

Three Accounts of No-Self (*Anatta*)

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Introduction

My aim is to reconcile Buddhism, specifically the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) with a broadly Kantian philosophy according to which there is a self with the vital function of maintaining a unity of apperception. The conflict is that the self either does not exist (Buddhist Philosophers) or does exist (Kant). My reason for exploring reconciliation is my appreciation of the spiritual wisdom within the Buddhist tradition along with my rejection of many of the metaphysical and phenomenological doctrines championed by Buddhist Philosophers. More specifically, I reject the empiricist, phenomenalist, Cartesian and reductionist analogues to the Western philosophical tradition that I find among prominent contemporary Buddhist Philosophers.

Buddha’s practical orientation and the simile of the Poison Arrow

Was the Buddha a Buddhist Philosopher? Did the Buddha think selves were “ultimately unreal,” “convenient fictions” that they “lacked genuine existence?” Not according to the well-known simile of the poison arrow that illustrates the Buddha’s focus on practice. Confronted

with a list of 13 metaphysical questions, the Buddha is purported to have declined answering because he found the questions inessential.

"It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-colored... until I know...' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him."

— *Cula-Malunkya Sutta: The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya* (MN 63), *Majjhima Nikaya*

The Buddha was no more a Buddhist Philosopher with a doctrine of no-self (anatta) than Christ was a Christian philosopher with a theory of the Holy Trinity. My point is that we must distinguish the doctrines of Buddhist Philosophers from the practice of the Buddha.

Self_{Brandom} -- ***Kant, Hegel, and Sellars***

The concept of selfhood which I favor comes from Robert Brandom's interpretation and amalgamation of Kant, Hegel and Sellars. The Kant-Brandom "self" has three essential activities. With **Kant** we associate the requirement that a self maintain a unity of apperception. With **Hegel**, is associated the requirement that a self be part of a community of selves with reciprocal recognition. With **Sellars**, we associate the "space of reason" and the "game of giving and asking for reasons." According to Brandom, a unity of apperception is maintained when one integrates "ones new endorsements into the whole that compromise one's previous endorsements. One's critical responsibility is to weed out materially incompatible commitments. For example, to synthesize the belief that someone just walked into the room is to abandon the belief that I am alone. One's ampliative responsibility is to extract the material and inferential consequences of each commitment (e.g., there are two people in the room). "One's justificatory responsibility is to be prepared to offer reasons for the commitments."¹ For example, that I am awake and saw the person walk in.

Brandom maintains that selfhood, that is being discursive and being a member of a discursive community is what makes us who we are. We are beings with **histories**, not just

¹ Brandom, Reasons in Philosophy (2009), p.36.

natures. Through discourse, we become self-defining. We are not simply biological beings, members of the species *homo sapiens*.² We define ourselves by what roles we commit ourselves to: father, son, husband, professor, scholar, liberal, etc. The relevance of this point to Buddhist metaphysics is that analogies between selves and material objects are suspect: e.g., eddies, waves, clouds and chariots (King Milander). Because we are self-defining, the Existentialist slogan applies: “Existence precedes Essence.”³ This feature of the Kant-Brandom self lends itself to Existentialist readings of Buddhism: e.g, Stephen Batchelor, Alone with Others: An Existentialist approach to Buddhism.⁴

A further aspect of the Kant-Brandom self that is relevant from a Buddhist perspective is that a self is something that human beings acquire and develop as they become discursive and that can be lost through injury or senility. On this view, a self is a being (usually a *homo sapien*) in reasonable discursive working order. Such a self is clearly not eternal. Furthermore, it can change significantly as the elements of one’s unity of apperception, including self-image change significantly. The self_{Brandom} is a process, an activity, a role – not an essence.

The Kant-Brandom notion of a self is abstract and divorced from the biology of *homo sapiens*. DNA is not essential. Brandom flirts with the Hegelian idea that Geist is a self. Institutions and corporations may have selves_{Brandom}. There is no principled reason that a computer/robot couldn’t be a Kant-Brandom self. These possibilities underscore that the Kant-Brandom self is primarily function, practice, and role, not physical matter.

