realise (‘relevance’ in Heideggerian-speak) through using that thing in a particular way. The classic Heideggerian example is the hammer, which is related to nails, wood, other tools, etc., but also related to an end goal, a house, for example, and finally is defined by the activity ‘for-hammering’. On Wright’s account none of these relations or functions are ‘real’. We can only get to reality by divesting the object of these ‘artificial’ add-ons. Now, of course nothing in Heidegger’s philosophy is *physically* real or *necessary*. But that doesn’t make it illusory either, a word which also implies we would be better off without it. In fact, it is central to Heidegger’s thought that a world lacking a referential totality and relevance would be completely meaningless and far from enlightening us would only impoverish us. Indeed Wright’s ‘real’ world is one without hammers, planes, and noisy buzz saws, but full of raw ‘stuff’ (what Heidegger calls the ‘present-at-hand’ or ‘objectively present’). We can choose to take the hammer out of this relational web and see it, not as a tool for hammering, but as a lump of wood and metal which we can then analyse dispassionately, as it were, but this is a secondary and derivative way of apprehending it. It certainly doesn’t amount to seeing the hammer *more* clearly or as it *really* is. Quite the opposite in fact. What we are left with is something that can’t even rightly be called a hammer anymore.

Sartre also touches on this with his account of *nausea*, most famously portrayed in his novel of the same name. In the novel, the protagonist, Roquentin, finds himself gripped by moments in which things around him seem to slip out of the web of relations we usually grasp them within. For example, when looking at a park bench (think of all the associations and relations that automatically come with that word; the background context of a park, a place for sitting, people to sit on it, a certain functional size and shape, etc.), Roquentin is unable to grasp these connections and the bench appears to him as just an amorphous lump of metal with no purpose or relevance. It is just there. Sartre calls the brute presence of things removed from any meaningful context “absurd”, and it is this world that Wright offers to us.

*Other – Enlightenment*

Wright was sensibly non-committal regarding enlightenment but he did refer to it a couple of times as a state of “unalloyed bliss twenty four hours a day” and “enduringly transformative”. There seem to me to be massive problems associated with both of these descriptions (this is less a criticism of Wright and more one of the ideas themselves because, as I say, Wright seems to be more agnostic on the subject than anything else).

Take the first description. Perhaps one could experience unalloyed bliss all the time in a deep meditative state but 1) it is far from clear that this is desirable, and 2) it’s certainly not confronting reality as it really is. The first point has a precedent in Robert Nozick’s experience machine. If you could be hooked up to a VR-type machine that would give you nothing but pleasant experiences, would you? Most people would have at least some misgivings about taking the plunge, and these misgivings arise because of the second point; the experience machine is avoiding truth, or reality, rather than accepting, and living in, it.

But maybe, like the dubious claims of some of the people Wright recounts in the book, this unalloyed bliss isn’t restricted to time on the meditation mat but is a feature of ordinary, waking life. It’s hard to argue *against* this because there is no argument *for* it; we are reduced to taking other peoples’ word, the argument from authority. However, we can note that it certainly seems unlikely. How could any normal human life be “unalloyed bliss” when we consider what those lives *always* entail? All lives (even all *weeks*) have ups and downs; problems surface, people pass away, bills need to be paid, we fight with those closest to us, etc. Again, monks have deliberately cut these problems from their lives by avoiding situations that give rise to them but this is just a different version of Nozick’s experience machine. A normal human life with normal human responsibilities is anything but “unalloyed bliss twenty four hours a day” and I can’t see how it could be any different.

The second description of enlightenment as “enduringly transformative” also seems problematic. The mistake here I think is in believing that human beings are the kinds of things that can transform permanently and essentially come to have a fixed nature. This is a way of speaking that just doesn’t apply to human beings. In short, it is to mistake consciousness for a thing.

Consciousness is never, which is to say, it *can never be*, fixed. Why? Because, as we have seen, reflective consciousness always opens up space between it and what it is conscious of. As soon as I become conscious *of* being happy, I am no longer happy, i.e. I am no longer a purely happy ‘thing’ through and through. A truly happy ‘thing’, a ‘thing’ fixed in its happiness, is totally and completely happy, there are no possibilities in it for anything other than happiness. Consciousness is never able to participate in this mode of being, precisely because it is always consciousness *of* ---, which is to say, it is always detached, or removed, in some way from what it is consciousness of. How does this relate to enlightenment? Well, to claim that enlightenment is “enduringly transformative” means the exact opposite of everything I have just outlined. It claims that consciousness can become permanent or fixed in some unalterable state, i.e. no longer consciousness *of* Y, but just Y.

Let’s bring this discussion down to earth and substitute Y for some alleged trait of an enlightened master. If a master is enlightened, he is blissful. Not just sometimes, after a particularly deep meditation for example, but “enduringly” blissful, incapable of anything other than bliss. Before you raise the objection, this isn’t a straw man either, I don’t believe. Enlightenment is typically cast as a… well, as Wright says, as something “enduringly transformative”, a fixed, permanent state, as opposed to just a tendency towards that state. If it were just a tendency to be more blissful than the average person, it would hardly be worthy of the lofty title ‘enlightenment’ or ‘nirvana’.

If I make a round table, then it’s a round table, through and through. It has no other possibilities; it will be a round table until the end of time. No matter how many screaming children run around it and spill food on it, no matter how much violence it witnesses, it will remain a round table. Human beings, not just don’t, but *can’t*, partake of being in the same way. A blissful human one day may be a stressed out one the next. *There is no way to avoid this and still be a conscious human being.* Hours of meditation may mean you are less likely to lose your cool than others but it won’t “enduringly transform” you into a blissful person-thing. You will always retain the possibility of becoming a stressed-out-human.

If I can insert Sartre once more without pushing the existentialism connection too far, to suggest anything else is what Sartre calls *bad faith*. This frequently misunderstood term simply means to treat a free consciousness as if it were a mere thing (or vice versa). Enlightenment, as an enduring state, is an attempt to reduce a free consciousness (free because in being consciousness o*f* a state it has always already transcended that state) to a fixed state, in other words, to a thing. This is impossible and we ought to be glad of that.