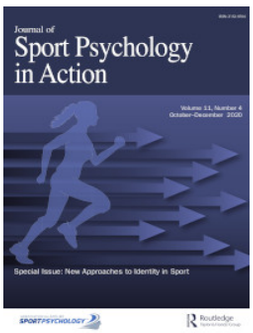

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Identity and the Elusive Self: Western and Eastern Approaches to Being No One

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ABSTRACT

Ideas about self and identity being illusions have been around for a long time in both Eastern and Western philosophies and psychologies. In this article, I trace the concept of there being no independent self (separate from conscious experience) from its ancient roots in the philosophies of Heraclitus and the Buddha through the Age of Enlightenment (David Hume) to modern times (William James, the Dalai Lama). In sport and exercise psychology, substantial interest has grown in mindfulness practices with little attention paid to its original goal in Buddhism of the realization of no-self. The question is, however, what might be the usefulness of these concepts about the illusory nature of the self and identity in the world of sport and exercise psychology service?

KEYWORDS

Buddhism; mindfulness; no-self; process philosophy; professional practice

> *The extent to which you can lose your ego as a consultant in this field is going to determine the extent to which you are truly a contributor in the lives of the athletes you seek to serve.*
>
> (Bruce Ogilvie in Simons & Andersen, 1995, p. 467)

The original title of this article was *A Scottish Empiricist, an American Pragmatist, a Greek Philosopher, and a Tibetan Buddhist Walk into a Sports Bar and Start Talking about Mistaken Identities*. Those four guys: David Hume, William James, Heraclitus of Ephesus, and the Dalai Lama are firmly established in my pantheon of demi-gods who have contributed to how my brain understands the world. There are others who are enthroned on my personal Olympus (e.g., Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, Buddha), but I had to draw a line somewhere. I chose these four because they speak most directly to this article and my take on this special issue of the *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, and that is: the illusions (and nonexistence) of the self and the impermanence of all things (including our *identities*). The

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quote from Bruce Ogilvie, arguably the father of modern applied sport psychology, encapsulates the problems of identity (e.g., ego) and how they might interfere with service delivery from the aspect of the sport psychologist's own sense of self and the defense mechanism employed to protect that self. In this article, I will draw from these four men (and Bruce) to argue that many of the concepts about self (e.g., self-image, self-worth, self-esteem) rest on illusions and misunderstandings that lead, often, to a lot of suffering.

Now that the big guys have been introduced, I would like to continue with a story. It involves Yosemite National Park in California, some friends, a bear, a prayer, some furious running, and sailing off a cliff. Once upon a time, a few decades ago, two good friends and I were hiking around one of the many stunning waterfalls in Yosemite in the early Spring. We had started out on the valley floor and had hiked up past the top of one of the falls. The park ranger in the valley had warned us that a mother bear and her cubs were up in the falls area, and we should give her a wide berth if we saw her. We would know her by the red tag stapled to her ear. It was a brilliant day, and we were walking across the heavy snow along the trail. We had crossed a wooden bridge over the river above the falls and had hiked for another 10 minutes or so. We then decided that because of the time, and the snow depth, we would call it a day and return to the valley floor. As we were walking back, we rounded a bend in the trail and could see the bridge we needed to cross, and we froze. There on the other side of the bridge, right in front of us, was Mama Bear (red tag and all) staring directly at us. Someone said, "Oh crap! Do you see the cubs?" And then one of us said (it could have been me), "I don't see no f***ing cubs." At that point we unfroze and began to walk slowly backward, all of us thinking the similar thought that we had inadvertently placed ourselves between Mum and her babies, in the ursine world, not a good place for relatively large non-bear animals to be. As we were moving backwards, keeping her in our sights, she began to walk across the bridge, nose in the air having a smell of these cub-threatening interlopers. She started toward us slowly at first but then began to increase her pace. We mirrored her and picked up our backwards motion. We were silent except for one of my friends who kept saying, in panicked *sotto voce,* "Shit, shit, shit." Fairly quickly Mama Bear's walk turned into a lumbering lope and then a full gallop. At that time, we turned around and started doing our best Usain Bolts (even though he wasn't born yet). As I was running, I saw one of my friends peel off to the right and head up the steep slope, and I thought, "Oh no, bears can run faster uphill than downhill. I hope she doesn't go after him." That myth about bears is actually wrong; they can run you down and eat you equally fast uphill or downhill. I looked back, and Mom had ignored our