Brandom_{selves} are compatible with a transformational, action-oriented account of “no-self”, but not with either of two more familiar accounts. One ontological strategy for denying the existence of a self, which I reject, is exemplified by Hume’s bundle theory of self. The second, speculative psychological view, which I also reject, posits an inner self of pure, undifferentiated, objectless-less awareness.

² Brandom, Tales of the Might Dead (2002), p.217

³ Brandom , Tales of the Might Dead (2002), “Holism and Idealism in Hegels Phenomenology”

⁴ See also Philosophy of Religion, Notions of Selflessness in Sartrean Existentialism and Theravadin Buddhism, Sander H. Lee, Keene State College, slee@keene.edu

Analogy - no sin

An analogy should help to distinguish the three structurally distinct approaches I consider. Instead of “no self, consider a “no sin” doctrine. The ontological interpretation denies the very existence of sin. For example, an atheist might reason that without God, there are no sins. A second purity view, champions purity of heart as a state that one should strive to attain if one wants to achieve “no sin.” On the purity view, Saints are people who have attained such purity of heart that the temptation to sin is not at issue. Some believe that Christ was such that he could not sin. Christ and saints are wired-up differently; they have a different inner structure. A third view of “no sin” maintains that persons should transform themselves and stop sinning as much as possible. Can one avoid sinning altogether? Probably not. “Sinlessness” is an ideal, not a state of grace. The three approaches to “no sin” involve ontology (denial of existence), hard to achieve purity of heart, and avoidance behavior respectively. Analogously, the ontological view is that selves do not exist; the purity view is that some can achieve a state of pure selfless awareness; the behavioral, transformational view is that selfing (selfish behavior) is to become less frequent.

Three opponents: Empiricism, Cartesianism and Representationalism

Three historic divides shape my discussion.

Empiricism

An underlying fault line is that between empiricist views (East and West) that take experiences as episodes that occur between the ears (*erlebnis*) and views for which experience (*erfahrung*) is something one accumulates and nurtures over time with practice. Episodic perceptions occur constantly. On the other hand, job candidates are asked for their previous experience (*erfahrung*). As Hume noted, on the empiricist, atomistic, episodic view, the existence of a self is problematic. The anti-Empiricist sees Hume as looking for the self in all the wrong places. By contrast, if the emphasis is on the acquisition and exercise of a practice (e.g., language use) over time, the existence of a self is intrinsic to the practice. The ontological accounts of no-self that I criticize both give a fundamental role to Cartesian episodic experience. For Brandom, a high point in anti-empiricism is Sellars’ hegelian attack of “the myth of the given.” There is a fundamental incompatibility between selves_{Brandom} and atomistic accounts of

“experience.”⁵ The Western empiricist tradition against which I inveigh is one of impressions, sense data, ideas and empiricist atomistic reductions. Similar tendencies are to be rejected when they appear in the East.

Cartesians

A second historic divide is between Cartesian and Kantian views of the self. The Cartesian self is a disembodied thinking thing. The self_{Brandom} is an embodied active participant in a community of language speakers. The Cartesian self is compatible with so-called passive witness-consciousness and conceptless awareness. The contrasting, Kantian view is that the “I think” accompanies all our thoughts. A return to selfless, concept-less awareness (pure witness consciousness) would be regression not purification.

Representationalism

A third fault line is that between representational and non-representation theories of language. A representationalist slides easily between our ongoing practice of talking about selves to the ontological question of to the **reference** of “self”. Anti-representationalist—Dewey, Wittgenstein and more recently Sellars, Richard Rorty, Brandom and Huw Price—avoid the assumption that talk of Xs necessitates the ontological question as to the nature of Xs. An anti-representationalist is inclined to think ontological questions about the nature of Xs is unfruitful and a symptom of the prevalence of representational semantics. The anti-representationalist asks the function of discourse about Xs. For example, how does ‘I’ function in communication. In the current case, the anti-representationalist focuses on self discourse and behavior and eschews metaphysical questions about the ontology and possible purity of selves.

