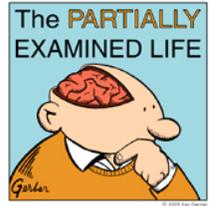


# Partially Examined Summaries



The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized by Owen Flanagan

## Introduction

The following summary is meant to serve as a guide for listeners of the [The Partially Examined Life](#), a podcast in which a few participants periodically read and discuss a philosophical text. In what follows I give a basic summary of Owen Flanagan's [The Bodhisattva's Brain](#). This summary does not follow the structure of the text exactly; rather, it distills its main points and organizes them thematically.

-- Wes Alwan

## The Summary

### **Motivation, Structure, and Method (From the *Preface* and *Introduction*).**

#### Motivation

Flanagan's interest in Buddhism developed out of a chance invitation to have a discussion with the Dalai Lama and other scientists and philosophers; and because of subsequent hyperbolic publicity to the effect that neuroscience was in the process of empirically demonstrating that Buddhism leads to happiness.

#### Structure

The book has two parts:

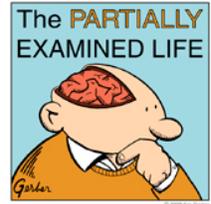
- **Part I:** Can neuroscience tell us whether Buddhism makes its adherents happy? Can neuroscience study such things?
- **Part II:** What is "naturalized Buddhism," and why might it be of interest to scientific naturalists and analytic philosophers?

#### Method

Flanagan will proceed on the assumption of philosophical naturalism to a form Buddhism that "after subtracting what is psychologically and sociologically understandable, but that epistemically speaking is incredible superstition and magical thinking, would be what I call "Buddhism naturalized," or something in its vicinity." His methodology will also embrace anachronism (ancient texts bear on modern problems), ethnocentrism (we can judge whether these texts are adequate to the problems of our own time and place), and a cosmopolitan style (an ironic, skeptical but sensitive attitude towards all forms of life, including one's own).

### **Part I: Neuroscience and Buddhism**

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## Using neuroscience to say whether Buddhism involves problems of polysemy, non-subjective components of happiness, and scientific precision.

### **Polysemy**

The problem with scientifically determining the connection between Buddhism and happiness is saying what each of these things means in enough detail to make them empirically testable. Happiness is polysemous, and so we need to pick a theoretical conception of it that is applicable to Buddhism and not merely nihilistic. One such theory is that of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, or "flourishing," a normative conception involving an active life of reason and virtue (including courage, justice, friendliness and generosity). This conception of happiness does not merely involve a subjective feeling (for instance, a good mood or happy state of mind).

Although there are a large variety of Buddhisms, but we can extract an ideal type, Eudaimonia<sup>Buddha</sup>, which involves both subjective and objective elements:

- Subjective: A stable sense of serenity and contentment (Happiness<sup>Buddha</sup>).
- Objective: A form of Life that leads to Happiness<sup>Buddha</sup> via virtue and goodness, which are the product of wisdom, which is in turn achieved by meditation and mindfulness.

### **Non-Subjective Components of Happiness**

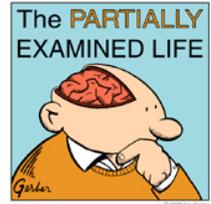
The meaning of Eudaimonia<sup>Buddha</sup> leads to a second problem facing any neuroscientific evaluation of Buddhism: not all of what constitutes Eudaimonia<sup>Buddha</sup> is in the head. Neuroscience can't address the (good/virtuous) events, happenings and doings (including critically, relationships to other people and acts of compassion) that are constitutive of eudaimonia. These objective elements not only cause Happiness<sup>Buddha</sup>, but are in some ways constitutive of it.

