

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

24 July 2026

Behaviour defines the self

According to this view, what matters most is what a person actually does.

A person may claim to be kind, honest, or courageous, but if their behaviour consistently shows cruelty, dishonesty, or cowardice, then their actions tell us more than their self-description.

From this perspective:

We are what we repeatedly do.

The self is not something hidden behind behaviour; it is expressed and constituted through behaviour, habits, and choices.

This view has the advantage of grounding identity in observable reality rather than intentions alone.

There is a deeper self apart from behaviour

Another view holds that behaviour is only the outward expression of something deeper.

A person may act against their values because of fear, ignorance, habit, social pressure, exhaustion, or confusion. Their behaviour may reveal something about them, but not the whole truth of who they are.

In this view:

The self is the one who can reflect on behaviour, judge it, regret it, and choose differently.

The fact that you can say, "I wish I hadn't done that," suggests a distinction between the observing self and the action being observed.

Many religious and philosophical traditions have embraced some version of this idea. They locate the core of the person in the soul, consciousness, character, or capacity for self-awareness rather than in behaviour alone.

A possible synthesis

Perhaps behaviour and self are not rivals.

The deeper self may exist, but it becomes known—both to others and to ourselves—through behaviour.

Imagine a musical score and a performance:

- The score is not the performance.
- The performance is not the score.
- Yet without performance, the score remains unheard.

Likewise, if there is a deeper self, behaviour is how it enters the world.

At the same time, behaviour can shape the self. Habits, choices, and actions do not merely express who we are; they can gradually change who we become.

So the question may not be:

"Is the self behaviour, or is it something deeper?"

but rather:

"How do behaviour and the deeper self continually create and reveal one another?"

That possibility preserves both responsibility for our actions and the intuition that no single action, however good or bad, completely captures a human being.