friend and was still coming after us. One safe; two still on the menu. It is at this point that I heard a voice, and it was saying, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen," and then I realized it was my voice, and I am not even Catholic. The trail we were running along had a cliff to the left, but it was not sheer. There were ledges and some bare rock that one could scramble down. My buddy was ahead of me, and I saw him jump down and land on a ledge, and I thought, "Good idea!" so I passed where he was and jumped down onto the rock ledge ahead of him. My portion of the ledge, however, was covered in moss and wet with melting snow, and, in a thoroughly lubricious pratfall, I hit it and went sliding off into the air. In that classic (almost cliché) peak experience kind of way, I had all the time in the world to watch my approaching death. I could see and predict each outcropping I would hit and bounce off. "Ahh, here comes one (ouch!), … and here's another one (oooh, that hurt!), and so on, ricocheting down the cliff face as I matter-of-factly kept reassessing my fate, moving from "sure death" to "Well, at least a broken leg" as I bounced down the cliff. I landed on a steep sloping pile of soft wet snow seemingly perfectly designed to catch idiots being chased over cliffs by charging she-bears. End result: loads of scratches and bruises but nothing worse than a sprained ankle. As I collapsed back onto the snow, I looked up and saw the bear sauntering along the cliff top occasionally turning and looking back down at me. I think she was quite pleased with herself. We never saw the cubs.

So, why have I told this story in an article on self and identity? This whole event probably took no longer than 30 seconds from first seeing the bear to landing in the snow, but it was in those 30 seconds that I caught a glimpse of enlightenment. There was no me there; there was only here-ness and now-ness and the continually unfolding (and quite dramatic) moment. Any sense of self or identity dissipated fast, and whatever I was, "I" wasn't there, but a kind of radical *being-in-the-moment* was. This event is around 40 years old, and at the time I had been studying Buddhism for about six years. I had an intellectual appreciation of the concept of *no-self* (*anattā* in the Pāli language of Buddhist scripture) and that our egos, or identities, or selves are constructions that are not real but, rather, they are illusory, empty, and substance-less and a source of chronic unhappiness. I also knew the realization of *anattā* could be helped along by the three meditative paths within the Eightfold Path of the Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism (i.e., right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration). I didn't know that being chased by a bear and sailing off a cliff could also open the window to *anattā*.

As for my enlightenment or "awakening," it didn't last much more than those 30 seconds, and then I almost immediately fell "asleep" again. I have told this story to introduce the idea that even saying the word *identity* or

self comes with a lot of unquestioned assumptions (e.g., that there is a "self" that exists, that there is an "I" who has an [I]dentity). My tale of the bear, the melodramatic experience of gravity at work, and the fleeting moment of awakening also segue into a discussion of my favorite ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

Heraclitus of Ephesus lived in the 6th century B.C.E. in what is now Western Turkey. Of the four classic elements (i.e., earth, fire, water, air), Heraclitus believed that fire was fundamental and symbolic of constant change and transformation. His most widely known aphorisms, "You cannot step twice into the same river," and "All is flux, nothing stays still" (Cohen & Cohen, 1998, p. 198) encapsulate his philosophy. In the river aphorism, the common translation is somewhat inaccurate. Miller (2008) commented on the original ancient Greek:

> The subjects of the stepping are plural, as are the rivers into which they step, so that the subject of the interaction need be no more unified than the object. In other words, this changes the popular version to voice this alternate meaning, "the same *you* cannot step into the same river twice."

Because the *self* is also in flux. When Heraclitus went "in search of himself," what he found was only the process of searching, with no independent searcher (see Heraclitus, ca 500 B.C.E/2001). In Western Philosophy, Heraclitus is considered the founder of *process* philosophy (versus *substance* philosophy, such as that of Aristotle and Descartes). Heraclitus would probably be in agreement with the Buddha who taught that all component parts of this world are impermanent (including the self). Heraclitus would also find philosophical kinship with the Scottish empiricist David Hume (1711–1776).