### **Scientific Precision**

#### Problems with Current Studies

There are currently no scientific studies that adequately connect happiness to Buddhism as a way of life. There are studies showing that Buddhist practitioners or meditators have synchronized global brain activity, autonomic nervous system control, a talent for face reading, and better than average mood (and here we have to beware of [Hawthorne effect](#)). One study showed that a mediating monk had unusually high activity in the left prefrontal cortex (LPFC), corresponding to positive mood; but a definitive study would require a sample of at least 40 monks who do better than a control population, and there is nothing to suggest that degree of LPFC activity corresponds to degree of happiness (and of course the LPFC has many other functions than positive emotion). Further, the same thoughts or emotions can be realized in different ways in different brains, and positive mood is not the same as happiness.

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## Problems in Principle

Measuring the effects of Buddhism on happiness requires operationalizing both concepts, which in turn requires that for different kinds of happiness, we establish the neural correlates of specific mental contents and (to whatever extent possible) their causes, including beliefs and states of mind (the wisdom part) and commitments to certain virtues (we have to do these things to distinguish, for example, the happy hedonist from the happy Buddhist). But currently neurophenomenology (which correlates mental states and brain states) is not advanced enough to establish the neural correlates of specific mental contents (and it may not ever be possible to fully establish correlates for their causes).

Further, we expect that even happy people will experience distress and non-blissful periods – our measurements can capture just a small period in someone's life. We can also expect different degrees of happiness and flourishing depending on how far along a practitioner is in developing virtue and wisdom.

Consequently, it is misguided to look for a single type of brain state across all traditions that promise some form of happiness; in order to know what they are looking for, neuroscientists need a specific understanding of the tradition to be investigated and what it promises.

## **Buddhist Epistemology and Science**

*Against luminous consciousness and untame karma.*

Flanagan advocates neurophysicalism and subjective Realism (a rejection of epiphenomenalism, in which mental states have neural correlates but lack causal efficacy): For mental events to be causally efficacious, they must be identical to neural events. Third person and first person accounts each capture different aspects of the same real phenomenon: "Consciousness just makes too much noise not to be doing anything at all." (Note that a failure to close the hard explanatory gap between the subjective and the neuronal – to say why a particular kind of neuronal activity leads to a particular feeling – means that epiphenomenalism holds).

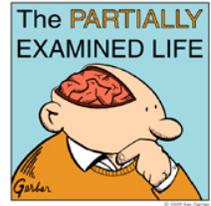
Regardless of one's theory of consciousness, all mental states must have neural correlates: Flanagan argues against the Dalai Lama's notion that there is such a thing as "luminous consciousness" without neuronal correlates (which is motivated by the idea that for mental states to be entirely wholesome they must be divorced from the body and materiality).

He also argues for a tame version of karmic causation, which amounts to the fact that the purposeful acts of sentient beings have abundant effects.

## **Part II: Buddhism as a Natural Philosophy**

### **An Outline of Buddhism**

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Buddhism is meant to be a solution to the fact that “everything is suffering” (the First Noble Truth). Which is not to say that we are always in pain, but that pain is frequent and our desires outstrip our desiring nature; desire overreaches and asks for more than the world can give (Second Noble Truth). (Further, we change before we get what we want, so the one who gets something wanted is not the original one who wanted it; and we make mistakes about what we want, and when we get it don’t get to keep it for very long, or don’t get enough). Because we can’t resolve this problem by controlling circumstances, the goal of Buddhism is to modify our desire (Third Noble Truth). Modification of desire involves ridding it of three poisons that infect our desire:

- False belief/delusion (moha)
- Thirst/avarice (raga)
- Covetousness/anger/resentment (dosa)

The [Abhidhamma](#) (an ancient Buddhist text) gives a detailed phenomenology of various types of specific mental affliction that derive from “six main” mental afflictions, including craving, anger, pridefulness, delusion, afflictive doubt, and afflictive views. This phenomenology is a depth psychology and ethics, categorizing mental states as wholesome or unwholesome and by object, phenomenal feel, proximate cause, and function.

