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Authenticity without Essence: A Buddhist-Cognitive Critique of the 'True Self' in Spiritual Identity

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a 'true self' remains central to many contemporary spiritual narratives, often serving as a benchmark for authenticity and personal growth. However, this notion typically rests on essentialist assumptions that are increasingly challenged by both Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science. Drawing on the Buddhist doctrine of anattā (non-self) and empirical research on the constructed nature of identity, this article critiques the metaphysical idea of a stable, discoverable self. It argues that authenticity is better understood as a dynamic, relational, and ethically responsive process rather than a return to an inner essence. Through comparative analysis of Western philosophical models, postmodern critiques, and cognitive psychology, the paper demonstrates how identity is shaped by impermanence, interdependence, and contextual factors, and how essentialist assumptions persist despite substantial philosophic and scientific challenges. The article proposes a Buddhist-Cognitive (realist) model of authenticity grounded in impermanence, interdependence, and ethical engagement, extending the original critique by showing how descriptive findings from cognitive science can inform normative claims about spiritual practice and psychological well-being. This model reframes authenticity as a practice of ethical engagement and psychological coherence within a fluid and evolving self-system. By rejecting metaphysical permanence and embracing relational emergence, the article contributes to a pluralistic understanding of authenticity that is both philosophically rigorous and practically applicable in contemporary spiritual and psychological discourse.

Keywords: Authenticity; Non-Self (Anattā); Essentialism; Non-Essentialism; Identity; Cognitive Science; Processual Selfhood; Buddhist-Cognitive Model

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1. Introduction

The search for authenticity is a defining feature of modern spiritual life. Whether in mindfulness retreats, personal transformation narratives, or broader spiritual discourse, individuals are often encouraged to "find their true self." Yet this notion, while intuitively appealing, rests on philosophical assumptions that merit scrutiny. Specifically, it reflects an essentialist view: the belief that each person possesses a fixed, inner essence that defines their true identity[1]. This paper explores the tension between such essentialist assumptions and a realist perspective, which understands identity as contextually emergent, relational, and shaped by ethical engagement[2]. Drawing on Buddhist anattā (non-self) and cognitive science, I propose a model of authenticity that moves beyond the search for an inner essence and instead embraces the dynamic, co-constructed nature of the self[3]. It adopts a realist orientation, with a philosophical and practical stance that affirms the possibility of meaningful, grounded engagement with reality, without relying on metaphysical essentialism.

The proposed framework adopts a realist orientation, affirming the possibility of meaningful engagement with reality without recourse to metaphysical permanence. Unlike naturalism or radical constructivism, realism here refers to a stance that treats ethical and psychological processes as real and actionable, even while rejecting the notion of an inherent self. This orientation enables an integration of Buddhist insights on impermanence and non-self with cognitive science's account of the constructed nature of identity, offering a model that is both philosophically rigorous and practically applicable.

The argument unfolds in five stages: 1) *Buddhist Foundations*—Anattā and related doctrines as a critique of essentialist identity, 2) *Cognitive Science*—Mechanisms of self-construction and their implications for non-essentialism, 3) *Western Essentialism*—Historical and transitional models that sustain the "true self" narrative, 4) *Synthesis*—A realist Buddhist-Cognitive model of authenticity, structured around non-essentialist, processual, relational, and ethical dimensions, and 5) *Applications*—Practical implications for contemplative practice, education, and clinical psychology.

This architecture makes explicit the premises (essentialist assumptions in spiritual discourse), the inferences (from Buddhist and cognitive critiques), and the scope (a model of authenticity as ethical engagement within a fluid self-system).

2. Buddhist Critique: Anattā and the Fluid Self

For the purposes of our discussion, the Buddhist path can be understood as both a philosophical and psychological undertaking that challenges the very premise of an essential self (note that Buddhism does not separate philosophy from psychology in the way Western traditions often do). Philosophically, Buddhism offers a radical rethinking of existence through doctrines such as anattā (non-self), anicca (impermanence), and paṭicca-samuppāda (dependent origination). These teachings dismantle the metaphysical assumption of a fixed identity, proposing instead that all phenomena, including what we call the "self," arise contingently through interdependent causes and conditions. This view aligns with contemporary cognitive theories that reject the notion of a core self in favour of a distributed, emergent model of identity, shaped by memory, perception, affect, and social context.

A note on anattā (non-self): Buddhism rejects the notion of an eternal, unchanging self. The doctrine of anattā asserts that what we call "self" is a conventional designation for a dynamic process of five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness)[3]. There is no metaphysical essence or soul that persists beyond these processes. Key features include: (1) ontological non-dualism: no permanent soul; body and mind are interdependent; (2) epistemological pragmatism: insight arises through direct experience and meditative inquiry; (3) self as process: identity is contingent, impermanent, and empty of inherent existence; (4) teleology: the goal is liberation from suffering through realization of emptiness and dependent origination[3].

It is important to distinguish the Buddhist doctrine of anattā from sociological or postmodern notions of de-essentialisation. While the latter critiques fixed social identities, it often presupposes a subject who performs or negotiates these identities. In contrast, anattā denies any enduring self at all, ontologically and experientially, making it a more radical and transformative position.

At the same time, Buddhism functions as a deeply pragmatic psychology. It offers a detailed phenomenology of mental states and a systematic method for transforming consciousness. The Four Noble Truths, often seen as the foundation of Buddhist teaching, are not abstract metaphysical claims but therapeutic insights. The first truth identifies the ubiquity of suffering (dukkha) in conditioned existence. The second traces this suffering to attachment (taṇhā), which arises from ignorance and the mistaken belief in a permanent self. The third truth affirms that the cessation of suffering (nirodha) is possible, and the fourth prescribes the Noble Eightfold Path as the means to that end. This path includes ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, practices that cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and insight into the nature of reality.

Central to this psychological dimension is the doctrine of dependent origination, which describes how suffering and identity are constructed through a chain of causally linked mental and existential processes. Rather than positing a soul or essence, dependent origination reveals that what we take to be "self" is a dynamic interplay of conditions (contact, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness), none of which are independently existing or enduring. This insight is not merely theoretical; it is meant to be realized through meditative practice, leading to a direct, experiential understanding that liberates the mind from clinging and delusion.

By framing Buddhism as both a philosophy and a psychology, we can better appreciate its relevance to contemporary debates about authenticity. In contrast to Western models that often equate authenticity with discovering or expressing a "true self," the Buddhist path suggests that authenticity arises not from uncovering an essence, but from relinquishing the very illusion that such an essence exists. This view opens the possibility of a more fluid, process-oriented understanding of identity that is grounded in awareness, ethical responsiveness, and freedom from fixed narratives. In this way, Buddhist thought offers a powerful critique of essentialist models of spiritual identity, while also providing practical tools for cultivating a more liberated and compassionate way of being.

The doctrine of anattā (non-self) is so foundational to Buddhism that its refutation of a substantially real self recurs across centuries and traditions. Nagarjuna (2nd century, Indian philosopher, poet) expounded the view of shunyata (emptiness) which encompasses all aggregates, including the "self."

> Form is not the self, the Buddha taught,
> And self does not have form, nor dwell in form,
> While form dwells not in self. Thus you must see
> The four remaining aggregates are empty too [4] (Verse 49, p. 47).

One of the most influential early critiques of the self is Vasubandhu's *Refutation of the Theory of Self*, composed in the 4th–5th century. Duerlinger (2009) regards this work as a classic articulation of the Buddhist position, beginning with the argument that persons are not selves in any substantial sense [5].

Vasubandhu challenges the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of mind as an internal organ that collaborates with the soul to produce mental phenomena. He argues that positing a mind achieves little, as the connection between mind and soul remains unexplained. Furthermore, the notion of the soul as the true self is undermined by everyday experience: we do not behave as if we are souls, but rather mistakenly identify the aggregates as the self [6]. As Goodman (2009) notes, genuine liberation is only possible once all forms of self-belief are extinguished [6].

Another authoritative voice in this tradition is Chandrakirti, a 6th-century Indian philosopher whose *Madhyamakavatara* (*Introduction to the Middle Way*) is central to the Vajrayāna tradition of Tibetan Buddhism [7]. Using rigorous reasoning, Chandrakirti demonstrates that the personal self is not a concrete entity. Against the view that the self is distinct from the aggregates, Chandrakirti argues that a permanent, unborn self is logically incoherent:

> "Something unborn is like the child of a childless woman; it does not exist at all. For what has never come into being previously cannot possibly exist here and now. It is impossible to ascribe existence to what has never arisen" [7] (p. 284).

If the self were truly distinct from the aggregates, it should be apprehensible. Yet, in ordinary life, no such entity is perceived. The "I" is merely an imputed appearance based on the aggregates. Even animals exhibit self-clinging without any conceptual awareness of a self separate from the

aggregates.

Against the view that the self is identical with the aggregates, Chandrakirti refutes the idea that the self is either the aggregates themselves or their combination. The basis of ego-clinging is not a substantial entity. The self is neither the foundation nor the possessor of the aggregates; it is dependent upon them and thus lacks inherent existence.

Different schools, traditions, and systems of Buddhism present different philosophical positions on anattā. However, this is not merely for dialogical and philosophical consideration, but also psychological, where the philosophies can be subject to experiential examination in meditation, and lead to a pedagogical progression as advocated by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche[8].

2.1. Shravaka Approach (Hinayana)

- **Doctrinal Description**

The Śrāvaka approach emphasizes the emptiness of personal identity. A permanent, unitary, and independent self does not exist[5, 6]. Practitioners analyse the five aggregates (*skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness) to dismantle the illusion of self. Liberation from *saṃsāra* is achieved through realizing non-self (*anattā*). Nāgasena's chariot analogy illustrates this:

> "Just as the word 'chariot' is but a designation for axle, wheels, frame, and other parts, so 'person' is only a designation for the five aggregates. There is no permanent soul or self apart from these"[9].

This doctrinal foundation is central to early Buddhist thought and informs the path of ethical discipline and insight meditation (*vipassanā*).

