



PROJECT MUSE®

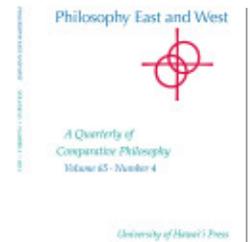
---

## No Self?: Some Reflections on Buddhist Theories of Personal Identity

Anthony Rudd

Philosophy East and West, Volume 65, Number 3, July 2015, pp. 869-891  
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2015.0059](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2015.0059)



➔ For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pew/summary/v065/65.3.rudd.html>

## NO SELF? SOME REFLECTIONS ON BUDDHIST THEORIES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY



**Anthony Rudd**  
St. Olaf College  
rudd@stolaf.edu

Recent years have seen a considerable growth of interest among Western philosophers and psychologists in aspects of Buddhist thought about consciousness and selfhood. Some time back, Derek Parfit noted parallels between his “reductionist” account of personal identity and the Buddhist idea of *anattā*—“no self,” as it is usually translated.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, not only reductionists but outright eliminativists about the self have also claimed that their views have significant affinities with Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile a number of philosophers have published works addressed to Western philosophical audiences, expounding and defending Buddhist views of the self,<sup>3</sup> and a fascinating recent anthology, *Self, No Self?* sets up a debate between both Buddhist and Advaita views from the “East” and both phenomenological and analytical accounts from the “West.”<sup>4</sup>

My aim in this article is to cast a critical eye on some of the versions of the *anattā* doctrine that have recently been defended for a Western audience. I am writing as a philosopher, trained in the Western tradition(s) and interested in assessing the various recent interpretations/defenses of *anattā* on their philosophical merits. I am not a scholar (or a practitioner) of Buddhism<sup>5</sup> and am happy to suppose that there may well be ways to articulate understandings of selfhood that are consistent with aspects of the Buddhist tradition but which are not vulnerable to the criticisms I raise here. Indeed, it seems to me that some of the views I will discuss are not only philosophically implausible, but also hard to reconcile with what I, as an outsider, can understand of Buddhist practice. I hope that Buddhist readers will take what follows as a series of questions—*are you really committed to this?* If so, how can you reconcile it with *that?*—rather than as a hostile critique of Buddhism per se. I will conclude by suggesting, tentatively, a way in which we might interpret *anattā* “practically,” one that would not see it as a theory about personal identity at all (at least not in the standard post-Lockean sense that Western philosophers are familiar with). We may indeed have much to learn from Buddhism, but it is not, I think, the sort of thing that the Western skeptics about the self mentioned above are looking for in it.

I

One question that needs to be asked of *anattā* theorists is “What are you denying, when you deny the self?” Is the relevant concept of selfhood supposed to be an esoteric, philosophical one, or an ordinary, everyday concept, one that would be held generally by non-philosophers? In the former case, to deny it might seem reasonable

but unexciting. Now, philosophy aims at truth rather than excitement, but Buddhism does claim to be an essentially practical doctrine—a way of spiritual liberation. Realizing—on a deep, existential level, not just intellectually—that one is not a self is supposed to be extremely difficult, but also crucially important in the process of Enlightenment. To really accept it is to have one's whole sense of who one is and what matters profoundly transformed. "Thinking on there being no self, he wins to the state where the conceit 'I am' has been uprooted, to the cool [i.e., *nirvāṇa*] even in this life."<sup>6</sup> I cannot see how merely rejecting some odd philosophical theory of the self could be supposed to have such a significant effect. If, on the other hand, what is being denied is an ordinary commonsense notion, then that might explain how the doctrine could be so radically transformative. But it would then have to seem radically counterintuitive to the uninitiated—that is, virtually everyone. But the more implausible the doctrine seems . . . well . . . the more implausible the doctrine seems. And, if it is being put up for consideration in the context of an academic philosophical discussion, supported only by philosophical argument and analysis (rather than, say, meditative insight), looking wildly implausible is hardly a point in its favor.

