

The Case of the Missing Self or Help! I can't find my Soul

The air is crisp, Jack is bundled in a heavy parka. There is still a two hour wait, but it is worth it. The SL's or Self-Less people are an exalted group. The procedure is expensive, that is the only thing that is officially known about it.

The first SL's became possible 92 years ago. The first world currency, the Unity Dollar, was plummeting in value. All twelve world zones had implemented martial law to restore order. When the Mars colony cut communication and trade the United Republic of the World sent a fleet to restore communication and trade, but the fleet was never heard from again.

It was the next month that the procedure was announced. Several facilities were opened in each of the twelve zones. The first SL's were conscripted from the owner class. Becoming an SL was promoted as a spiritual conquest, endorsed by the United Religious Order, and as a boon to the economy by the United Republic. The owner would enter with a self, but exit as a new entity, completely transformed, and their ownings would transfer to the United Republic to hold in trust for the worker class.

The first phase encountered resistance the world over, but it was carried through. The names of the first SL's became legend, their immediate family members were transitioned to leisure facilities and made part of the leisure class, celebrations were held to honor the SL's, and by the next phase people were volunteering.

Ninety-two years later, Jack is one of those volunteers. He had saved up for over four decades. Now it was Jack's time. Over three hours of waiting in a line outside of the building, finally he had made it into the building. He was nervous, but soon his self would be removed, and he would join the ranks of the Self-Less.

Hume could look within himself and find thoughts, and feelings, and perceptions, but he could not find his self. What exactly was Hume searching for? In comparing it to thoughts, feelings, and perceptions it seems that Hume would like to find an observable internal sensation, but is that how we define self? Is Hume unable to find his self because it is not there to be found? How does this relate to the idea of a soul?

David was a young explorer who lived in a cabin. He read a magnificent book on the wonders of the forest. The forest is vibrant, and alive, and to explore the forest makes one feel alive.

David set out to find his forest. He noticed a very curious squirrel. He watched the squirrel run along the ground and leap among the canopy. The squirrel is very intriguing, but eventually David decided that the squirrel is not his forest. Next, David noticed a bird. The bird soared through the air. Witnessing the grace of the bird was amazing, but eventually David decided that the bird is also not his forest.

At this point David was frustrated, he had been told that he had a forest, and he had read how amazing the experience of the forest was. He noticed a tree, this is very interesting, and he decided to inspect it closely. He looked at the bark and the roots, he climbed the trunk and inspected the branches and the leaves. He looked around and saw many other trees, but a tree is not his forest.

Now, David headed home. He had finally concluded, after careful inspection and deliberation, that his forest does not exist. The people that had told him about his forest were obviously very confused, and the people that write about the forest are writing about a delusion.

David put another log onto the fire. He sat back into his chair, satisfied that he may be the only rational person in the world. How could people be so easily led to believe in something so obviously false as the “forest.”

I propose two ideas. The first is that the colloquial use of self denotes an abstract and fluctuating concept based on what the person identifies as being a part of their own entity through observation and experience. This is similar to how we define a forest.

A forest cannot be experienced as a single sensation, there are many sensations that are a part of a forest. When we communicate the concept of a forest to another person the variables are allowed to vary, to fluctuate, within the concept being communicated. We have the option to communicate specifics, but the word symbol forest omits these specifics. This process of forming concepts from perceptions by omitting specifics is the process of abstraction, and the reverse is reification. These two abilities comprise creativity.

Another aspect of concept formation brings up another issue with defining a forest. Where does the forest start and where does the forest end? What is a part of the forest and what is not? Are there trees outside of the forest? Which ones? Who decides? If a bird is originally from another forest and fly's into this forest, is he a part of this forest now? What about when he leaves? Is the edge of the forest defined by the trees or the grass? Does the edge of the forest get redefined when a tree is cut down or when a new one grows? Concepts change from person to person and also change with time and context.

Does this idea of the self have any bearing on the idea of a soul? Fred was beginning to doubt his information. He scanned around the room again. He saw no cameras. The agency had told him that there was a camera in the room, and at first he believed them.

Fred had been extremely vigilant for two weeks. He watched his computer screen like a hawk, he scanned and zoomed in on every area of the room. He had known it would be a hard camera to find, the agency only assigned him hard problems, but eventually he started to think that maybe the agencies intelligence had been wrong.

Even if the camera was extremely well hidden within something else he would have found it by now. Fred concluded his investigation and wrote a lengthy and well detailed report extolling the futility of looking for a non-existent camera, and his report was widely accepted throughout the agency.

Meanwhile, within the room, six year old Mary noticed that the teddy bear on her dresser had an odd glint in its eye. The look in the eye of that bear scared Mary, so she told her older brother Jason. Jason wasn't afraid of anything. He grabbed the bear off of its perch and ripped its head off. Inside of the bears head he found a hidden camera.

Is it possible that Hume, in his investigation and search for his self, found both the self and the soul? What is it that Hume was able to observe his thoughts, feelings, and perceptions with? If the soul is the distinguishing characteristic that separates sentient beings from their non-sentient surroundings, then the soul is the volitional direction of attention, the observer, awareness. When we are looking out from a place of observation, we observe not that which observes, but that which surrounds the observer.

I propose that not only did Hume find his self, but he utilized his soul in the discovery. His difficulty in defining his self is the same difficulty we encounter when defining any abstract concept, but this does not negate the existence of the category, nor its utility in relaying useful information between persons. He also utilized choice in directing his attention within to carryout his search. For millennia people have debated, argued, and fought either for or against both the self and the soul. With a better definition and a better understanding of each we may find that we can move forward, and together we can surmount ever greater perplexities of the human condition.