An example of representationalist thinking that I oppose is this passage from Siderits’s Buddhism as Philosophy.

By ‘the self’ what Buddhists mean is the essence of a person -the one part whose continued existence is required for that person to continue to exist. This is the definition of ‘self’ that we will use, But what does it mean? It might be helpful to think of the view that there is a self as one possible answer to the question what it is that the word ‘I’ **refers** to. I am a person. And persons are made up of a variety of constituents: parts making up the body, such as limbs and organs, and parts making up the mind, such as feelings and desires. . . not all the parts of a person are necessary to the continued existence of a person. To say there is a self

⁵ Brandom, Reason in Philosophy (2009), Chapt. 7, “Three Problems with the Empiricist Conception of Concepts.”

is to say that there is someone part that is necessary. This one part would then be what the word 'I' really **named**. (Siderits 2007, p.32)

My target is accounts of Buddhism that side with empiricists, Cartesians, and representationalists.

Against "Bundle Theories"

Bundle theories are found in both the East (e.g., the Abhidharma interpretations) and West (Hume, James, Parfit, etc.). Contemporary writers often draw an analogy with Hume on the Self.⁶

As both the Buddha and Hume point out, we are never actually aware of the mind as something standing behind such mental events as feeling, perceiving and willing. We are just aware of the feelings, perceptions and volitions themselves. So the mind is unobservable. And it is the causal relations among these mental events that the Buddha says explain all the facts about our mental lives. So the mind becomes an unnecessary, unobservable posit (Siderits 45).

Miri Albahari⁷ identifies many bundle-theory passages.

[Hume concludes] that ' [persons] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement. ' .. , Buddhist writers typically make the same point by analysing a person into the 'Five Aggregates' [khandhas]. Since a person is nothing more than the sum of these five aggregates, and since soul, in the sense of a permanent unchanging subject of consciousness [viz., the self], cannot be identified with one or more of the five, soul cannot exist ... It seems clear that Hume and the Buddhists say the same thing for the same reasons : both analyse the 'soul' [viz., sense of self] into a series of events or processes, and do so because this is what experience reveals. (A.H. Lesser, 1979, 58)

Moment by moment, new experiences happen and are gone. It is a rapidly shifting stream of momentary mental occurrences. Furthermore, the shiftiness includes the perceiver as much as the perceptions. There is no experiencer, just as Hume noticed, who remains constant to receive experiences, no landing platform for experiences .. . Suffering arises quite naturally and then grows as the mind seeks to avoid its natural grounding in impermanence and lack of self. (Varela, Thomson and Rosch, 1991, 60-61)

⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, Appendix of *A Treatise of Human Nature* on Personal Identity

⁷ Miri Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism* (2006), does a superb identifying and criticizing Buddhist "bundle theories," progeny of the five aggregates. Cf. 3.2 The mis-portrayal of Buddhism as endorsing a 'bundle theory' of persons. pp.75-79

What we call a 'being', or an 'individual' , or 'I', according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates. (H. Walpola Rahula, 1996, 20)

Buddhist thought presents these five [conditioned] aggregates as an exhaustive analysis of the individual. They are the world for any given being - there is nothing else besides, (Rupert, Gethin 1998, 136)

The bundle theories of self are too rich and varied to be refuted in a single paper. However, I can sketch plausible reasons against such views. Four problems with bundle theories are first that they attempt to explain (construct) the more fundamental in terms of the less fundamental. Second, bundle theories rely on implausible principles of mereological essentialism. Thirdly, bundle theories sweep too broadly and fail to recognize the difference between physical entities (e.g., flames and chariots), which have natures, and cultural entities like selves that have histories. Finally, as stressed by Albahari, bundle theories do not do justice to the many passages in the Pali Canon which ascribe to Buddhist training the attainment of a special, “selfless,” state of mind. Albahari speculates that the quality-of-minds passages are sometimes overlooked because of their clear association with the Upanishads and the Advaita Vedānta, associations which many Buddhist Philosophers wish to avoid.⁸

‘I’ is a “logical locution”⁹

On a Kant-Brandom view of selves, recognition of selves as unit of account is presupposed by discourse and understanding. In Brandom’s terminology, the self is a “coresponsibility class of commitments and entitlements.”