- **Implications for Understanding Self and Authenticity**

The self is understood as a conceptual construct, not an enduring essence. Authenticity involves relinquishing egoic clinging and cultivating ethical discipline. This is not achieved through intellectual analysis alone but through meditative practice, systematic contemplation of impermanence and non-self. Authenticity becomes experiential freedom from identification, realized through insight meditation and ethical engagement rather than fidelity to an imagined core identity.

2.2. Cittamatra (Mind-Only) Approach

- **Doctrinal Description**

The Cittamātra, or Mind-Only, school focuses on the emptiness of external phenomena[10]. It posits that all experiences are manifestations of mind, and that external objects do not exist independently of mental perception. The self is not a fixed entity but a mental construct arising from habitual patterns and karmic seeds stored in the *ālaya-vijñāna* (storehouse consciousness)[10]. The illusion of a personal self emerges from the misidentification of these mental processes. Liberation involves recognizing that this self is not ultimately real, and that all appearances, including the self, are mind-only.

Importantly, while Cittamātra does not affirm a self in the conventional sense, it does allow for a continuity of consciousness that persists through rebirth and serves as the basis for spiritual transformation. This view is more phenomenological than ontological: it focuses on how the self appears and functions within experience, rather than asserting its existence or non-existence in absolute terms[11].

- **Implications for Understanding Self and Authenticity**

The self is reframed as a projection of consciousness, undermining essentialist notions of identity. Authenticity involves recognizing this mind-only nature and loosening attachment to appearances. Crucially, this insight is cultivated through meditative examination of the mind-stream and its projections, not through conceptual reasoning alone. Authenticity becomes a dynamic process of cognitive clarity and ethical responsiveness, grounded in experiential realization of mind-only reality[10].

2.3. Svatantrika-Madhyamaka Approach

- **Doctrinal Description**

The Svatantrika-Madhyamaka approach asserts the emptiness of inherent existence using autonomous reasoning (*svatantra*), a method articulated by Bhāviveka in the Madhyamakahrdaya[12]. While phenomena are understood

to lack inherent existence, they can still be conventionally described and analyzed. What sets Svatantrika apart is its use of autonomous reasoning to establish philosophical positions, unlike the Prasangika school, which avoids making any assertions and relies solely on reductio arguments. Svatantrika philosophers argue that while phenomena, including the self, do not exist inherently, they do exist conventionally and can be described and analyzed within the framework of relative truth[12, 13]. In terms of the self, Svatantrika would argue:

- The personal self is not a substantially real entity.
- It is a dependently arisen phenomenon, designated upon the aggregates.
- While it does not exist ultimately, it functions conventionally and can be the basis for ethical responsibility, karmic continuity, and spiritual practice.

This approach allows for a more structured philosophical discourse, especially in debates with non-Buddhist schools that affirm a real self, such as Nyāya or Vaiśeṣika. Svatantrika thus serves as a bridge between rigorous Madhyamaka deconstruction and practical engagement with conventional reality.

- **Implications for Understanding Self and Authenticity**

Authenticity is not grounded in metaphysical permanence but in pragmatic coherence. It involves living ethically within conventional reality while realizing its emptiness. This is cultivated through analytical meditation on dependent origination and emptiness, leading to experiential insight beyond conceptual elaboration. Authenticity thus becomes relational and context-sensitive, realized through practice rather than abstract theory.

2.4. Prasangika-Madhyamaka (Rangtong) Approach

- **Doctrinal Description**

The Prasangika-Madhyamaka school takes a more radical stance by denying inherent existence without asserting any philosophical position of its own. It maintains that all phenomena, even those conventionally accepted, are empty of inherent existence. This approach uses consequential reasoning (*prasanga*) to deconstruct all views, exposing contradictions in any claim to intrinsic reality, a method emphasized by Candrakīrti in the Madhyamakāvatāra[14]. According to Prasangika-Madhyamaka, the self does not exist inherently, not as a soul, not as a mind, not even as a subtle continuity. This school applies the doctrine of śūnyatā universally: all phenomena, including the self, are empty of intrinsic nature[15]. What we conventionally call a "self" is merely a designation or imputation upon the five aggregates (skandhas). There is no core essence or substratum behind the label "I."

What distinguishes Prasangika from other Madhyamaka schools (like Svatantrika) is its method of reasoning. It does not assert any positive thesis about the nature of reality. Instead, it uses prasanga (consequential reasoning) to show that any attempt to posit an inherently existing self (or anything else) leads to logical contradictions. Even the idea of a conventionally real self is treated with caution: while the self functions in everyday life, it is understood to be entirely dependent on conceptual imputation and lacks even a shred of inherent existence.

In this view:

- The self is not identical to the aggregates, nor is it separate from them.
- It is not a possessor of the aggregates, nor a controller.
- It is a mere conceptual designation based on the interdependent functioning of the aggregates.

The goal of the Prasangika path is to realize this radical emptiness directly, without falling into either eternalism (believing in a real self) or nihilism (denying the functionality of conventional reality). This realization leads to the cessation of grasping, the root of suffering, and ultimately to full enlightenment. The aim is a direct, non-conceptual realization of emptiness, free from elaboration or assertion.

- **Implications for Understanding Self and Authenticity**

Authenticity cannot mean fidelity to a core self because no such self exists. It becomes radical openness: letting go of all views and cultivating direct, non-conceptual insight into emptiness. This is achieved through meditative absorption and ethical responsiveness, not through intellectual debate alone. Authenticity is reframed as freedom from concep-

tual fixation, realized in lived experience and compassionate engagement.

2.5. Shentong (Other-Emptiness) Approach

- **Doctrinal Description**

The Shentong, or Other-Emptiness, approach offers a unique perspective by asserting that ultimate reality is empty of relative phenomena but not of its own nature, a view articulated by Dolpopa in the Mountain Doctrine[16]. It emphasizes the luminous, non-dual nature of mind, often referred to as Buddha-nature, as a real and unconditioned presence. In terms of the self, Shentong does not affirm a personal, independent self in the conventional sense. It agrees with the broader Buddhist rejection of a permanent, unitary self (anattā). However, it diverges from more radical Madhyamaka views by asserting that the ultimate nature of mind, the substratum of the mindstream, is real and inherently pure, not merely a conceptual construct[17]. This substratum is not the ego-self but rather the innate wisdom or buddha-nature that becomes fully manifest upon enlightenment.

Thus, Shentong's view of self is nuanced: it rejects the conventional self as illusory and conditioned, while affirming an ultimate, non-dual awareness that is not empty of its own enlightened qualities. This view is often described as more conducive to meditative realization than purely philosophical analysis, and it emphasizes direct experience of the mind's luminous nature over conceptual deconstruction. The progression from Śrāvaka to Shentong reflects a shift from conceptual analysis to direct realization, reinforcing the dynamic nature of authenticity.

- **Implications for Understanding Self and Authenticity**

Meditation in this tradition involves direct experience of the mind's radiant clarity, beyond conceptual thought. The goal is to realize this innate wisdom, which is not empty of itself but free from all transient appearances. Authenticity is not about affirming a personal essence but resting in luminous awareness. It becomes a practice of realizing Buddha-nature through meditative absorption and ethical compassion. Authenticity is experiential openness, grounded in the recognition of mind's innate clarity rather than identity-based coherence.

As noted earlier these arguments are not just philosophical, they are also psychological and offer a pedagogical method of experiential insight. Moreover, the goal is not to reify any particular Buddhist philosophy as that would be counterproductive. Instead, as Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche details in *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*[8], they offer a structured path through the five philosophical approaches to emptiness, each corresponding to a different level of meditative insight and conceptual sophistication. These stages are not merely historical schools but are presented as progressive meditative views that help practitioners deepen their understanding of emptiness. The progression is designed as a gradual unfolding of insight, moving from simpler, more dualistic understandings of emptiness toward subtler, non-conceptual realizations. Each stage builds upon the previous one, refining the meditator's view and deepening their experiential understanding. The purpose is pedagogical and experiential: to guide practitioners from basic conceptual frameworks toward direct realization of emptiness and ultimately, the nature of mind. It is a meditative path that helps dismantle progressively subtler forms of clinging and conceptual elaboration.

The progression works by starting with what is most accessible: the illusion of a personal self (Shravaka), and from there challenge the reality of external objects, (Cittamatra). The analysis is then refined using logic to deconstruct inherent existence (Svatantrika). To go deeper all conceptual positions are abandoned (Prasangika). Finally, rest in direct experience: the luminous nature of mind (Shentong). In this way each stage: refines the view of what emptiness means, reduces conceptual grasping, and prepares the mind for deeper meditative absorption. Given its experiential and developmental structure, this progression offers an ideal framework for cultivating authenticity as a dynamic and evolving process. **Table 1** synthesizes the doctrinal foundations, practical implications for authenticity, and the progressive meditative trajectory across five major Buddhist schools, illustrating how each stage deepens insight into emptiness and informs authentic practice. This integrated view is critical because it demonstrates that authenticity, within a Buddhist framework, is not a static ideal but an evolving practice, progressively refined through doctrinal insight, ethical responsiveness, and meditative realization.

Table 1. Doctrinal Foundations, Practical Implications for Authenticity, and Progressive Meditative Stages across Five Buddhist Schools [8].