So, to start with the first horn of this dilemma, it has sometimes been suggested that all the historical Buddha meant to deny was the contemporary Brahmanical theory of the *ātman*—an unchanging core self that was also held to be identical with the universal spirit, Brahman—and even, perhaps, that he was only rejecting corrupt versions of that doctrine.<sup>7</sup> But rejecting the *ātman* theory would seem to leave most people—who never held it—just where they started. And even substantialist views of the self that are somewhat less radical than the full *ātman* theory can be rejected without much injury to ordinary common sense. Dan Zahavi puts the point well:

Consider the claim that the self—if it exists—is some kind of ontologically independent invariant *principle of identity* that stands apart from, and above, the stream of experiences, something that remains unchanging from birth to death; something that remains entirely unaffected by language acquisition, social relationships, major life events, personal commitments, projects and values, something that cannot develop or flourish nor be disturbed or shattered. Frankly, I don't see such a notion as being much in line with our pre-philosophical everyday understanding of who we are.<sup>8</sup>

If rejecting *that* notion of the self (let's call it "super-self") was all that *anattā* amounted to, then it is hard to see how it could be the crucial, existentially transformative doctrine it is supposed to be. It would be pretty much ordinary common sense, and the belief in the super-self—so understood—would be the radical, transformative vision; which is indeed what the *Upaniṣads* present it as being.

Turning to the other horn, if *anattā* is to have the radical implications it is supposed to, it seems it would have to involve a drastic change in what we ordinarily believe about ourselves and—more importantly—a radical change in the way we experience ourselves. But the more radically counterintuitive the doctrine is, the harder it will be to make it look at all plausible—especially if one is simply relying

on philosophical argument rather than encouraging the skeptical to embark on an arduous course of meditative discipline that will end with them seeing for themselves [*sic!*] the truth of the doctrine. One philosopher who does firmly seize this horn of the dilemma is Mark Siderits. Making what he notes is a speculative extrapolation from the teaching of some Buddhist Schools,<sup>9</sup> he argues for at least taking seriously the view that not only the self but even consciousness itself is an illusion. He rather neatly reverses an argument commonly used against *anattā*:

1. If there was conscious experience, it would require a conscious subject, a self;
2. There is conscious experience;
3. Therefore, there is a self and *anattā* is false.

Most defenders of *anattā* respond by rejecting (1), but Siderits accepts (1) and then insists that since (2\*) there is no self, we have to conclude that (3\*) there can be no consciousness either—that it is an illusion, albeit a deeply rooted and pervasive one. “There is no experiencing subject, not even a momentary one, nor is there the inner subjective realm.”<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that, if we do accept (1), then Siderits’ argument could work only as a *reductio* of its other premise (2\*), the rejection of which is, to put it mildly, far more plausible than the acceptance of (3\*).

Siderits does try to meet the obvious objection that it is incoherent to claim “that it seems to us that there is such a thing as its seeming to us . . . when in fact there are no seemings.”<sup>11</sup> He responds, first, by pointing out that illusions can persist even if we know that they are illusions. But the “illusion” that there is consciousness cannot be just an illusion like any other; it is the transcendently necessary condition for there to be any illusions (or, of course, veridical experiences) at all, and so it cannot, as such, itself be an illusion. Siderits does also suggest that it is possible that “the illusion may be dispelled by knowledge of its source.”<sup>12</sup> His claim is that those who reach Enlightenment might become “Robo-Buddhas”; it would cease even to seem to them that things seemed to them. The existence of such beings “would show that the difference between zombies and us is just one of our taking all too seriously the merely useful device of self-representation.”<sup>13</sup> But even if there could be—or even are—such beings, their existence would show not that consciousness was an illusion but only that it was possible to lose it. An illusion is only dispelled if there is someone who can experience it as dispelled. You don’t “dispel” the Muller-Lyer illusion for me by hitting me over the head so that I pass out, although it’s true that if you do I will no longer experience the illusion.