David Hume

Immanuel Kant once said that Hume had awakened him from his "dogmatic slumbers," but Bertrand Russell suggested that once Kant had been awakened, he then immediately fell back to sleep. Hume still seems like a good alarm clock for, or antidote to, the walking somnolence there is around self and identity in sport and exercise psychology. Or to evoke the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians, 13:12), when it comes to self and identity, "we see through a glass, darkly." The following quotes are from Hume's (1739) *A Treatise on Human Nature:*

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or

> hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception (para. 3)

> Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea (para. 2)

> I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (para 4.)

Hume, like Heraclitus, was a process philosopher and did not believe in the usefulness of *substance* philosophies such as Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (je pense, donc je suis; I think, therefore I am) who posited two types of substances in the world: thinking substance and extended substance. For Descartes, there is an "I" who does the thinking, whereas for Hume there is no "I" and thinking just happens. Hume has had a profound influence on process philosophy in general, and William James, in particular.

William James

The American pragmatist and radical empiricist, William James (1842–1910), described what he called the *stream of consciousness:*

> Now the immediate fact which psychology, the science of mind, has to study is also the most general fact. It is the fact that in each of us, when awake (and often when asleep), some kind of consciousness is always going on. There is a stream, a succession of states, or waves, or fields, (or of whatever you wish to call them), of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life. The existence of this stream is the primal fact, the nature and origin of it form the essential problem, of our science. (1899, p. 15)

For James, there was only this stream and not some self behind the stream somehow generating the flow of experience. As he stated in the first volume of his *Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890/1950), "thought is itself the thinker, and psychology need not look beyond" (p. 401), and "The phenomena are enough, the passing Thought itself is the only verifiable thinker, and its empirical connection with the brain-process is the ultimate known law" (p. 346). As with Hume, James could not find an "I" behind all the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions flowing in the stream of consciousness.

The Dalai Lama, Buddhism, and mindfulness

In the edited and translated book of the Dalai Lama's lectures in the USA and Canada from 1979 to 1981, *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* (1984), he talked about the nonexistence of a self:

> With regard to selflessness, it is necessary to know what "self" is — to identify the self that does not exist. Then one can understand its opposite, selflessness. Selflessness is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming non-existent; rather, this sort of "self" is something that never did exist. What is needed is to identify as non-existent something that always was nonexistent, for due to not having made such identification, we are drawn into the afflictive emotions of desire and hatred as well as all the problems these bring. (pp. 51–52)

The Dalai Lama, as a stand-in for Buddhist psychology, takes the ideas of self and no-self further than the Western philosophers in this article. In Buddhism, the constructed (false) self is one of the major sources of human suffering and disquietude. We construct our precious selves and identities (e.g., "I am a talented athlete"), cling to them, and then suffer when those identities are bruised or destroyed by, for example, an abusive coach or a career-ending injury. In the Eightfold Path of the Fourth Noble Truth in Buddhism, the three meditative paths, right effort, right concentration, and, particularly, right mindfulness are means to the realization of no-self and the letting go of clinging to impermanent and non-existent false constructions of self that lead to suffering and unhappiness. Buddhism, as represented in the words of the Dalai Lama, seems in close agreement with the Western words of Heraclitus, David Hume, and William James, but adds practical paths to letting go of something that never existed in the first place, and which keeps us stuck in a kind of pervasive unsatisfactoriness.

Mindfulness and no-self

Today, mindfulness seems like a kind of panacea *du jour*. It is everywhere, in psychology, in business, in education, in medicine, in social work, and all across the internet in various forms. In its westernized, secular applications, mindfulness is used to help with emotional dysregulation (e.g., in dialectical behavior therapy), or as a tool in a stress management program (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction), or as a means for personal gain (e.g., mindfulness for business success). Mindfulness appearances in sport, performance, and exercise psychology are usually focused on enhancing performance (e.g., Baltzell, 2016; Gardner & Moore, 2007). In these Western appropriations of an Eastern meditative practice, there is little mention of the original purposes of mindful awareness within a Buddhist framework (e.g., realization of *anattā*), although there are exceptions (e.g., Andersen & Mannion, 2011; Andersen & Williams, 2020; Mannion & Andersen, 2015, 2016; Zizzi & Andersen, 2017). This narrow focus on performance gains with the use of mindfulness seems to be to be a somewhat paradoxical application aimed at, in part, increasing a variety of selfisms (e.g., enhanced self-esteem, self-image) through accomplishments rather than helping athletes let go of a source of unhappiness. But, as Mannion

and Andersen (2016) suggested, "better to have a little mindfulness than no mindfulness at all" (p. 443).