School/Stage	Doctrinal Description (with References)	Implications for Self and Authenticity (with Practice Context)	Purpose and Progression in Meditation
Śrāvaka (Hinayana)	Emphasizes emptiness of personal identity; no permanent self. Analysis of five aggregates (*skandhas*). Nāgasena's chariot analogy illustrates conceptual designation [6–9].	Self as a conceptual construct; authenticity as freedom from identification. Realized through insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and ethical discipline, not intellectual analysis alone.	Break identification with a permanent self; cultivate detachment from ego.
Cittamātra (Mind-Only)	All phenomena are mind-only (*vijñaptimātra*). External objects lack independent existence; appearances arise from karmic seeds in *ālaya-vijñāna*. Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* outlines three natures: imagined, dependent, perfected [10, 11].	Self as a mental construct; authenticity as cognitive clarity and ethical responsiveness. Cultivated through meditative examination of the mind-stream, not conceptual reasoning alone.	Undermine belief in external reality; deepen introspective awareness.
Svātantrika-Madhyamaka	Uses autonomous reasoning (*svatantra*) to assert emptiness of inherent existence while affirming conventional reality. Bhāviveka's syllogistic logic analyzes the two truths [12, 13].	Authenticity as relational and context-sensitive. Realized through analytical meditation on dependent origination and emptiness, leading to experiential insight beyond theory.	Use reasoning to dismantle subtle conceptual clinging to inherent existence.
Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka (Rangtong)	Denies inherent existence without asserting a positive thesis. Candrakīrti uses consequential reasoning (*prasaṅga*) to dismantle all views [14, 15].	Authenticity as radical openness: freedom from conceptual fixation. Achieved through meditative absorption and ethical responsiveness, not debate alone.	Let go of all views; cultivate direct, non-conceptual insight into emptiness.
Shentong (Other-Emptiness)	Ultimate reality is empty of relative phenomena but not of its own nature. Dolpopa affirms luminous Buddha-nature as real and unconditioned [16, 17].	Authenticity as experiential openness: resting in luminous awareness. Realized through meditative absorption and ethical compassion.	Rest in the luminous, non-dual nature of mind; stabilize realization of Buddha-nature.

Note: The stages are presented in a progressive sequence, moving from analysis of personal identity to realization of luminous awareness.

3. From Essence to Emergence

Because this article integrates empirical findings from cognitive science with normative claims drawn from Buddhist philosophy, it is important to distinguish descriptive from normative inferences. Descriptive claims report what is observed in scientific research (e.g., neural mechanisms of self-referential processing), while normative claims articulate what ought to be pursued in ethical or spiritual practice (e.g., authenticity as openness and compassion). To avoid the is–ought gap identified by Hume [18, 19], the argument makes explicit the inferential steps that bridge empirical observations and ethical recommendations [20]. These steps include: (1) stating the descriptive premise, (2) introducing the normative premise, (3) explaining the inferential link, and (4) drawing the normative conclusion. This structure ensures that empirical data do not dictate values but inform them within a coherent philosophical framework.

Both cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy converge on a processual view of selfhood: identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing, contingent pattern of interactions and updates.

Descriptive premise: Cognitive psychology and neuroscience investigate the self as an emergent phenomenon, constructed through memory, perception, attention, and social interaction.

Normative premise: The Buddhist-Cognitive model treats authenticity as openness, ethical responsiveness, and freedom from rigid self-identification.

Inferential bridge: If empirical findings show that the self is constructed and impermanent, then ethical authenticity cannot be grounded in essence but must be enacted as a dynamic practice.

Normative conclusion: Therefore, authenticity should be cultivated as a relational and processual engagement rather than a return to a metaphysical core.

While empirical findings on DMN modulation, predictive coding, and agency support a processual view of selfhood, these results are subject to interpretive constraints. Effect sizes vary across studies, and alternative models (e.g., embodied enactivism, social constructivism) offer competing explanations. The inferential bridge proposed here is heuristic, not deterministic: it suggests ethical implications without claiming empirical proof. Future research should test hypotheses such as whether mindfulness-based interventions reliably enhance relational authenticity across diverse cultural contexts.

3.1. Mechanisms of Self-Construction

Cognitive science offers a compelling account of how the sense of self is constructed through dynamic and distributed processes in the brain. Rather than positing a fixed essence, this view emphasizes the integration of sensory, motor, and cognitive systems that give rise to self-experience. These mechanisms align with Buddhist philosophy, which also denies the existence of a permanent self and instead views identity as a fluid aggregation of impermanent processes.

One foundational mechanism is multimodal integration. The brain continuously synthesizes information from vision, proprioception, interoception, and touch to create a coherent body schema. This schema underlies our basic sense of being in and owning a body. Experiments such as the rubber hand illusion (believing it to be a part of your own body) demonstrate how easily this representation can be manipulated, revealing the constructed nature of bodily self-awareness[21].

Another key dimension is the narrative self, which emerges from autobiographical memory and internal dialogue. Through temporal continuity, remembering the past and anticipating the future, and reflective language use, individuals construct a story about who they are. This process is closely linked to activity in the default mode network (DMN), a set of brain regions active during self-referential thought and daydreaming[22]. Meta-analyses confirm that DMN connectivity underpins autobiographical memory, narrative identity, and mind-wandering, all of which contribute to the illusion of a coherent self[23–26]. Systematic reviews also show that meditation significantly modulates DMN activity, reducing self-referential processing and enhancing integration with attention networks[27–29]. It is important to make a note on neuroepistemology, as neural correlates of self-referential processing (e.g., DMN activity) indicate functional associations, not ontological evidence of a metaphysical self; correlation does not equal essence. These findings support a processual view of identity rather than reifying a fixed entity.

Predictive coding theories further illuminate the dynamic nature of selfhood. Rather than positing a metaphysical core, predictive coding models describe the brain as continuously updating its internal model of the self to minimize prediction error[30]. This aligns with Buddhist insights into impermanence and dependent origination: identity is not a static entity but a probabilistic construct shaped by ongoing interaction with the environment.

Agency and ownership, the sense of being an agent who initiates and controls actions, also arise from predictive processes. Reviews of motor prediction and error monitoring show that when predicted and actual sensory outcomes align, individuals experience agency; when mismatched, as in schizophrenia, agency collapses[31].

Cognitive science does not posit a metaphysical self; it models self-related processes as emergent and functional. Neural correlates indicate mechanisms underlying the *illusion* of self, not evidence of an inherent essence. This reductionist approach explains how the brain constructs a sense of identity without implying an ontological core. Together, these findings support the claim that authenticity cannot be grounded in a fixed essence. Instead, it emerges as a relational and ethical practice enacted within a fluid, neurocognitively distributed self-system. This empirical account resonates with Buddhist critiques of a controlling self, reframing agency as a contingent phenomenon rather than evidence of an enduring subject.

Social cognition also plays a vital role. The mechanisms we use to infer others' mental states, known as theory of mind, are also employed in self-reflection[32]. This recursive modelling helps us navigate social environments and maintain a stable identity, reinforcing the idea that self-understanding is deeply relational.

From a philosophical and cognitive science perspective, the self is best understood as a construct, a model the brain builds to organize experience and guide behaviour. Predictive coding theories support this view, suggesting that the

brain continuously updates its model of the world and the self to minimize prediction error[31]. This dynamic updating process mirrors the Buddhist insight into impermanence and the illusion of a fixed self.

In sum, cognitive science reveals the self as a product of integration, memory, agency, social cognition, and predictive modeling. These mechanisms do not point to a singular, unchanging self but to a flexible and adaptive system of self-specification. This empirical account resonates with Buddhist teachings on anattā (non-self), offering a bridge between scientific understanding and contemplative insight. First, both views regard the self as a construct. Cognitive science describes the self as a dynamic model created by the brain to organize experience, predict outcomes, and guide behavior. Similarly, Buddhism teaches that the self is an illusion (anattā), a temporary aggregation of five skandhas, form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In both frameworks, the self is not a permanent essence but a process or pattern.

Second, impermanence and continuity are central themes. Cognitive science shows that the sense of self is maintained through memory and narrative continuity, yet it is constantly updated. This resonates with the Buddhist doctrine of anicca, which holds that all phenomena, including the self, are impermanent. Clinging to a fixed self leads to dukkha, or suffering, a view echoed in psychological models of maladaptive self-concepts.

Third, the notion of agency and control is critically examined. In cognitive science, agency arises from motor prediction and error correction, and can be disrupted in conditions like schizophrenia. Buddhism, however, views the idea of a controlling self as a delusion. Actions arise from causes and conditions, not from a central agent, aligning with the principle of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda).

Fourth, both traditions emphasize the transformative power of meditation and self-observation. Neuroscience shows that meditation alters brain activity, particularly in the default mode network, reducing self-referential processing[29]. Buddhism teaches that meditation reveals the emptiness of self and cultivates insight into reality beyond egoic constructs. These findings suggest that meditation can dissolve rigid self-boundaries, supporting Buddhist goals of liberation.

Finally, both perspectives address suffering and liberation. Cognitive science links rigid or distorted self-models to psychological suffering, such as anxiety and depression. Buddhism posits that liberation (nirvāṇa) comes from seeing through the illusion of self and ending attachment. Mindfulness-based therapies, rooted in Buddhist practice, exemplify this convergence by promoting psychological well-being through non-attachment and present-moment awareness[33].

Together, these findings affirm a processual view of selfhood shared by cognitive science and Buddhism: identity is not a fixed essence but an evolving pattern of interdependent processes. Authenticity, therefore, is not discovered but enacted as a relational and ethical practice within this dynamic system.

Inferential Summary:

1. **Multimodal Integration**
   - *Descriptive premise:* Selfhood emerges from integrated sensory and motor processes; experiments like the rubber hand illusion show its constructed nature.
   - *Normative premise:* Authenticity in the Buddhist-Cognitive model values openness and non-attachment.
   - *Bridge:* If bodily identity is contingent, then authenticity should not be equated with fidelity to a fixed essence.
   - *Conclusion:* Practices that cultivate flexibility and mindfulness are ethically coherent.
2. **Default Mode Network (DMN) Activity**
   - *Descriptive premise:* Meditation reduces DMN activity, lowering self-referential processing.
   - *Normative premise:* Authenticity involves reducing egoic clinging and fostering ethical responsiveness.
   - *Bridge:* Lower DMN activity supports this ethical aim.
   - *Conclusion:* Mindfulness-based practices can be recommended as strategies for cultivating authenticity.
3. **Predictive Coding**
   - *Descriptive premise:* The brain continuously updates its self-model to minimize prediction error.
   - *Normative premise:* A dynamic, adaptive self

aligns with Buddhist principles of impermanence and interdependence.

- *Bridge:* If identity is probabilistic and context-sensitive, then ethical authenticity requires flexibility.
- *Conclusion:* Interventions that encourage adaptive self-modeling, such as meditation, are normatively justified.

3.2. Cognitive Science on Authenticity

Recent research in cognitive science challenges traditional notions of authenticity as the expression of a fixed 'true self.' Instead, authenticity is increasingly understood as a dynamic, context-sensitive experience rooted in psychological and neural processes. This shift reframes authenticity not as ontological discovery but as subjective coherence and adaptive functioning.