One of the normative social statuses instituted by any scorekeeping practices that qualify as discursive is that of being an individual *self*: a subject of perception and action, one who both can *be* committed and can *take* others to be committed, a deontic scorekeeper on whom score is kept, Selves correspond to **coresponsibility** classes or bundles of deontic states and attitudes-an indispensable individuating aspect of the structure of scorekeeping practices that institutes and articulates discursive commitments. (Brandom, MIE, p. 559.

⁸ Albahari (2006), xii, 75, 193-4

⁹ (MIE p.559)

A parrot can respond differentially to red objects, but to genuinely understand the concept 'red' one needs to attribute responsibility for the utterance to oneself and to hold others responsible for their use of 'red'. The very possibility of discursive communication presupposes selves that participate. By analogy, the very possibility of there being soccer goals presupposes the existence of soccer players. Brandom writes, "'I' is a logical term," by which he means that uses of 'I' make explicit an essential aspect of the framework in which thought and discourse is possible.

Contra Atomism and Mereological Reductivism

A second concern is the reliance on a problematic atomism and mereological reductionism. Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2007), is an excellent exposition of the variety of reductionist arguments in the Buddhist tradition. One reductionist principle on which Siderits focuses on is **The Exclusivity Principle** according to which a self is nothing but a bundle of impressions (skandas). However, selves_{Brandom} are in a different category of being. Siderits also notes reliance on **Mereological Reductionism** which claims that composite object made up of parts do not exist.

Mereological Reductionism: The parts are real but the whole that is made of these parts is not. The whole can be reduced to the parts; it isn't anything over and about the parts.¹⁰

A consequence of this view is that chairs don't really exist; they only exist "conventionally." An obvious problem with such a view is identifying the atomic "parts:" pieces wood assembled by the carpenter, or molecules, or atoms, or quarks. A mereological essentialist faces a heavy burden of proof if they are to deny our intuition that cars exist even if they are made up of parts. Furthermore, ordinary objects cannot be identical to the atoms of which they are made, because atoms are constantly being added or subtracted. I see no reason to think that bicycles don't exist because they have wheels, handlebars, etc.

A somewhat less prevalent principle that Siderits finds is similar to George Berkeley's idealism according to which the world is an assembly of quality-particulars and substances do not exist. However, Berkeley's idealism is not more plausible in its Eastern variants than it is in the Western philosophical tradition.

¹⁰Siderits, p.54

Natures vs. Histories – the difference consciousness makes

A third objection to bundle theories of composite objects is that they fail to distinguish conscious entities from non-conscious macroscopic items. According to bundle theories, selves do not exist, but for the same reason neither do bicycles, lions, or houses. Furthermore, as Albahari stresses, such sweeping accounts of putative non-existence fail to do justice to the many passages in the Pali Canon where no-self is associated with a difficult to achieve state of consciousness, not a general ontological condition.

Against “Witness Consciousness”

Miri Albahari’s Analytic Buddhism (2006) develops another no-self account that focuses on *nibbāna* (*Nirvāṇa*, enlightenment) as the elimination of “boundedness” and “ownership.” Her account depends on there being a state of witness-consciousness (luminous, undifferentiated, *nibbanic*, awareness). A strength of theories of “pure awareness” is that there are many passages in Buddhist traditions suggesting that the goal of Buddhism is to uncover a true self. Albahari’s witness consciousness fits well with popular views of eastern spirituality as aiming to achieve states of higher consciousness and pure awareness. “...the path to nirvana is most accurately viewed as an uncovering rather than a literal development of the mind.” [Albahari, p.34] Layers of “defilements” are to be removed.

