

The Dalai Lama Gathers His Thoughts: Self as a Construction

by Craig Skinner

During his visit to a Cognitive Research Unit, His Holiness (DL) is in discussion with a cognitive scientist (CS).

CS. What we aim to do eventually is to upload a person's mind into an artificial body so that she carries on her life despite death of her original biological body.

DL. Exciting stuff. Maybe I can help. Because of course I am the fourteenth incarnation of the Dalai Lama, each earlier one having had his mind uploaded to the next.

CS (*politely amused*). Ah, yes, metaphorically or symbolically speaking maybe, but it's not real reincarnation.

DL. On the contrary. All the thoughts of the ageing DL, or as many as can be gathered, are collected by watching what he says and does and by questioning him, and a dataset is formed ready for upload into the new DL in due course.

CS. And how exactly is this "upload" achieved?

DL. To date, we've had to rely on old-school technology. It's all written down, the new DL studies it in detail and takes it all in, thereby achieving memory transfer from all previous incarnations. Naturally there is some loss of old memories to make room for new ones, just as happens to anybody with age, and while I can't claim to recall all the details of what I've done over the centuries, I have fair recollection of my sayings and doings hundreds of years ago.

CS. They're not your sayings and doings, they're those of previous people. You have false memories, if you have any at all, you "recall" events you never experienced.

DL. Naturally I didn't experience them in my current embodiment. Just as, once your research succeeds and you are uploaded into a synthetic body, the same will apply – you will have memories of events you never experienced in your new embodied state.

CS. But hold on, how can you be the reincarnation of the previous DL, if as I understand it, several candidates were considered, and, no offence, but one of the others, not you, might have been chosen.

DL. Exactly so, in which case that other candidate, not I, would now be the present DL. Of course I'm chosen. Just as in your planned high-tech upload, some new body or other is chosen to be the one which embodies the new you. It's not as if one of the potential new bodies is "recognized" as being the new you, it is simply that a suitable one is chosen. Just as nobody recognized the boyhood me as the new DL, rather I was chosen to become so.

CS. There are serious questions about selves and personal identity here which I'll come on to. But first a worry about how complete any database of a DL's thoughts and memories could be, and suspicion that there are many missing, the ones the DL never revealed, for don't we all have thoughts we'd rather hide?

DL. Good point. And one I've discussed periodically over the centuries. It's agreed that the database is incomplete. Some deplore this, thinking that successive reincarnations corrupt the original, and advocate strenuous attempts at maximal thought-gathering. Indeed I'm hoping high-tech can help here. Research relating MRI scans and reported thoughts might help tease out hidden ones: procedures include scanning while showing the subject images of sex, violence, racism and so on, trying to pinpoint the scan signatures of bad thoughts. But that's enough about those who deplore the incomplete database. Others welcome it, reckoning that since some loss of thoughts and memories over time is inevitable, this may as well include the bad thoughts. Indeed we could say that each incarnation is a purified rather than corrupted version of the previous. Why (*chuckling*), if I were religious I might say each is born-again or redeemed – but let's keep our feet on the ground here.

CS. Agreed. Another point though. Surely genuinely reincarnated people recall events of earlier lives without being told about them.

DL. Oh, come on, time for you to keep your feet on the ground. Nobody, whether as artificial re-embodiment or human reincarnation can recall such events unless told of them or having had the memories otherwise uploaded. Claims to the contrary are simply untrue, either lies or self-deception.

CS. Fair enough. Can I turn now to this "self" that you claim persists through the succession of DLs making you all the same person. As you describe it in your own individual case, it seems a peculiarly socially-constructed self, what with telling you all about the thoughts of your predecessor, agreement by you to incorporate these, agreement and spreading the word that you really are the DL, and acceptance by others that indeed you are.

DL. A socially-constructed self, eh! Well said. How else can any self be produced? Think of the day when you are uploaded. Your new artificial body

may not look exactly as the old you. You have to be accepted as yourself by the world. The bank manager, for instance, smiles and gives you the money when you ask for a withdrawal from your account. And so on. Your self, as present in others' minds, your third-person self or identity as it were, is a construct, which indeed will need a little strengthening after upload.

CS. I'm not sure about all this, but even if my social self is a construct, what about my inner self, my first-person self in your terminology.

DL. Same thing. First, the integrity of your inner self depends on its acceptance by the world. Without such reinforcement it starts to fade. Imagine if everybody you know suddenly stopped treating you as you. Your sense of self would start to crumble. Personal identity is constituted in our relations with others and sustained by collective belief. Secondly, that inner self is a construct, a narrative shared with other people, a story each normal human tells herself, a Humean bundle of sensations. Of course it also depends on how the individual's brain works, but cognition is distributed between brain, body and the world. In short, the self consists of information stored in others' brains and in the wider environment, as well as in the individual human's brain.

CS. Well, yes, I see what you mean, but it makes the self seem so, well, insubstantial, so elusive.

DL. Exactly right. It is not a substance. But what is it you would wish for. The immaterial, unextended, thinking substance of Descartes, or perhaps an immortal soul as Christian theology has it? As for being elusive, there are those of us who think human life would be better if the self eluded us altogether, but I don't want to bang my own drum too much here.

CS. I'll have to give it some thought. But maybe if my research succeeds it won't be such a big deal after all (*looking slightly downcast*).

DL. Nonsense. It'll be a technological tour-de-force. And in due course will allow not just uploading into new bodies, but also uploading to entirely virtual existence, as well as to augmented human intelligence. It's just that the metaphysical underpinnings may not be quite as you imagined.

CS. Thanks for the encouragement, and for the interesting chat. Enjoy the rest of your visit.

DL. I'm sure I will, and thank you. I'm off to see some of the other wizards now.

Suggested reading

1. Bamford S, Danaher J (2017). Transfer of Personality to a Synthetic Human (or “Mind Transfer”) and the Social Construction of Identity. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 24, No. 11-12, pp 6-30.
2. Flanagan OJ (2011). *The Bodhisattva’s Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. The MIT Press.

Postscript

This dialogue is intended as a user-friendly way of arguing for a philosophical position and maybe stimulating a little discussion. I include the Dalai Lama as a literary device. I have long had the utmost respect and admiration for His Holiness, and if I have misrepresented his views or caused offence to him or any of his followers in any way, I am truly sorry.

© Craig Skinner 2018

Email: ingridandcraigskinner@btinternet.com