One key dimension of authenticity is the feeling of fluency. Individuals often report feeling authentic when their actions feel natural or 'just right.' This sense of ease does not require access to a true self but reflects a subjective alignment between behavior and internal states. It is a phenomenological marker of congruence rather than a metaphysical claim.

Traditional models of authenticity emphasize self-consistency: acting in accordance with one's values, self-accuracy, and being honest about one's traits. However, cognitive research reveals that people often engage in self-enhancement, perceiving their authentic self as more positive than it may objectively be. This suggests that authenticity is not purely objective but shaped by motivational and affective biases.

Cognitive science also supports a constructivist view of the self. Self-referential processing is distributed across a network of brain regions, including the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), hippocampus, and amygdala. These regions coordinate to integrate autobiographical memory, emotional salience, and social feedback, forming a coherent but flexible self-model. This self-model is shaped by cultural and social contexts. Research by Markus and Kitayama demonstrates that independent and interdependent cultures produce different self-concepts and emotional experiences [34]. Such findings affirm that selfhood is not universal but constructed through interaction with one's environment.

Autobiographical memory plays a central role in maintaining narrative identity. The brain synchronizes activity across the hippocampus, thalamus, and prefrontal areas during memory retrieval, showing that selfhood is constructed through dynamic memory integration. This process supports continuity while allowing for adaptation and change.

In sum, cognitive science presents authenticity as a psychological and neural phenomenon grounded in coherence, fluency, and contextual responsiveness. This view aligns with post-essentialist models and Buddhist philosophy, both of which reject the notion of a fixed self. Instead, authenticity emerges as a practice of alignment and ethical engagement within a fluid and relational self-system. Cognitive psychology supports the Buddhist view by revealing the self as a narrative and attentional construct. Research on memory, perception, and social cognition shows that our sense of self is shaped by context, expectation, and feedback. Hence, cognitive neuroscience supports the illusionist view of self, showing that self-referential processing is distributed across multiple brain regions rather than localized in a single "self-center" [35].

Moreover, psychological models such as Kernis and Goldman's multicomponent conceptualization of authenticity highlight the dynamic and socially embedded nature of selfhood [36]. Kernis and Goldman define authenticity as the "unimpeded operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise," comprising four interrelated components: awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation. While their framework assumes a dispositional core self, the operationalization of authenticity as a dynamic, context-sensitive process aligns with cognitive and Buddhist critiques of essentialism. In particular, the emphasis on awareness and relational orientation resonates with Buddhist mindfulness and ethical responsiveness, while unbiased processing parallels the Buddhist practice of non-attachment and clear seeing. Although the model retains a latent authenticity factor, its flexibility allows for integration with a realist account, one that views authenticity not as fidelity to a fixed essence, but as an evolving practice of congruence, responsiveness, and ethical engagement.

Inferential Summary

1. Authenticity as Psychological Coherence

- *Descriptive premise:* Research shows authenticity

is experienced as coherence and fluency, not as access to a metaphysical "true self."

- *Normative premise:* The Buddhist-Cognitive model defines authenticity as ethical responsiveness and relational attunement.
- *Bridge:* If authenticity correlates with adaptive functioning rather than essence, then ethical practice should emphasize openness and compassion.
- *Conclusion:* Authenticity ought to be cultivated as a dynamic process, not as fidelity to a fixed identity.

2. Kernis and Goldman's Multicomponent Model

- *Descriptive premise:* Empirical psychology operationalizes authenticity through awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation.
- *Normative premise:* These dimensions resonate with Buddhist ethics of mindfulness, non-attachment, and compassion.
- *Bridge:* If empirical models support relational and processual authenticity, then integrating these with Buddhist principles strengthens ethical practice.
- *Conclusion:* Authenticity should be reframed as an evolving, ethically engaged process rather than a return to essence.

3.3. Toward a Realist Account of Authenticity

A realist account of authenticity can incorporate Kernis and Goldman's components not as expressions of a metaphysical self, but as operational dimensions of ethical and psychological alignment. Awareness becomes the capacity for introspective clarity; unbiased processing reflects non-attachment and openness; behaviour signifies congruence with values; and relational orientation embodies compassion and interdependence. These elements, when viewed through a post-essentialist lens, support a model of authenticity grounded in responsiveness, impermanence, and relationality, core tenets of both cognitive science and Buddhist thought.

A realist approach to authenticity rejects the search for essence and embraces the evolving nature of self. In this view, authenticity is not about being true to a fixed identity but about engaging sincerely with one's context, values, and relationships. It is a practice of ethical responsiveness rather than ontological discovery. This perspective aligns with both Buddhist ethics and contemporary psychological models, offering a more sustainable and inclusive framework for spiritual development.

The myth of the "true self" continues to shape spiritual discourse, often in ways that obscure the complexity and fluidity of identity. By integrating Buddhist philosophy and cognitive psychology, we can move toward a more realistic and ethically grounded understanding of authenticity, one that honours the impermanence of self and the relational nature of spiritual life.

Inferential Summary

1. Constructed Nature of Selfhood

- *Descriptive premise:* Cognitive science demonstrates that selfhood is constructed and impermanent.
- *Normative premise:* Buddhist philosophy affirms that liberation and authenticity arise through ethical responsiveness, not essence.
- *Bridge:* If identity is contingent and relational, then authenticity cannot be defined as fidelity to a fixed core.
- *Conclusion:* Authenticity must be reconceptualized as a practice of ethical engagement rather than an ontological discovery.

2. Integration of Empirical and Normative Frameworks

- *Descriptive premise:* Empirical models show dynamic, distributed self-processes shaped by context.
- *Normative premise:* The Buddhist-Cognitive model values impermanence, compassion, and interdependence.
- *Bridge:* If empirical findings confirm fluidity, then ethical authenticity should emphasize relational and processual dimensions.
- *Conclusion:* A realist account integrates these insights to frame authenticity as dynamic engagement with context, values, and relationships.

4. The Western Roots of the 'True Self'

Essentialism, the belief that individuals possess an innate, immutable essence that defines who they truly are, continues to exert a powerful influence on contemporary understandings of authenticity and the "true self." This influence is especially evident in popular psychology, spiritual discourse, and identity politics, where the notion of "being true to oneself" is often framed as a process of uncovering or returning to a pre-existing, core identity[37, 38]. Such views implicitly rely on essentialist assumptions: that there is a stable, internal self that exists independently of context, culture, or relational dynamics. This belief fosters a reductive model of authenticity, one that equates personal growth with self-discovery rather than self-construction. It encourages individuals to seek coherence and consistency in their identities, often at the expense of embracing complexity, contradiction, or transformation[37, 39].

Moreover, essentialist ideas underpin many spiritual and therapeutic narratives that promise access to a "real" or "higher" self. These frameworks often obscure the contingent, performative, and socially embedded nature of identity, reinforcing the illusion of a singular, knowable essence[1, 38]. In contrast, Buddhist and cognitive perspectives challenge this essentialist paradigm. Both traditions emphasize the fluidity and interdependence of the self, viewing identity not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic process shaped by causes and conditions. From this standpoint, authenticity is not about uncovering a hidden essence but about cultivating awareness, ethical responsiveness, and psychological flexibility[7, 8].

By critically examining the essentialist foundations of popular ideas about the true self, we can begin to reframe authenticity as a practice of presence and relational attunement rather than a quest for inner purity or self-consistency. This shift opens space for more inclusive, adaptive, and liberating understandings of identity, ones that honour multiplicity, transformation, and the co-arising nature of selfhood[40, 41].

4.1. Philosophical Essentialism

Plato's conception of the "true self" rests on his metaphysical dualism and theory of the soul. In *The Republic* and *Phaedrus*, he describes the soul as tripartite: reason, spirit, and appetite. A person's essence lies in the integration of these faculties, with reason governing the whole. This structure reflects the soul's alignment with the eternal Forms, particularly the Form of the Good, the highest truth and value[42, 43].

Plato's epistemology reinforces this view. Genuine knowledge arises not from sensory experience but from the soul's recollection of the Forms known before incarnation. Philosophical inquiry is anamnesis, a recovery of innate knowledge. Authenticity involves aligning the rational soul with eternal truths through contemplation and ethical living[42, 43]. This framework rests on ontological and epistemological dualism. Plato distinguishes the immortal, rational soul from the perishable, desire-driven body. The soul is the true self; the body a temporary vessel. He posits two realms: the eternal, unchanging world of Forms, where essence resides, and the physical world of change and illusion. The soul's participation in the realm of Forms defines its essence; authenticity means living in accord with this higher reality[42, 43].

Plato's vision shaped early Christian thought through Neoplatonism. Augustine of Hippo adopted Plato's notion of the soul as immortal, rational, and oriented toward transcendent truth[44]. Encountering Platonic ideas via Latin translations and Neoplatonists like Plotinus and Porphyry, Augustine developed a theology of the soul's transcendence and relation to God[45].

Body–soul dualism became central to Christian anthropology, portraying the soul as an eternal essence striving to overcome bodily temptation and sin[46]. Plato's ascent toward the Form of the Good was reinterpreted as the soul's journey toward God, the ultimate source of truth and goodness[47]. Augustine acknowledged Platonic influence, remarking that "none are closer to us [Christians] than the Platonists," while critiquing their limits[48].

Plato's framework provided a foundation for doctrines of salvation, spiritual transformation, and immortality. Popular spiritual narratives echo this legacy, depicting the "true self" as eternal and discoverable through introspection or moral purification, reinforcing essentialist beliefs in a fixed inner core and obscuring the contingent, relational identity emphasized in Buddhist and cognitive perspectives.

Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" grounds selfhood in rational introspection. The cogito reveals a self independent of external validation, certain in thought, and shared by all

rational beings[49]. Despite relational tensions in the figure of the malin génie, Cartesian selfhood is typically read as essentialist: a thinking substance independent of body and world[49]. This model underpins modern notions of authenticity as autonomy and self-certainty. Popular psychology and self-help echo this, urging individuals to "find themselves" through introspection, a view sharply opposed to Buddhist notions of no-self and interdependence. Closer reading reveals relational dynamics within the cogito. Descartes' radical doubt, often seen as solipsistic, depends on relational imagination. The malin génie functions as a hypothetical interlocutor, forcing the cogito to emerge in opposition to deception[50]. The Cartesian self is not a static essence but a dialectical emergence shaped by tension and negation[50, 51].