Once the Venerable Ananda approached the Blessed One and asked: 'Can it be, Lord, that a monk attains to such concentration of mind that in earth he is not percipient of earth, nor in water is he percipient of water, nor in fire ... air ... the base of infinity of space ... the base of infinity of consciousness ... the base of nothingness ... the base of neither perception nor non-perception is he percipient of all these-but yet he is percipient?' 'Yes, Ananda, there can be such a concentration of mind that in earth the monk is not percipient of earth ... nor is he percipient of this world or a world beyond -but yet he is percipient.' 'But how, Lord, can a monk attain to such concentration of mind?' 'Here, Ananda, the monk is percipient thus: 'This is the peaceful, this is the sublime, namely, the stilling of formations, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, *Nibbina*.' It is in this way, Ananda, that a monk may attain to such a concentration of mind.' (AN X. 6)

Is “witness consciousness” possible?¹¹

However, there are serious problems with theories that posit states of pure awareness, witness consciousness. Such states are incoherent if there are selves_{Brandom}. Sapient awareness (as opposed to mere sentient awareness) must be awareness of something by someone. Awareness requires integration into a unity of apperception. The idea of regressing to an objectless, conceptless state is incoherent. There is no reason to think such a state is a “higher” state of consciousness.

Zahavi approaches issue of the ownership of conscious states from a Husserlian, phenomenological perspective. He plausibly argues that to be consciously aware is to realize that the awareness is one’s own. When I feel a pain, I am aware that it is my pain, not your pain. For the Kantian, the “I think” accompanies all our representations. For the phenomenologist, “myself” accompanies all our sensory inputs.

Is “witness consciousness” desirable?

The state of Pure Awareness is often said to be blissful, luminous, sublime, auspicious, wonderful, and amazing.¹² However, there is reason to suspect that no state of consciousness could guarantee so much. Instead of “blissful,” the alleged state of “pure witness consciousness” could be negative or neutral. Perhaps anesthesia is a self-less, object-less, concept-less mental state. However, anesthesia is a great void, an unremembered nothingness. As Albahari notes, psychological states of “depersonalization” are sometimes very unpleasant. Albahari further notes it is plausible to assume that newborns and an array of primitive animals will have awareness without a sense of bounded self (p.177). But bliss is at best an occasional state experienced by newborns and animals. Concerning psychedelic drugs, bad trips as well as bliss occur.

Furthermore, the soteriology benefits of witness consciousness are doubtful. Supposing turning off all self-awareness might be relaxing and conducive to better behavior, there is no reason to assume it would have lasting effects. It stretches credulity to think that any state, no matter how blissful, could last or could eliminate one’s lesser angels.

¹¹ “Are There Pure Conscious Events?” Rocco J. Gennaro, University of Southern Indiana

¹² Albahari, 41

Transformative Accounts – No Selfing

On the transformative view of no-self, Buddhism is not about denying the existence of a self, but about purging oneself of the three poisons: ignorance, attachment, and aversion. As Gil Fronsdal maintains that the aim of Buddhist practice is “no selfing.” An analogy is with the alcoholic aspiring to “no drinking.” The goal is to give up drinking as much as possible. The goal is not to attain a state in which the very thought of a drink is impossible. We are born “self” addicts and aspire to “no selfing.”

The combination of selves_{Brandom} and a transformative no-selfing account of no-self is attractive for several reasons. Brandom’s analysis, like the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising, is deeply relational. Selves (discursive performers) only exist in concert with other selves. Brandom’s conglomeration of Kant, Hegel, Dewey, Wittgenstein and Sellars, fits smoothly with dependent co-arising. Additionally, the selve_{Brandom} changes constantly along with the associated unity of apperception.

Conclusion

There are many schools of Buddhist Philosophy with many arguments. In this paper I sketch several broad lines of critique as well as one way out. If I am right that Philosophical Buddhism is encumbered with troublesome similarities with empiricism, reductionism and Cartesianism, then there is the large project, much larger than a single paper, of demonstrating the many manifestations of these encumbrances.

I conclude that a Buddhist sympathizer may accept the existence of a Kantian self and accept a transformative account of the “no self” doctrine. However, Kantian selves are incompatible with two widely-defended versions of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self: empiricist bundle theories and speculative, possibly incoherent, accounts of witness-consciousness.

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