The antidote to these afflictive mental states (Fourth Noble Truth) is virtue, which we get from wisdom, which comes from meditation and mindfulness:

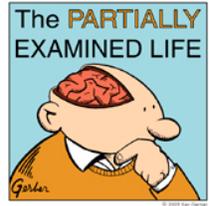
- Meditation/Mindfulness (samadhi): Right effort/resolve (accomplish what is good without lust, avarice, and ill will), mindfulness and concentration: a more embodied, less cognitive form of self-knowledge that includes vigilance against unwholesome attachments. →
- Enlightenment (bodhi)/Wisdom (prajna): right view, right intention. →
- Virtue (sila, karuna): Right speech (truth telling without gossiping), action (no killing, sexual misconduct or intoxicants) and livelihood (work that does not harm sentient beings); and the four abodes. (→ Flourishing, Happiness, an end to suffering)

*Flanagan’s interpretation of mindfulness and meditation:* “Buddhist mindfulness is less dialogical in process than Socratic self-knowledge, less concerned with epistemic justification of belief, and more concerned with the intrapersonal regulation and attunement of psychic factors that motivate one’s Dasein, one’s being-in-the-world, to produce the effects, both intra- and interpersonal, that it produces.” And meditation involves, for instance, dealing with lust by imagining the object of lust old or dead; or tuning one’s compassion by pitting one’s loving side against one’s selfish side (Flanagan notes that it seems like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with a depth-psychological twist).

Wisdom consists of deeply absorbed (intellectually and meditatively) knowledge of:

- Impermanence (anicca): all things are impermanent.

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- Dependent origination (prat tyasamutp da): everything is caused to happen by prior events and processes that will yield other events and processes; everything is in flux.
- No-self (anatman): there is no metaphysical ego or soul – I am among the impermanent things.
- Emptiness (sunyata – in Mahayana Buddhism): everything is decomposable into components, and this never bottoms out; nothing has an essence.

Virtue involves a character that embodies the four “illimitables” or “divine abodes”:

- Compassion (karuna) – end suffering of others.
- Lovingkindness (metta; maitri) – bring happiness to others.
- Appreciative/Sympathetic joy (mudita) – joy at good fortune of others.
- Equanimity (upekkha; upeksha) – more than personal serenity; feeling impartially about well-being of others. Equal care.

Virtue leads in turn to flourishing.

Buddhism also includes the concepts of nirvana and rebirth, for which Flanagan thinks there are tame (naturalistic) interpretations.

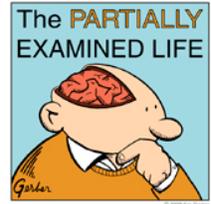
## **No-Self Does not Mean No-Person**

There seems to be some conflict between the idea that there is no self and a eudaimonistic theory that depends on persons who possess character and virtues. Flanagan argues that there are persons in Buddhism; it's just that they refer to a conventionally useful pattern that is not ultimate or really real (as in immortal souls or transcendental metaphysical egos). He argues that this notion is consistent with Locke's consciousness criterion of personal identity (psychological continuity grounds us, not a metaphysical ego) and the contemporary analytic concept of person.

While there are no such things as metaphysical egos, there are such things as persons with character traits and virtues. Buddhism requires it: “A virtue is a disposition {to perceive, to feel, to think, to judge, to act} in a way that is appropriate to the situation.” These virtues instantiated neurally, in the same way that solubility is instantiated in sugar chemically. A virtue is not to be reified as a thing, but it is a real and reliable pattern among relata – a habit with certain activating conditions. Reality is full of such non-substantial things. (Virtues also have phenomenal aspects, as in being inclined to rescue a child from a well, so character traits are not merely useful summary statements of behavioral tendencies). If we take the view that Buddhism advocates a more radical view of the no-self doctrine, this is an argument for a more Aristotelian middle ground that embraces character.

## **The Connection between No-Self and Virtue**

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What is it about the realization that there is no self that is supposed to motivate us to be compassionate, and thereby flourish? Why isn't this knowledge motivationally inert? Or why couldn't it motivate hedonism? (For Plato, the Good motivates by activating Eros).