Rousseau offers a contrasting account of inner essence, grounded in moral sentiment and natural goodness[52]. In *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, he argues humans are born good, peaceful, and compassionate. This natural disposition constitutes human essence, distorted by society. Rousseau distinguishes the natural self, authentic, shaped by compassion, from the social self, alienated by institutions promoting inequality and vanity. Vice arises not from nature but from corrupted *amour-propre*, self-love inflamed by comparison[53]. Authenticity involves returning to the natural self. Rousseau privileges moral sentiment over abstract rationality, claiming compassion and empathy as the true foundations of essence. This departs from Enlightenment rationalism and Plato's metaphysics[53]. His critique of rationalism contrasts sharply with Descartes, proposing a socially embedded, emotionally grounded self[54].

Rousseau's dualism is moral and developmental, not metaphysical. He contrasts natural goodness with social alienation; authenticity means resisting distortion and reclaiming innate moral sensibility[55]. His vision resonates in popular culture, where emotional sincerity and resistance to norms are celebrated. Wellness movements and self-help echo his belief in innate goodness corrupted by society. This view contrasts with Buddhism's *anattā* (non-self): Rousseau seeks to restore essence; Buddhism seeks to dissolve it. Rousseau's authenticity is restorative, grounded in sentiment; Buddhist authenticity is transformative, grounded in insight and ethical responsiveness. Both critique social conditioning but diverge in metaphysical assumptions about selfhood[56].

4.2. Psychological Essentialism

Maslow's theory of self-actualization is among the most influential psychological models of the "true self" in modern Western thought. At the top of his hierarchy of needs, self-actualization refers to realizing one's potential, creativity, and authenticity[57]. Maslow described self-actualizing individuals as growth-oriented, capable of peak experiences of insight, joy, and transcendence, and living with purpose[58]. Such individuals exhibit autonomy, creativity, spontaneity, and acceptance of self and others. They are problem-centered rather than ego-centered, maintain freshness of appreciation, and cultivate deep relationships[59]. These traits suggest authenticity as uncovering and expressing a pre-existing essence[60].

Maslow's model influenced education, therapy, leadership, and popular culture. Ideas like "being your best self" or "living your potential" echo his framework, reinforcing belief in an inherent, discoverable self[60]. While essentialist in assuming a core nature that is good and growth-oriented, Maslow's essentialism is humanistic, not metaphysical. He posits psychological potential, not an eternal soul.

Carl Rogers, another key figure in humanistic psychology, shares Maslow's emphasis on growth but frames it more fluidly. Rogers introduced the "organismic self," emerging when conditions of worth are removed, and congruence exists between self-concept and experience[61]. His person-centered therapy fosters unconditional positive regard, enabling clients to reconnect with an authentic self beneath social conditioning[62].

Maslow structured growth hierarchically; Rogers emphasized a client-led, experiential process[63]. Both assume an inner core that can be accessed and expressed, making their models essentialist. Authenticity is recovery, not construction, a return to natural psychological essence[64]. Rogers emphasized the actualizing tendency, a built-in drive toward growth and fulfillment[63]. He distinguished between real and ideal selves, viewing distress as incongruence between them. The real self is authentic and inherently positive; authenticity involves congruence with inner experience[61]. Like Maslow, Rogers' essentialism is experiential and psychological, not metaphysical[63].

These humanistic models contrast sharply with Buddhist critiques, which deny a permanent, discoverable self. In Buddhism, the self is a process of interdependent arising,

not a fixed entity[64]. From this perspective, Maslow and Rogers offer comforting but illusory narratives, reflecting the enduring appeal of the imagined self in Western culture[64].

Maslow's self-actualization and Rogers' organismic self exemplify psychological essentialism. Both portray authenticity as expressing an inner nature that is positive and growth-oriented. Popular culture widely adopts this view, promoting fulfilment through "being your best self" or "living your truth"[64]. While experiential rather than metaphysical, these models assume a stable, discoverable self beneath social conditioning, an orientation that contrasts with Buddhist and cognitive critiques, which view the self as dynamic and context-dependent[64].

4.3. The Enduring Hold of the Imagined Self

People seek coherence and continuity in their lives. The notion of a "true self" offers a stable anchor amid change, trauma, or confusion. It supports self-esteem and authenticity, helping individuals feel they are living in alignment with their values or inner nature. Therapeutic models, such as Carl Rogers' person-centred therapy, emphasize uncovering the "real self" beneath social conditioning. Christianity has historically reinforced this psychological appeal by positing the soul as the immortal essence of the person, created by God, capable of moral discernment, and destined for eternal communion with the divine. The Christian self is often portrayed as restless until it finds rest in God (Augustine), and authenticity involves aligning with divine will. Even secularized notions of "being true to oneself" often echo this metaphysical legacy, suggesting fidelity to a soul-like inner essence.

Western cultures, especially post-Enlightenment, emphasize individualism and personal freedom. The "true self" becomes a project, something to discover, express, and protect. Popular media, self-help literature, and social platforms reinforce the idea that fulfilment comes from "being yourself" or "finding your passion." Christianity also contributes to this narrative, particularly in Protestant traditions that emphasize personal relationship with God, individual conscience, and spiritual self-examination. The idea of a divinely ordained purpose or calling can merge with secular ideals of self-discovery, creating a hybrid model where authenticity means living in accordance with one's "God-given" nature or mission.

While this article critiques essentialist models of the self, it is important to acknowledge that essentialism remains a vital and evolving position in contemporary philosophy. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, for instance, defends a form of ethical essentialism grounded in human nature. Thinkers such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse argue that virtues are not arbitrary traits but dispositions that fulfill our *telos* as rational, social beings[65, 66]. In this framework, authenticity involves aligning one's character with the essential features of human flourishing: reason, emotion, and community. Although this model avoids metaphysical claims about the soul, it retains a normative essence that defines what it means to live well. This stands in contrast to the Buddhist-Cognitive model proposed here, which denies any fixed essence and instead emphasizes impermanence, relational emergence, and ethical responsiveness without recourse to a teleological human nature.

Personalist traditions offer another influential defence of essentialism, particularly in theological and idealist contexts. Personalism posits that the person is the fundamental category of reality, endowed with intrinsic dignity, moral agency, and continuity through time. Thinkers such as Borden Parker Bowne and Edgar Brightman argue that the self is not merely a social or neurological construct but a real, enduring subject[67, 68]. Even secular variants of personalism maintain that identity is more than a narrative; it is a bearer of moral worth and existential depth. This view sharply contrasts with Buddhist *anattā*, which sees the self as a conventional designation devoid of inherent existence. While the realist model of authenticity proposed here affirms ethical engagement and relational integrity, it resists the personalist assumption of a metaphysical or ontological core, instead treating identity as a dynamic and context-sensitive process[69].

While Western philosophical traditions have often grounded authenticity in a stable inner essence, such essentialist models are increasingly subject to critique. A diverse range of modern Western thinkers challenge the coherence of a fixed or discoverable self, offering instead alternative visions of identity as fluid, constructed, and contingent. These critiques intersect provocatively with Buddhist insights into impermanence and non-self, suggesting a shift from metaphysical substance to relational and processual understandings of selfhood. In what follows, we examine thinkers

who occupy transitional positions between essentialist and non-essentialist paradigms, as well as those who more fully embrace non-essentialism. Along the way, we remain attentive to how naïve essentialism can subtly reappear, even within frameworks that explicitly seek to dismantle it.

In sum, Western models of authenticity, from Platonic metaphysics to humanistic psychology, share an essentialist assumption: that identity is grounded in a stable inner core. While these frameworks differ in emphasis, rationality for Plato, moral sentiment for Rousseau, self-actualization for Maslow and Rogers, they converge on the belief that authenticity involves uncovering or expressing this essence. This contrasts sharply with the Buddhist-Cognitive view advanced here, which reframes authenticity as a dynamic, relational, and ethically enacted process rather than a return to metaphysical permanence.

4.4. Transitional Positions

Transitional thinkers occupy a pivotal space between classical essentialism and full non-essentialism, offering models that resist metaphysical permanence while retaining structural or normative dimensions of identity. They illustrate a spectrum: moving from substance-based accounts toward relational and processual frameworks, while grappling with ethical and existential concerns. These positions anticipate non-essentialist models but often retain residual structures that distinguish them from the radical emptiness of Buddhist anattā.

Søren Kierkegaard occupies a pivotal position in the history of Western thought on the self. While grounded in Christian theology, his existential writings mark a departure from classical essentialism. For Kierkegaard, the self is not a static essence but a task: something one must become through inwardness, despair, and faith [70–73]. His model retains a spiritual depth yet anticipates the relational and processual views of later existential and postmodern thinkers. As such, Kierkegaard serves as a bridge between essentialist and non-essentialist paradigms, opening the way for a rethinking of authenticity as existential rather than metaphysical [70, 74].

Kierkegaard's conception of the self is rooted in existential and theological reflection. He rejects the idea of a static essence and instead presents the self as a dynamic relation, one that must become itself through tension, responsibility, and ultimately, through relation to God [70, 75]. In his non-pseudonymous works, such as *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard emphasizes that the true self is not discovered but realized through spiritual surrender. Authenticity arises when the individual stands transparently before God, embracing love as a divine command and living in obedience rather than self-assertion [70, 76]. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard defines the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself, and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another", that "other" being God [70, 72]. Despair, for Kierkegaard, is the failure to become oneself, whether through ignorance, defiance, or self-reliance. The cure is not autonomy but dependence, an existential leap into faith [70].

Across both pseudonymous and direct writings, Kierkegaard insists that selfhood is not a given but a task. It unfolds through stages: first aesthetic, then ethical, and finally religious, each marked by increasing depth of relation [70]. Even his method of indirect communication reflects this: the self must be provoked into reflection, not instructed into essence.