I would also note that the Buddhist credentials of such a view seem extremely dubious. There is, apparently, nothing that is like to be a Robo-Buddha; the dawning of Enlightenment would be the passage into oblivion. Some early Western interpreters of Buddhism did interpret *nirvāṇa* as extinction, but that view is now almost universally rejected as a travesty. Indeed, the Buddha is represented as rejecting that view himself in a famous passage in the Pali Scriptures:

There are some . . . who misrepresent me . . . saying: “The recluse Gotama [the Buddha] is a nihilist, he lays down the cutting off, the destruction, the disappearance of the existing entity.” But as this is just what I am not, as this is just what I do not say, therefore [they] misrepresent me untruly, vainly, falsely.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Buddhist or not, it is hard to see this view as proposing a desirable goal, something worth striving for. If my consciousness is an illusion, it is one I would prefer to hold on to. Even someone in despair, longing simply for oblivion, might think it would be a good deal easier to obtain by putting a bullet in his or her head than by embarking on an arduous process of meditation.<sup>15</sup> Siderits’ account does have the merit of making no-self a genuinely radical doctrine, thus making some sense of why it could be regarded as having deep existential or soteriological significance. However, he only makes *some* sense of this because he fails to explain how it could be taken as a desirable goal, something to long for. As the editors of *Self, No Self?* (including Siderits) note in their Introduction, in Siderits’ view, “the soteriological aim behind no-self is to overcome the illusion that we are not zombies. To say that most readers will find this implausible is probably not an overstatement.”<sup>16</sup>

## //

So can we find an interpretation of *anattā* that makes it still radical but not as wildly implausible as Siderits’ version? Such a theory would recognize the reality of conscious experience while denying that there are subjects who have this experience. And it is indeed often supposed that Buddhism holds a “bundle theory,” like Hume’s, according to which there are conscious mental states—thoughts, sensations, emotional episodes, et cetera—but that there is no self over and above these particular states.<sup>17</sup> Talk of the self or the subject is just a convenient shorthand for a bundle of causally connected particular states. The suggested parallel with the Humean view of the self may help to make *anattā* look more familiar to Western philosophers; but the parallel hardly recommends it to those many Western philosophers who think that we have decisive reasons to reject the Humean bundle theory.

The bundle theory is usually defended by appealing to a general principle of “mereological reductionism”—that parts are prior to the wholes they compose and that a whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts.<sup>18</sup> But, even if we set aside doubts that might reasonably be entertained about that general principle,<sup>19</sup> its application in this context presupposes that particular mental states, such as thoughts or feelings, can be understood independently of—and as prior to—a subject or self. So it is supposed that we can all agree that the particular mental states exist; and the bundle theorists can then ask why we should believe in the reality of anything further, over and above those agreed-on entities. But this assumes that we can first understand what a thought or a sensation is, without a self being presupposed. And this seems to me fundamentally false; I can make nothing of the idea that mental states are ontologically distinct basic entities. On the contrary, I can understand thoughts, sensations, et cetera only as episodes in the mental lives of subjects, which are thus ontologically prior to the states that they may have. So in arguing with someone like

me, a bundle theorist cannot start by saying: well, we all agree there are thoughts, but why suppose there are thinkers? For there is no such agreed starting point between bundle theorists and their opponents. It begs the question to start from the (to me unintelligible) notion of a thought without a thinker, and then appeal to Occam's Razor to justify dispensing with the self. Of course, simply to assert dogmatically that there can be no mental states without a subject would itself beg the question against the bundle theorist. So it might seem that there is a stand-off; one side takes particular mental states as ontologically fundamental, the other takes selves.

A number of strategies have been used to try and resolve this stand-off by arguing that the bundle theory—or at least some kind of no-self theory—*must* be true, however counterintuitive or implausible it may initially seem.<sup>20</sup> So it is sometimes claimed that the truth of the bundle theory necessarily follows from the rejection of what I have called above the “super-self” theory.<sup>21</sup> But I think Zahavi is right that our ordinary conception of the self is not a super-self one, and the Buddhists are also right that it isn't no-self either (*anattā* wouldn't be revisionary if it were). So our ordinary conception of self is what one might call (with a nod to the current context) a Middle Way between these extremes. And many philosophers have given intellectually sophisticated articulations of this middle-way approach, providing accounts of the self that are neither reductionist nor Cartesian (let alone Upaniṣadic).<sup>22</sup> Of course, it is open to the no-self theorist to argue that all these views are, on close examination, incoherent; but this would—to say the least—take a lot of work. The point is that there can be no shortcut to no-self simply through arguing that the super-self needs to be rejected, since there are plenty of intermediate views that need to be considered.