The doctrine of no-self is meant to alleviate suffering by helping us let go of bad experiences and accept the passing of good experiences. Egoism in the form of acquisitiveness is the main cause of suffering, and realizing there is no self is meant to help alleviate it: it is the "best psychological environment to let go of unhealthy craving." Resentments, for instance, treat something past as if it were still in the present, and use memory in an attempt to defeat time. To hold onto a resentment is to "try to work myself into something that I cannot be, a selfsame ego that can continue to hold in place now what is no longer there. What is it that is no longer there? Two things: the experience that I clutch and the self that had the experience." And the things I want won't lead to lasting happiness because I change before I get them; ridding myself of this expectation will lead to less frustration.

As egoism wanes, fellow-feeling takes precedent.

## **Virtue Ethics is Consistent with Other Ethical Theories**

Eudaimonistic theories do not stand in stark opposition to consequentialism and deontology, both of which rely on a single meta-virtue that inclines us to rationally test moral problems via the categorical imperative or principle of utility. These Enlightenment theories fail to pay enough attention to personal flourishing, but they are not inconsistent with virtue ethics – we can blend the theories (one might advocate eudaimonistic consequentialism with deontological constraints). While justificatory priority is a legitimate question, the rivalry is not between an agent-centered and impersonal good.

## **The Connection between Virtue and Happiness**

### **What is the Connection?**

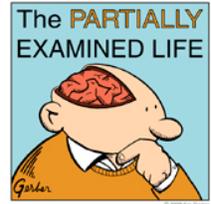
Some possibilities in order of increasing sophistication:

- AL: virtue is necessary and normally sufficient for happiness.
- AL': true virtue and only true virtue produces true happiness.
- AL'': virtue is the usual but not necessary cause of happiness; b) only happiness caused by virtue is wholesome (this is a normative exclusion – which we can argue for by talking about desert or the priority of epistemic norms (commitment to truth) – and it helps us deal with a hypothetical in which someone is made happy by a magic pill).

### **Comparing and Contrasting Aristotelianism to Buddhism's Therapy of Desire and Delusion**

Buddhism (like post-Aristotelianism, including Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Stoicism) differs from Aristotelian and Platonic accounts of virtue. For Plato, reason is a charioteer that must reign in appetite and tame the irrational; Aristotle's practical reason serves a similar function, leading to habituation if

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one is well socialized to begin with. The approach in Buddhism is more therapeutic: wisdom is meant to break the grip of selfishness. Buddhism is also focused on the virtue of compassion, which Aristotle neglects (whereas Aristotle focuses on justice, which Buddhism neglects).

“Aristotle was insufficiently attentive to the way certain destructive states of mind, like greed and avarice, cause suffering and bad actions, but are nonetheless subject to voluntary control.” In other words, Aristotle’s theory assumes too much: is not remedial enough. More than good socialization is required to eliminate the negative desires from which most of us suffer: mindfulness and the expansion of compassion are required. And one has to do more than get rid of a conscious belief: long standing unconscious emotional attitudes and tendencies are at stake. Thus techniques *de soi* are required, not just arguments, in order to adjust the economy of desire.

Despite his lack of emphasis on compassion and therapy, Aristotle’s *Poetics* makes clear that he thought there are techniques beyond rational argument to assist flourishing – as in identification with characters in plays and resulting catharsis. For Aristotle, there is a division of labor between practices that work on emotional economy (purge the negative) and those that cultivate virtue (habituation). Buddhism blends these more closely: philosophical ideas are mixed with parable. As in the Mustard Seed parable, in which a protagonist learns to grieve by seeing death as a law common to mankind rather than a particular blow to herself, as something that singles her out uniquely. She overcomes loss by having her compassion activated.