Kierkegaard's relational model of selfhood stands in stark contrast to Cartesian isolation. Where Descartes seeks certainty through solitary thought, Kierkegaard finds authenticity in vulnerability, in the willingness to relate to others, to oneself, and to God [70, 73, 77]. His view anticipates later existential and dialogical thinkers and resonates with Buddhist and cognitive critiques of the self as fixed essence, but unlike Buddhism, which denies any enduring self altogether, Kierkegaard retains a notion of personal continuity through relational tension, an existential becoming that unfolds in response to ethical and spiritual demands [70, 73, 77]. The self, for Kierkegaard, is not substance but relation in tension, a becoming, not a being. His model is existential, not epistemological, and insists that authenticity arises through tension, not resolution.

Building on Kierkegaard's existential turn, Kant introduces a structural account of selfhood that resists metaphysical essence while retaining necessary conditions for experience [78, 79]. Hence, Kant marks a transitional moment in the history of selfhood. While rejecting metaphysical essentialism, he retains a necessary structure, the transcendental unity of apperception that grounds coherent experience [78, 80]. This structural necessity resists essentialist substance, yet still functions as a condition of identity, making

Kant a pivotal figure between essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms[78, 81]. This self is not known through introspection or empirical observation. It cannot be grasped as a thing among things. Instead, it is the implicit "I think" that must accompany all representations[78]. The self is the unifying activity of consciousness, not a metaphysical entity but a logical function. It is what makes experience possible, not what is experienced[78, 82].

Kant's view resists essentialist notions of selfhood. There is no soul or substance behind the unity of experience, only the formal structure of cognition. The self is not a thing with properties but a relation: a synthesis of manifold impressions under the categories of understanding. Authenticity, in this framework, is not about discovering a hidden essence but about recognizing the conditions under which meaning and coherence arise[78, 82]. This conception anticipates later critiques of the substantial self. Like the Buddhist doctrine of anattā, Kant's transcendental self undermines the idea of a fixed, knowable essence[78, 79]. Both traditions, in their own ways, point toward a view of selfhood as structural, relational, and contingent, rather than metaphysical or eternal[78, 79]. However, while Kant denies metaphysical essence, his notion of a necessary structure for experience can be misread as implying a stable core self, especially when the "I think" is treated as a foundational identity[78, 81].

From Kant's formal structure, Locke shifts the focus to psychological continuity, emphasizing memory and narrative as the basis of identity[83, 84]. The self is not a soul or substance but a chain of memories that link past and present consciousness[83, 85]. Identity is contingent on the ability to remember and recognize experiences as one's own. The self is defined by the persistence of awareness across time, not by the presence of an indivisible essence[83, 84]. While Locke avoids metaphysical essentialism, his view still relies on a coherent narrative of selfhood, making authenticity a matter of narrative integrity rather than ontological depth[83, 84].

This view introduces a radical shift: the self is not what one is, but what one remembers being. Locke famously imagines a prince waking up in the body of a cobbler[83]. If the prince's consciousness, with all its memories and intentions, persists, then the prince remains the same person, regardless of bodily change[83, 86]. Identity, in this framework, is psychological rather than ontological.Yet this psychological continuity is fragile. It depends on the reliability of memory and the coherence of the narrative. There is no metaphysical guarantee of unity, only the contingent thread of recollection[83, 85]. The Lockean self is a narrative construction, vulnerable to forgetting, fragmentation, and reinterpretation[83, 84].

In this sense, Locke's account anticipates modern critiques of essentialist identity. Like Buddhist thought, which denies a permanent self and emphasizes impermanence and dependent origination, Locke's theory suggests that selfhood is a process rather than a substance[83, 84]. Authenticity, here, is not fidelity to an inner essence, but coherence within a mutable and evolving story of experience[83, 87].

Freud complicates this narrative by introducing a layered psychic model, where unconscious conflict challenges the coherence of selfhood[88, 89]. Nevertheless, his assumption of a structured psychic apparatus places him within the essentialist tradition, albeit as a critical and transitional figure[88, 90]. Sigmund Freud's model of the self stands as a pivotal moment in the Western understanding of identity. Rather than positing a harmonious inner essence, Freud presents the self as a conflicted structure, composed of the id (instinctual drives), the ego (rational mediator), and the superego (internalized moral authority)[88]. These components are often in tension, and the self is shaped by unconscious desires, repressions, and unresolved conflicts[88, 91]. Freud's influence on popular culture and therapeutic discourse is profound. Ideas of repressed trauma, inner conflict, and self-discovery through introspection are now commonplace in media, literature, and everyday psychology. Freud's model resists the comforting narrative of a "true self" waiting to be uncovered. Instead, it suggests that identity is always partial, constructed, and in flux[83, 89]. Yet Freud's layered model of the psyche, though dynamic, may inadvertently suggest a fixed architecture of the self, especially in therapeutic contexts where integration is equated with uncovering a 'true self'[83, 89].

Taylor's dialogical model offers a moral and cultural dimension to authenticity, suggesting that identity is shaped through relational engagement[92, 93]. Taylor critiques the atomistic self of liberal individualism, arguing that identity is not discovered in isolation but articulated through dialogue with the values and narratives that shape our world[92]. The "true self," in this view, is not a solitary core but a moral orientation, a commitment to living in accordance with one's deepest sources of meaning, which are always

socially and historically situated[92, 94]. Taylor's model is essentialist, but in a nuanced way. He does not posit a metaphysical soul or psychological essence, but he does assume that individuals have authentic moral sources that can be obscured or distorted by consumerism, relativism, or cultural fragmentation[92, 94]. Authenticity, for Taylor, involves recognizing and articulating these sources, and resisting shallow or externally imposed identities[92, 93]. His emphasis on interconnectedness and ethical responsibility resonates with certain aspects of Buddhist thought, particularly the idea that identity arises through relational and contextual processes[92, 93]. However, Taylor retains a belief in moral depth and personal integrity that distinguishes his view from Buddhist non-essentialism[92, 93]. Where Buddhism sees the self as empty of inherent existence, Taylor sees it as morally constituted, not fixed, but still grounded[92, 93].

These transitional thinkers occupy a middle ground between classical essentialism and full non-essentialism. While they critique or move away from the idea of a fixed, metaphysical self, they often retain structures or narratives that can inadvertently reintroduce essentialist assumptions. While they move toward processual and relational models, they often stop short of the full deconstruction that Buddhism advocates. Buddhism not only critiques essentialism but also offers a path of liberation from self-clinging, which is absent in most Western transitional models.

4.5. Non-Essentialist and Deconstructive Thinkers

Modern Western philosophy offers a rich tapestry of critiques that challenge the essentialist notion of a fixed, discoverable self. Postmodern philosophy has offered powerful critiques of essentialist identity, exposing the constructed, performative, and discursively regulated nature of the self. Thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Butler dismantle the notion of a stable subject, revealing identity as a product of language, power, and repetition. These insights have been instrumental in challenging metaphysical and psychological essentialism, and they resonate with Buddhist critiques of self-clinging and inherent existence.

Derrida's intervention is primarily linguistic: identity is not a stable presence but a textual trace, constituted through *différance*, the endless deferral of meaning within the play of signifiers. This undermines any claim to a fixed essence, situating subjectivity within a system of differences rather than self-sufficient foundations. Foucault shifted the focus to power and discourse, showing how identity is shaped by normative regimes[95]. While his earlier work emphasized disciplinary mechanisms, captured in the phrase 'the soul is the prison of the body', his later writings on the 'care of the self' introduce a more constructive dimension, framing subjectivity as an ethical practice within constraints. Similarly, Butler critiques the notion of a pre-discursive self through her theory of performativity, revealing identity as constituted through repeated acts that cite and reinforce social norms[96]. Yet Butler also acknowledges the possibility of agency and resignification within these norms, suggesting that authenticity, even as a regulatory ideal, can be negotiated rather than wholly determined.

However, even Derrida and Butler, who deconstruct identity, are often misread in popular discourse[95, 97]. The persistence of slogans like "be your authentic self" and "live your truth" shows how essentialist interpretations survive despite theoretical critiques, as the cultural appeal of authenticity endures. Similarly, the notion of "lived experience," originally intended to foreground situated, embodied perspectives, often becomes essentialized in everyday usage, functioning as an unquestionable truth claim. This tension underscores the enduring hold of the imagined self, and its corollaries, even in an age that questions their very existence.

As Bialystok (2014) and others note, certain interpretations of postmodern skepticism have been criticized for potentially contributing to a perceived paralysis of meaning, particularly when coherence and normative grounding are questioned[98–100]. By rejecting foundational claims, some strands of postmodern thought may risk challenging the possibility of ethical orientation and psychological coherence, though others propose constructive alternatives[98–101]. If the self is nothing but a discursive effect or a deferred trace, then authenticity becomes either incoherent or purely strategic. Critics argue that, in certain contexts, this stance can be interpreted as fostering normative nihilism, where claims to truth or integrity are treated with suspicion and ethical engagement appears limited to critique rather than constructive commitment[98–103]. While Western non-essentialist thinkers reject fixed identity, most retain structural or normative assumptions that differ from the Buddhist doctrine of anattā.

Despite their differences, postmodern critiques share important convergences with the realist Buddhist–Cognitive

model: both reject essentialist identity, emphasize relationality, and foreground the constructed nature of subjectivity. Where postmodern thought situates identity within discursive and power-laden contexts, the realist model complements this by adding an ethical and contemplative dimension, affirming that meaning and authenticity can be enacted without metaphysical foundations.

The realist model proposed here acknowledges postmodern insights, particularly the rejection of essence and the emphasis on relationality, while avoiding the pitfalls of relativism and fragmentation. It affirms that while the self is constructed and impermanent, it can still be ethically enacted, psychologically integrated, and spiritually cultivated. This model does not rely on metaphysical foundations but on context-sensitive coherence, ethical responsiveness, and embodied awareness.

In contrast to postmodern skepticism, the realist model:

- Affirms the possibility of meaning without metaphysical essence.
- Grounds authenticity in ethical practice, not ontological purity.
- Recognizes the constructed nature of identity, while allowing for psychological and relational integrity.
- Embraces impermanence and interdependence as conditions for transformation, not as barriers to truth.