The earliest recording of guidelines for mindfulness meditation are in the *Satipatthana Sutta* written around 20 B.C.E. (Analayo, 2004). The various instructions for mindfulness of breath, body, movement, sensations, and so forth usually include the realization of no-self. For example, in the section on mindful breathing and body awareness in the *Satipatthana Sutta* one finds the following:

> Thus he dwells perceiving again and again the body as just the body (not mine, not I, not self, but just a phenomenon) in himself; … To summarize, he is firmly mindful of the fact that only the body exists (not a soul, a self or I). That mindfulness is just for gaining [this] insight (*vipassanā*). (Analayo, 2004, p. 9)

There is a thread, from ancient times in both the East (Buddha) and the West (Heraclitus) through The Enlightenment (Hume) to modern times (James, Dalai Lama), of the illusions of the self and identity. There are many other examples of Western no-self in psychology such as the radical behaviorism of B. F. Skinner and the egolessness of peak experiences in Maslow's humanistic psychology. So, no-self in Western psychology might not be as foreign as one would think. The question, however, is: how might these no-self insights play out in sport and exercise psychology practice?

Being no one in sport and exercise psychology practice

Some common questions many sports psychologists ask athletes, often in a first one-on-one meeting are: How are you feeling, thinking, and acting during the time of a really excellent performance? and What are you like at those times when your performance is quite poor? The answers to the first question often contain descriptions that could be connected to no-self such as: "There aren't really many thoughts or feelings; there is just swimming," and "It's like I turn into a robot and just do it." The answers to the second question often contain anxiety and descriptions of bruised egos, such as: "I had so much worry about what my coach was thinking," "I felt so ashamed," and "I kept telling myself I was crap." In the language of mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment (MAC) for sport performance (Gardner & Moore, 2004, 2007), the times of poor performance are occasions when athletes become fused (identify) with their negative thoughts and emotion (e.g., I am performing like crap and, therefore, I am crap). In the MAC approach, sport psychologists help athletes *defuse* from their negative thoughts and emotions and see them for what they are: just thoughts, just emotions that rise and fall and eventually fade away, and how these thoughts and emotions are not who they *are*, but rather, something that they are *experiencing*. The MAC practitioner is essentially

helping athletes drop their judgments and just *be* with their experiences. MAC, and its progenitor, acceptance and commitment therapy, however, do embrace a belief that there is something that can be called a "true self," an enduring entity who is having the experiences. Of course, there is no mention of no-self in the MAC manual, but despite the dubious ontological assumption of a true self, the approach does come close to glimpsing no-self.

In an explicit use of the concept of no-self in sport psychology, Andersen and Mannion (2011) presented a case example of a baseball player, Sammy, who was asked about the differences between the Sammy, who performed brilliantly in practice, and the Sammy who played poorly and was a bundle of tension and anxiety on game day. Sammy named his two different "selves" as the "Baseball-Beast Sammy" and the "Scared-Shitless Sammy." The first author (me) went on to described where he and Sammy went then:

> We then talked about the contrast between the two. We discussed how a beast doesn't really need to think or worry about things, how a beast goes on its merry way, doing the beastly things it knows how to do, and how a beast doesn't really think of itself as a beast. It just is. We talked about how when the beast was out there, there was no worried and scared Sammy around; furthermore, when he was just being, perceiving, acting, and making decisions (e.g., swing, don't swing), there really was no Sammy at all. He liked the idea and said on his own, "It would be cool to be a No-Sammy more often." (p. 174)

Many times, over the decades I have worked with athletes and coaches and in clinical psychology settings, clients have walked into my office, and when I ask them, "What is bringing you in here today?" they will say something like, "I am lost, and I don't know who I really am," or "I would like to figure out what it all means," or (with a nod to Douglas Adams) "I want you to challenge me on how I think about life, the universe, and everything." What usually happens then, over the course of treatment, is what I would call philosophical psychotherapy where we address the big questions in life.