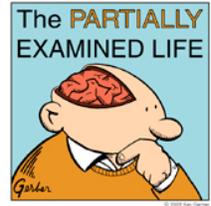
## How Happiness Differs Between Various Moral Theories

Ultimately, the kind of happiness that accrues from each theory is different: “The happiness that accrues from virtue<sup>Aristotle</sup> differs in degree and possibly in stability, since ordinary human luck can undermine it, but not in kind, from the sort of good feelings one has in friendship, in familial love, perhaps in good citizenship.” But Buddhist enlightenment seems to differ in kind from more mundane happiness, including what comes from familial and friendly bonds.

Both of these theories differ from liberal commonsense morality, which says that each person determines their own good within broad constraints and prohibitions (liberal morality tells us we can’t interfere with the freedom of others to pursue their happiness). It is cautious about a shared, communal conception of the good life. But this leads to a default shared conception of the good life as involving what every ancient tradition rejects: wealth, status, and superficial romance. It does not advertise that true virtue is a necessary condition of happiness; rather, liberal virtues are for sake of an environment amenable to the pursuit of individual happiness. It is weaker and less demanding than eudaimonistic theories, and posits a weaker connection between virtue and happiness; it’s possible that it’s more realistic.

## The Importance of our Social Nature

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We might worry that the kind of civilizing therapy called for in Buddhism will lead inevitably to discontent (from repression). But not if we think that fellow-feeling and compassion are as rooted in our nature as the three poisons. Virtue then involves “the amplification of our social nature, an innately attractive and pleasing aspect of ourselves in social relations, which becomes ever more pleasant the more fully it blossoms.” And: “Thanks to a certain directionality in our nature, developing and then expressing a well-formed, virtuous character leads to feelings of contentment. Excellent social relations are a source of happiness.” Happiness then is not just a feeling state but involves cognitive content, ascriptions such as “I am a good person.” Each moral tradition will try to create reliable dependency relations between happiness and being good. So the magic pill cases lack the correct self-ascription of goodness.

## **Buddhism is Doable**

Is Buddhism too demanding in its call for universal love? No: it calls for compassion towards others, not the same kind of love that we reserve for family and friends. We ought to believe that everyone deserves to be free of suffering and deserves happiness.

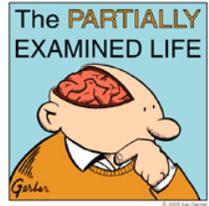
## **From the Postscript**

“I do not doubt that Buddhism is a decent and defensible form of life. But I have expressed reasons for skepticism of the claims that it is the right choice if you want flourish, be happy, and the like, and, furthermore, that neuroscience has shown, is in the process of showing, or even could in principle show that this is so. First, there are problems defining and measuring happiness. Big problems. Second, there are problems with neuroscience claiming that it can measure human flourishing in the robust philosophical sense(s) of flourishing by looking at brains.” Not that materialism false; flourishing not just in the head.

“Buddhism, I claim, should be of interest to philosophers because it offers a metaphysics that accepts the wisdom of impermanence, no self, the ubiquity of causation, and emptiness, an epistemology that is empiricist, and an ethics that prizes compassion— all of which have some plausibility—and because it claims that there are logical connections between these three.”

“Buddhist ethics? There are three things that cause me hesitancy. First, Buddhist ethics overrates the virtue of compassion and undervalues justice as fairness. Second, many Western Buddhists I know are not very nice, both more passive-aggressive and more narcissistic than other types I prefer. This may have nothing to do with Buddhism but mainly with the nature of American spiritual seekers; even so, it concerns me. Third, I still do not see, despite trying to see for many years, why understanding the impermanence of everything including myself makes a life of maximal compassion more rational than a life of hedonism.”

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“My own way of dealing with this problem is to be and live as a platonic hedonist, to try to maximize pleasures at the places where what is true and beautiful and good intersect. The comfort associated with living in this space, insofar as there is any, comes from thinking that no answer is the right answer to the question of how one ought to live. Thinking this is compatible with thinking that there is much worthwhile in the wisdom of the ages, including Buddhism.”

“Some will say that platonic hedonism is a form of liberal ironism, and that liberal ironism is the form of life favored among modern cosmopolitans who live their lives at the intersection of many traditions. This seems right.”