This approach aligns with Buddhist philosophy, which critiques the illusion of a fixed self but offers a path of liberation through insight, compassion, and ethical engagement. It also resonates with cognitive science, which views the self as a dynamic model shaped by memory, perception, and social interaction. Together, these perspectives support a realist account of authenticity that is both philosophically rigorous and practically applicable.

Table 2 provides a comparative overview of major non-essentialist thinkers, Self-Determination Theory, and Buddhist perspectives on self and authenticity, highlighting similarities and differences in their ontological and ethical assumptions. Together, these thinkers dismantle the metaphysical self from different angles, offering alternative visions of identity that, while distinct, converge in their rejection of essence and their openness to process, relation, and impermanence. Building on recent syntheses of postmodern critiques[103], this section briefly foregrounds classic non-essentialist precursors, Nietzsche on becoming[104], Heidegger on temporal unfolding[105], and Sartre on project and freedom[106], before contrasting them systematically in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Comparison of Non-Essentialist Thinkers, Self-Determination Theory, and Buddhist Views on Self and Authenticity.

Thinker	View of Self	Authenticity	Comparison to Buddhism	Difference from Buddhism
Hume[18]	Bundle of perceptions	Illusory coherence	Similar: denies unified self	Lacks ethical path and soteriology
Nietzsche[104]	Dynamic interplay of drives	Embrace becoming	Partially similar: affirms transformative ego	Affirms ego and will to power
Heidegger[105]	Temporal unfolding (Dasein)	Existential possibilities	Similar: processual self, but retains authentic being	Retains authentic being
Sartre[106]	Project shaped by choice	Freedom and responsibility	Similar critique of essence, but affirms subjectivity	Presupposes enduring subject
Derrida[97]	Deferred textual trace	Critical awareness	Similar: rejects essence, lacks ethical practice	No liberation goal, purely linguistic
Foucault[95]	Discursively constructed	Normative critique	Similar: critiques identity as social construct	Focus on power, not liberation
Butler[96]	Performative repetition	Regulatory ideal	Similar: identity as performance, lacks liberation path	No path to transcend ego
SDT[68–71]	Dynamic psychological integration	Autonomous motivation	Similar: integration and ethical alignment	Implies core self via integration language

Note: This table synthesizes philosophical and psychological models alongside Buddhist views to illustrate convergences and divergences in conceptions of self and authenticity.

4.5.1. Self-Determination Theory: A Psychological Model of Constructed Authenticity

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a psychological model of authenticity grounded in motivation and integration. It views the self not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic process shaped by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness[107]. When these needs are met, individuals develop a more integrated and coherent sense of self. This self is not imposed externally but emerges from internalization, where external values and behaviours are gradually assimilated into one's identity[107, 108]. Authenticity, in SDT, is closely tied to autonomous motivation: acting in accordance with one's true values, interests, and beliefs.

SDT does not posit a metaphysical "true self" but rather emphasizes psychological integration. The "authentic self" is not something to be discovered but something to be cultivated through experiences that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness[107]. This aligns with Buddhist perspectives that challenge essentialist notions of self. Both recognize the importance of integration: SDT through psychological coherence, Buddhism through insight and ethical alignment[109, 110].

Yet, despite SDT's rejection of metaphysical essence, its language of psychological integration and self-endorsed values can imply a core self that one must align with, which blurs the line between construction and discovery. SDT assumes a functional self that can be integrated and authentic. Whereas Buddhism challenges the very notion of a self as a source of suffering and illusion. Phrases like "acting in harmony with oneself" risk reintroducing essentialist assumptions, especially when autonomy is framed as discovering rather than constructing identity[110].

4.5.2. Toward a Post-Essentialist Spiritual Identity

These Western thinkers, in their own ways, challenge the essentialist notion of a "true self." Yet only Buddhism offers a path of practice aimed at the liberation from self as a source of suffering. In the context of spiritual identity, this suggests a move not toward discovering an authentic essence, but toward deconstructing the very need for one, a view increasingly supported by cognitive science and post-structuralist thought.

These postmodern critiques raise important challenges for any attempt to rehabilitate authenticity. They suggest that even relational and processual models may unwittingly reproduce essentialist assumptions or obscure the role of power in shaping identity. However, rather than abandoning authenticity altogether, a realist model can respond by:

1. Acknowledging the constructed nature of identity, while still affirming the possibility of ethical responsiveness.
2. Situating authenticity within relational and dialogical contexts, rather than as an expression of inner essence.
3. Remaining critically aware of normative pressures, especially in institutional settings where (spiritual) identity may be codified and commodified.

In this way, the realist model does not reject postmodern insights but incorporates them as a caution against naïve essentialism. Authenticity, understood as a dynamic and ethically engaged process, must remain vigilant against the very discourses that seek to define and delimit the self.

5. Buddhist-Cognitive Model of Authenticity

This article proposes a Buddhist-Cognitive model of authenticity that integrates insights from Buddhist philosophy and contemporary cognitive science with a realist orientation. In contrast to essentialist models that posit a fixed inner essence and postmodern critiques that dissolve identity into discursive flux, this model treats authenticity as a dynamic, ethically responsive process. It is grounded in the Buddhist doctrine of anattā (non-self), which views identity as impermanent and relational, and in cognitive science's empirical understanding of the self as a distributed, context-sensitive construct. Authenticity, in this view, is not a return to a pre-existing self but a practice of ethical engagement and psychological coherence within a fluid and evolving self-system. This view allows for meaningful engagement with identity and authenticity without relying on metaphysical permanence.

Authenticity, within a realist orientation, is treated not merely as a psychological state or social performance but as a moral and relational practice. It emphasizes values, responsibility, and compassion as real and actionable dimensions

of human life. Even though the self is not metaphysically fixed, ethical engagement remains central to how authenticity is enacted and experienced. This orientation draws on cognitive science and neuroscience to understand the self as a dynamic, distributed process. It takes seriously the functional and embodied mechanisms, such as memory, attention, and social cognition, that shape selfhood and authenticity. In this sense, realism is grounded in empirical insight, offering a scientifically coherent account of how identity and authenticity emerge.

The model includes a relational-processual model of authenticity that challenges essentialist notions of a fixed or discoverable "true self." Drawing from Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and dialogical ethics, the model reframes authenticity as an ongoing, ethically responsive engagement with one's context, relationships, and evolving self-understanding. Rather than locating authenticity in internal coherence alone, this approach emphasizes its enactment through compassion, mindfulness, and relational presence.

5.1. Argument Architecture of the Realist Buddhist-Cognitive Model

To clarify the logical structure of the proposed model, the following outlines the premises, inferences, and scope:

Premises:

1. Contemporary spiritual and therapeutic discourses often assume a "true self" grounded in essentialist metaphysics.
2. The Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* denies any enduring self and frames identity as impermanent, relational, and contingent.
3. Cognitive science demonstrates that selfhood is a constructed, dynamic process rather than a fixed entity, emerging through neural, psychological, and social mechanisms.

Inferences:

- If essentialist models are incompatible with both Buddhist and cognitive perspectives, then authenticity cannot be defined as fidelity to an inner essence.
- If identity is constructed and impermanent, then authenticity must be reconceptualized as an ethically responsive, relational, and processual practice rather than an ontological discovery.
- Therefore, a realist model can integrate Buddhist and cognitive insights to frame authenticity as a dynamic engagement with context, values, and relationships.

Scope:

- This model applies to philosophical, psychological, and spiritual contexts where authenticity is theorized or practiced.
- It does not claim empirical proof of ethical outcomes but offers a conceptual framework for integration and application in contemplative practice, education, and clinical settings.
- The model is normative and heuristic rather than predictive, aiming to guide inquiry and practice rather than provide a closed system of explanation.

Evaluation Criteria for the Realist Model

To clarify what counts as explanatory and ethical success, the model adopts three criteria:

1. **Conceptual Coherence**—Does the framework integrate Buddhist and cognitive insights without contradiction?
2. **Practical Applicability**—Can the model inform interventions in contemplative practice, education, and clinical care?
3. **Ethical Responsiveness**—Does it foster compassion, relational integrity, and non-attachment in applied contexts?

These criteria can be illustrated through case studies and tested indirectly via empirical proxies (e.g., measures of psychological flexibility, relational well-being), ensuring that success is operationalized without reverting to metaphysical permanence.

Figure 1 outlines five key dimensions that enhance a relational-processual understanding of authenticity within a Buddhist-Cognitive framework. The Non-Essentialist dimension rejects the notion of a fixed "true self," emphasizing impermanence and the absence of inherent essence. This dimension is a dynamic and evolving process informed and revised by the other dimensions. The Neurocognitive dimension views the self as distributed, embodied, and socially constructed, aligning with contemporary cognitive science.

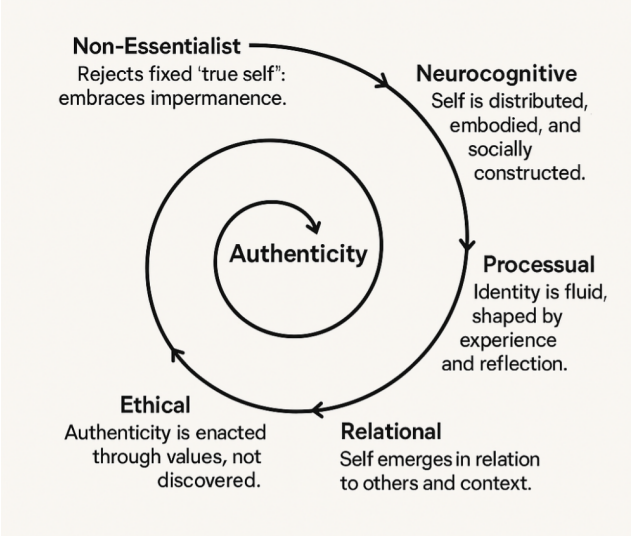


Figure 1. Five interdependent dimensions of the Buddhist–Cognitive model of authenticity: Non-Essentialist, Neurocognitive, Processual, Relational, and Ethical.