Sometimes the path we take is an existential psychotherapy journey, and other times we travel along the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism to, at least, appreciating the concept of no-self, if not getting an occasional glimpse of *anattā*. These two psychotherapy paths have a lot in common, and these philosophical journeys will often include discussions of readings from authors such as Viktor Frankl (1946/2008; *Man's Search for Meaning*), the Dalai Lama (2009; *The Art of Happiness*), Pema Chödrön (2006; *Getting Unstuck*), or Friedrich Nietzsche (1886/1966; *Beyond Good and Evil*). I am a big fan of this type of bibliotherapy, and, more often than not, inquiry about what the self is (or is not) and the mercurial quality of one's identity will walk onto the scene.

One of the common outcomes of this sort of philosophical/existential approach (as with many other psychotherapies) is that the clients re-story their lives, with the help of a caring other and an overarching framework, in ways that make for a more rational, less fragmented, more comprehensive, and compassionate tale of how they understand themselves and others in the world than what they had before. This re-storying can lead to feelings of being grounded and acting in ways with oneself and others in a congruent and authentic manner. In other words: decreased suffering and increased happiness.

The mindful no-self sport psychologist

As one sits in the chair (or stands on the playing field) in the role of a sport psychologist working with athletes, all sorts of things are happening. All manner of thoughts are flying around the sport psychologist's head; images are popping up; attention is focused, and attention is lost; emotions are evoked; somatic responses arrive, and doubts and anxieties about one's competencies emerge, and then, one hopes, they deliquesce, and the focus returns to being interpersonally mindful with the client (again and again). The aspiration of becoming a no-self sport psychologist gets tripped up all the time, and one reason that occurs is because most all of us have constructed selves that are often fragile and need to be shored up and defended. When confronted with athletes for whom we don't appear to be helping, the ego takes a blow, and we get stuck in our anxieties and potential shame for not being the competent sport psychologist we imagine ourselves to be. And then, Boom! We are no longer mindfully present with clients, but rather, we are mired in our insecurities.

The instructions for mindful breathing are to pick a focus point (e.g., diaphragm rising and falling) and to keep returning to that focus, but noticing what arises and takes the focus to something else, and then, without judgment, returning to the breath, over and over again. Keeping attention on the breath for long periods of time is not the point of mindful breathing. The point is to notice and return. The same applies to working with clients. They are like the breath, the point one returns to as one invariably gets sidetracked by doubts or worries or what one wants for dinner. My meditation teacher (I love her dearly), every three or four weeks in our classes with her, ends our sessions with a reminder that goes something like: "As we all go forward with a bit more clarity today, remember to not take things so personally. Most all things in this world are not about you." She is one of my soothing internalized voices that supports, instructs, and comforts me as I move through the world with my family, friends, and

clients and keeps me grounded in returning, however fleetingly, to, at least, the concept of no-self.

Conclusion

In the case example of No-Sammy above, the authors concluded the story with an observation about our problematic "selves."

> Sammy wasn't helped by attempts to build self-esteem, self-worth, self-efficacy, self-belief, self-image, self-narratives (currently quite popular), or any other selfisms. He was helped by learning how to drop the self and its attachments. When his worries appeared, he did not fight them, or try to control them, or cling to them; rather, he would mindfully note their rise and fall as he returned to No-Sammy. (p. 175)

That observation sums up how I feel about self and identity in sport psychology practice, and I really appreciate the guest editors of the *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* allowing me to offer another alternative view in this special issue that challenges current thinking in the discipline.

Being no one and dropping one's ego as a sport and exercise psychologist (see Ogilvie quote at the beginning of this article) would seem to be an aspirational stance for the practitioner to take so as to be present with one's clients and cultivate interpersonal mindfulness (see Mannion & Andersen, 2016). But, no-self is fleeting. Even after decades of meditative practice, I still get anxious about what my clients think of me; my ego still gets bruised, and I sometimes just can't let things go. There are, however, times, in meditation, at mutual "Ah-ha" moments with my clients, when skiing through 50 cm of dry powder snow, when falling off a cliff, or moving into a loving embrace that "I" (ironic use) know that *I* disappear.

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