Another argument that some kind of no-self doctrine must be true appeals to the authority of science or, underlying that, to a broadly naturalistic metaphysics. An anonymous reviewer for this journal writes: “If anything like the science of psychology is possible, or anything like neuroscience, then there will be a level of description that doesn't directly invoke a self—and [self-conscious mental states] will have a description at that level—and so of course we can make sense of [them] without there being a self.” Well, neuroscience is indeed possible (because actual), but the question is whether it can, even in principle, give us a full and complete understanding of our mental life. Neuroscience does allow us to describe the neural correlates of some personal conscious states, but it certainly does not follow from that that we can “make sense” of these personal states without presupposing the reality of the self. Thinkers like Metzinger and Dennett do indeed argue from neuroscience to the unreality of the self,<sup>23</sup> but their arguments depend on the premise that a full, exhaustive account of reality can (and must) be given in wholly objective (impersonal, physical, third-person) terms. Granted this premise, then some form of no-self doctrine will indeed follow. (The self is a personal, subjective reality if it is anything, and one certainly won't find the self—or consciousness or free will—by doing fMRI scans.) But, of course, for just that reason, no believer in the self would accept such a premise, and, like many other philosophers (including Nagel, Searle, Chalmers, Zahavi, Baker, and Swinburne), I think we have every reason to reject it.<sup>24</sup>

If we can't break the stand-off between bundle theorists and their opponents in these ways, then I think our only recourse is to turn to phenomenology. And, although the classic bundle theorists improve on Siderits' nihilism by recognizing the reality of conscious experience, I do think their account of that experience is just phenomenologically inadequate. Although the classic sense-datum language has gone out of fashion, philosophers still often talk as though basic experiences were discrete and self-contained units, like the seeing of a chair or the hearing of a tone. But in ordinary perception, what is experienced is richly complex. Say I am looking at a chair. In so doing, I am aware, not just of that one object, but a whole range of other objects around it, forming a more-or-less carefully attended-to background. And I may also be aware of the chair as given to me through different modalities (e.g., sight and touch), and in doing so I experience it as one and the same thing. I may be aware of it from different angles, seeing first the front, then one side, then the back, as I walk around it, and again, experiencing all these as different aspects of the same thing. The crucial point here is not just the richness and quantity of experience—a bundle theorist can easily agree that there may be a lot going on in each bundle—but that the experiences are internally related. That is, each experience is what it is only because of all the others. I hear the note as part of the melody I have already started to hear and which has set up expectations for how it will continue; this experience of the chair is the one I expected to have, given the previous ones, and it sets up expectations for what the next one will be like. Indeed, even to speak of these experiences as though they were clearly distinct from one another is already to falsify the phenomenology: I don't hear this note and then that one; what I hear is, primarily, the tune as a whole, and it cannot be decomposed into a sequence of discrete notes.

But even thinking of mental states as internally, holistically related will not be enough to do justice to the phenomenology. For my total state of consciousness includes not only this whole array of elements that are flowing together and, in many cases, internally related to one another, but that they are all presented to *me* as aspects of *my* total experience. So I may be aware not only of seeing the chair and what I can see surrounding it, but also of hearing the radio playing in the background, feeling the breeze in my hair, smelling what's cooking, and so on. There is not just a seeing of the chair, a hearing of the radio, et cetera—even if these states are intimately connected and flow into one another. There is, rather, one total experience (the synchronic unity of consciousness) that is *my* being aware of all these things simultaneously—I, the mental subject whose states these all are (Kant's Transcendental Unity of Apperception). As Zahavi puts it:

When I consciously perceive an object, the perceptual experience itself is, at least tacitly, *given* as *my* experience. When I consciously taste freshly brewed coffee, touch an ice cube, see a dragonfly, or feel pain or dizziness, the experiences in question are characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them as my own.<sup>25</sup>