1. ***Non-Essentialist****: Rejects the notion of a fixed "true self," aligning with Buddhist anattā and impermanence (Section 2).*
2. ***Neurocognitive****: Frames selfhood as distributed and embodied, consistent with cognitive science findings on DMN activity and predictive coding (Section 3.1).*
3. ***Processual****: Highlights identity as fluid and evolving, resonating with both Buddhist doctrines and psychological models of dynamic selfhood (Sections 3.2).*
4. ***Relational****: Emphasizes co-construction of identity through social and contextual interactions, echoing dialogical and interdependent views (Sections 3.3).*
5. ***Ethical****: Positions authenticity as an enacted practice of compassion and moral responsiveness, rather than fidelity to essence (Sections 3.3). The spiral symbolizes non-linear growth, interdependence, and expanding awareness, illustrating authenticity as a dynamic trajectory rather than a static endpoint.*

The Processual dimension highlights identity as fluid and continuously shaped by experience and reflection. The Relational dimension asserts that the self emerges through interactions with others and contextual factors. Finally, the Ethical dimension reframes authenticity as a practice enacted through values and moral commitments, rather than something to be discovered. Each returns to Authenticity, not as a final truth, but as a reframed understanding shaped by the journey.

The spiral symbolises: Non-linear Growth—unlike a straight line or cycle, a spiral suggests evolution without repetition. Each loop builds on the last, reflecting how authenticity is not a fixed endpoint but a deepening process of becoming. Interdependence and Return—the arrows show that every insight, whether neurocognitive, ethical, or relational, recontextualizes authenticity. This mirrors Buddhist ideas of dependent origination: nothing stands alone. Embodied and Temporal—the spiral evokes movement through time and space, aligning with the processual and embodied nature of selfhood in both Buddhist and cognitive frameworks. It is not just a model, but a lived trajectory. Expanding Awareness—as the spiral widens, it suggests expanding consciousness. Each layer adds complexity and depth, much like how mindfulness and reflection deepen one's understanding of self and authenticity.

This model complements Kernis and Goldman's [36] multicomponent model, comprising awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and relational orientation, further grounding this framework in empirical psychology. While Kernis and Goldman's model provides a valuable psychological foundation for understanding authenticity, the Buddhist-Cognitive model expands this framework by embedding it within a broader philosophical and ethical context. Specifically, it challenges the implicit assumption of a stable self underlying these components by introducing the Buddhist principle of anattā (non-self), which reframes authenticity as a dynamic, relational, and impermanent process. This model also deepens the ethical dimension by emphasizing compassion and moral responsiveness as central to authentic enactment, rather than treating ethics as a peripheral or outcome-based concern. Furthermore, by integrating neurocognitive insights, it situates authenticity within embodied and distributed processes, moving beyond introspective coherence to include intersubjective and ecological awareness. In doing so, the Buddhist-Cognitive model not only complements Kernis and Goldman's structure but also reorients it toward a more fluid, ethically engaged, and spiritually resonant understanding of the self.

Awareness refers to the capacity to know and understand one's internal states, including emotions, motives, desires, and values. In practice, it involves mindful self-reflection and being attuned to what one genuinely feels and believes. This is not merely surface-level introspection but

a deep, honest engagement with one's inner life. From a Buddhist perspective, awareness aligns closely with the concept of mindfulness (sati), the practice of being present and observing one's thoughts and feelings without attachment or aversion. This form of awareness fosters clarity and openness, allowing individuals to engage with their experiences authentically and compassionately. It is enriched by being processual, evolving over time, and shaped by experience; neurocognitive, involving brain-based mechanisms of self-reflection and distributed processing; and non-essentialist, rejecting fixed identity and embracing the fluidity and impermanence of the self.

Unbiased processing is the ability to objectively evaluate self-relevant information without distortion, denial, or defensiveness. Practically, it means accepting both strengths and weaknesses without exaggeration or avoidance and being open to feedback and self-critique. This component encourages a non-defensive stance toward personal growth and fosters humility. In Buddhist thought, it resonates with non-attachment and equanimity, which involves seeing things as they truly are rather than through the lens of desire or fear. Such clarity supports ethical responsiveness and a balanced approach to self-understanding. This dimension is enriched by being ethical, involving moral discernment and fairness in how one interprets and responds to personal truths; neurocognitive, grounded in cognitive processes that support impartiality and self-evaluation; and non-essentialist, embracing openness to change and rejecting rigid, fixed self-concepts.

Behaviour, in the context of authenticity, refers to acting in ways that are congruent with one's values, beliefs, and self-understanding. Authentic individuals strive to align their actions with their inner convictions, even when faced with social pressure. This component emphasizes integrity, consistency, and moral courage. In Buddhism, this mirrors the principle of ethical conduct (sīla), living in accordance with compassionate and mindful principles. Ethical behaviour not only supports personal authenticity but also builds trust and moral clarity in relationships and communities. This dimension is enriched by being processual, recognizing that behaviour adapts over time and in response to changing contexts; ethical, guided by moral principles that shape intentional action; and relational, acknowledging that behaviour is co-constructed through interactions with others and reflects the quality of those relationships.

Relational orientation involves valuing and fostering openness, honesty, and genuineness in close relationships. Authentic individuals seek transparent and meaningful connections, showing a willingness to be vulnerable and share their true selves with others. This orientation aligns with Buddhist notions of interdependence and compassion, recognizing that the relative self is not isolated but co-arises through relational dynamics. By embracing relational authenticity, individuals deepen their spiritual intimacy and enhance the quality of care and connection in their interactions. This dimension is enriched by being relational, emphasizing empathy, connection, and mutuality; processual, acknowledging that relationships are dynamic and evolve over time; ethical, involving responsibility, care, and moral presence in relational engagements; and non-essentialist, recognizing that identity is co-constructed through relationships rather than rooted in a fixed inner essence.

Together, these perspectives offer a robust, interdisciplinary account of authenticity that is both philosophically rigorous and practically applicable. This model provides a nuanced framework for cultivating authenticity not as a static trait, but as a dynamic, relational, and ethically enacted process, one that honours impermanence, embraces complexity, and fosters genuine connection.

5.2. Why This Integration Matters

This integrative framework is significant on multiple levels: Philosophical, Practical, and Theoretical. This model contributes meaningfully to ongoing debates in the philosophy of mind and identity studies by challenging the notion of a singular, essential self and offering a dynamic, relational alternative. In contrast to Cartesian and essentialist views that posit a core, unchanging identity, the Buddhist-Cognitive framework aligns with enactivist and embodied cognition theories, which see the self as emergent from interaction, context, and temporality. By integrating anattā with neurocognitive insights, the model reframes identity not as a metaphysical given but as a contingent, ethically enacted process. This positions authenticity within a broader philosophical discourse that includes process philosophy, dialogical self theory, and non-dual ontologies, offering a spiritually resonant and scientifically coherent account of selfhood.

In therapeutic and chaplaincy settings, this model offers a nuanced approach to supporting individuals navigating identity crises, grief, or spiritual disorientation. For example, a hospice chaplain working with a terminally ill patient might use mindfulness-based dialogue to help the patient explore their evolving sense of self, not as a search for a fixed "true self," but as a compassionate engagement with impermanence and relational meaning. Rather than reinforcing rigid self-concepts, the chaplain facilitates a processual and ethically grounded reflection, allowing the patient to find authenticity in how they relate to others, make peace with their life story, and embody values such as compassion and acceptance. This approach fosters spiritual intimacy and psychological coherence, even in the face of existential uncertainty.

5.3. Case Illustration: Hospice Chaplaincy and Ethical Bridging

A hospice chaplain supports a patient with advanced cancer who wishes to discontinue aggressive treatment and focus on comfort care. The descriptive premise is that the patient experiences existential distress and values autonomy, a psychological need strongly associated with well-being and life satisfaction[111, 112]. The normative premise, drawn from Buddhist ethics, is that compassionate presence and non-harming should guide care. The inferential link is that honoring the patient's autonomy while fostering relational harmony aligns with both empirical evidence on autonomy's benefits for meaning and engagement[113] and normative commitments to compassion. The normative conclusion is to facilitate a family dialogue that respects the patient's wishes while supporting loved ones in preparing for loss. This example illustrates how empirical insights and normative principles can be integrated to inform ethical decision-making in end-of-life care[114, 115].

5.4. Applied Relevance for Therapy, Education, and Spiritual Care

The inferential structure has practical implications across disciplines. In therapy, mindfulness-based interventions and compassion training (e.g., MBCT, CBCT®) operationalize Buddhist principles within cognitive-behavioural paradigms, enhancing emotional regulation and resilience[116, 117]. In education, pedagogical models informed by Buddhist epistemology foster critical thinking and ethical sensitivity, supporting interdisciplinary curricula in psychology and philosophy[116]. In spiritual care, chaplaincy practice benefits from structured inferential reasoning to navigate ethical dilemmas, ensuring that spiritual interventions respect pluralism while promoting well-being[118].

5.5. Closing Synthesis

These applied examples underscore the central claim: integrating empirical insights from cognitive science with normative principles from Buddhist philosophy requires a transparent inferential structure. By demonstrating how this framework informs ethical decision-making in hospice care, therapeutic interventions, and educational practice, we show that the descriptive–normative bridge is not merely theoretical but foundational for interdisciplinary approaches to well-being. This alignment ensures that scientific findings inform, rather than dictate, values, preserving philosophical coherence while enhancing practical relevance across clinical, pedagogical, and spiritual domains.

6. Conclusions

In sum, the practical and ethical implications of this framework affirm its utility for guiding compassionate, evidence-informed practice. By making inferential steps explicit, practitioners can integrate empirical knowledge and normative commitments responsibly, fostering approaches that are both scientifically grounded and ethically coherent.

Theoretically, it strengthens the critique of essentialist models by showing that authenticity can be dynamic, contextual, and co-arising, while remaining structured and psychologically grounded. This synthesis allows for a richer, more inclusive understanding of the self that is both spiritually resonant and scientifically informed. This synthesis offers a spiritually resonant and scientifically grounded understanding of the self, one that honours impermanence, embraces complexity, and fosters genuine connection.

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