A defender of *anattā* might at this point respond: well, yes, Zahavi is right about the phenomenology. Our experience *is* given in this first-personal way, as to a self who experiences it all as "mine." But our experience may itself be misleading as to

what is really going on, and *anattā*, as a radical, revisionary view, is concerned precisely to point this out. All that is really happening is that impersonal psychological processes are constructing a false sense of self. In reply to this, I would note that Zahavi's understanding of the self or subject here is a phenomenological one. Selves, mental subjects, cannot be things that exist, just as stones in the road do,<sup>26</sup> whether or not anyone notices them. There is something reflexive about the existence of a mental subject; it exists, at least in part, in and through its awareness of itself, and if that awareness exists then the self exists.<sup>27</sup> The self is not a metaphysical entity that might be more or less plausibly *inferred* from experience. (I am concerned here, of course, with our everyday conception of the self, not with a super-self theory.) That my experience does have this first-personal structure is what I *mean* (or a crucial part of what I mean) when I say that I exist as a self or subject, and I can no more doubt the existence of the self in this sense than I can doubt the existence of consciousness itself. If the self thinks it exists, then it does exist; there is no possibility of *illusion* in such a case.

One who still wants to preserve something of the bundle theory may now accept that the synchronic unity of consciousness requires that there be a subject of experience at any moment, but still deny that such subjects are enduring entities. So at any moment there is a subject who has a wide range of experiences, but such subjects are fleeting, continually going out of existence and being replaced by new ones (which, however, inherit the memories, dispositions, et cetera of their predecessors). This seems to be the view of Georges Dreyfus, or of the Buddhist traditions on which he draws. According to Dreyfus, we should reject the traditional bundle theory, according to which "the person is just a convenient fiction imposed on a group of impersonal elements."<sup>28</sup> However, he insists, "The sense of the diachronic unity of the self is at the heart of the illusion of the self, which in many respects arises from blindness to change. . . . [D]iachronic unity is just a construct created by memory."<sup>29</sup> This claim that the "illusion" of diachronic unity "arises from blindness to change" is quite revealing; it suggests to me that Dreyfus is, albeit negatively, held captive by a kind of Parmenidian metaphysics, or a form of the "super-self" view, according to which change of any sort would be incompatible with identity across time. This, I think, is an assumption that we need to challenge.

One way to do this is to see that the very idea that we can treat synchronic and diachronic unity separately, as distinct problems, is itself deeply misleading. For the self at any moment is a mere abstraction from the continuing life of the self across time, and the experiences of the self "at any moment" are experiences of significance which necessarily involve a wider temporal context. I can't feel vaguely melancholy just at a certain moment; emotions have intentionality and necessarily have a history. I can't have a thought about the philosophy of mind just at a certain instant, either, as though it could be an open question whether it is me (the subject I am now) or another subject who will complete that thought. The "thought at this moment" will always be more or less arbitrarily cut out of a process of thinking. I can't hear a musical note just at the moment; I hear it as part of the melody that started earlier and which set up expectations for how it will continue. It's not even clear that I can feel

a sensation just in the moment. Is this moment supposed to have any temporal extension at all? Is it the specious present? But the specious present really is specious. My conscious waking experience is a continuous flow; it simply doesn't divide up naturally into discrete stages, which we then have to work out how to connect with one another. Bundle theorists treat both synchronic and diachronic unity as "binding problems"—how are all these events experienced simultaneously? How is this time-slice connected to that one? But these are pseudo-problems generated by making artificial distinctions. Once we have the idea that there are discrete mental objects, distinct time-slices and/or momentary selves, we then face the problem of how to connect them with one another. Once we see that there are no such distinct entities to start with, the problems dissolve.

Although Dreyfus mostly seems to be saying that there is synchronic unity while denying diachronic unity, he sometimes hints at a rather different view. For he argues that the reason why experiences are not impersonal is because they belong to "a minimal I (the constantly changing stream of pre-reflective self-aware experiences, not the reified self)."<sup>30</sup> Now if this "minimal I" is a continuing, albeit constantly changing, stream, then it can't be a merely momentary (non-diachronic) subject. It would indeed have to be something that endures though time—though in the way that a stream endures, rather than the way in which a rock does. In which case, then, it seems that the "minimal I" *does* have a kind of diachronic unity. ("This continuing stream of experience is mine; *that* one is yours.") And if, as we should, we reject the Parmenidian assumption that change is incompatible with identity, then we can accept that the self does indeed continue to exist across time, but as a "constantly changing stream" rather than as an immutable block.

### ///

So it seems then, that if we start with the classic bundle theory and keep modifying it in an effort to arrive at a view that is true to the phenomenology, we will eventually arrive at what we might call the stream theory, according to which consciousness is not an assemblage of discrete units, or even of synchronically unified but momentary slices, but is rather a continuous flow, in which internally related mental events come and go. This could still be regarded as a no-self theory in that it does not postulate a self apart from the stream of conscious experiences, which is supposed to "have" these experiences. And some scholars have argued that this stream or process view of the self is indeed what the original Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* amounted to. This claim has been made, for instance, by Sue Hamilton, who also claims that *anattā* should be taken not as a negative view about one particular putative entity (the self) but as an account of what it means for anything to exist. It is a denial of substance—understood as an unchanging, permanent core—in everything, not just the self. So it isn't teaching that the self is any less real than other entities, nor is it a nihilistic denial of any reality to anything. It is, rather, a claim that reality consists in process or flow rather than substance (comparable, perhaps, to the views of Heraclitus or Whitehead). In this view, *anattā* denies that anything is unchanging or unaffected by other

phenomena, but it doesn't make any invidious claims about the self, specifically, being unreal. As Hamilton puts it,

The point is that . . . the manner in which all things occur—including selves in the same way as musical notes, toenails, thoughts, laughter, aromas, cats, trees, chairs and stones—is generically the same, not that they are non-existent. Because of its subjective connotations, the term *anattā* can act as a red herring. The Buddha was denying, not people's selves, but that anything exists independently.<sup>31</sup>

This view might seem to have the advantage of being both metaphysically interesting and not wildly implausible. As Keith Ward says:

In so far as Buddhism works with the idea of a process-self, it should not be seen as a view which holds there is no self at all, over against a view which holds there is one immutable and indestructible self, beyond the temporal flow. The process-self which lies between these extremes is a dynamic, ceaselessly active subject, its content in constant change.<sup>32</sup>

However, while we may be content with the denial of an "immutable and indestructible self" (the "super-self" doctrine), there is still a need to distinguish between the self and its passing states. I have already argued that what is given phenomenologically is not just a collection (however closely related) of experiences (a hearing, a seeing, etc.) but a subject who is aware of hearing *this* while seeing *that* et cetera. And it now needs to be emphasized that some mental subjects ("persons") have the capacity for having higher-order thoughts, desires, and volitions about their various mental states (whether passing episodes or long-term dispositions).<sup>33</sup> And this *is* something about persons that radically differentiates their manner of being from those of toenails, chairs, and even cats. A person can, as Harry Frankfurt says, choose to identify or not identify with a first-order desire.<sup>34</sup> But this involves distinguishing between the desire and the "I" who has it. If I can stand back from and evaluate any particular state, then I cannot just be the succession of particular states.

A defender of the pure stream theory might say that there is really no distinct "I" involved; it is simply a matter of one particular mental state (one of self-critical evaluation) taking another one as its object. But that doesn't capture the first-personal nature of self-examination. Stepping back from my first-level states, and considering what sort of person I want to be, *I* am considering whether *I* want to identify with this desire or not. This crucially first-personal sense is lost when the phenomenon of self-examination is reduced to simply the occurrence of a state of mind that is about another one. (And there could, of course, be a third-level state that is about the second-level one and so on; this is why Frankfurt insists that a decisively personal act of identification is needed to halt a possible regress of higher-level states.<sup>35</sup>) It might be replied that, however deeply ingrained is this idea of ourselves as self-evaluating beings who can step back from ourselves, it might still be false. But, as I have argued above, the self is not a (perhaps wrongly) inferred entity, but is simply given in the phenomenology. Insofar as it is so given, it is real. And this is true, not just of myself considered as a minimal mental subject, but of myself considered as a self-aware person who can take up attitudes to my first-order mental states. Since I do, in fact,

do this all the time, and in so doing distinguish myself from these states, I cannot seriously doubt my existence as a being who can do so.

It would, in any case, seem hard for a Buddhist to claim that *anattā* requires the rejection of the Frankfortian self-examining self. For self-examination—mindfulness—is central to Buddhist practice. As the influential contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh puts it:

to take hold of our minds and calm our thoughts, we must also practice mindfulness of our feelings and perceptions. To take hold of your mind, you must practice mindfulness of the mind. You must know how to observe and recognize the presence of every feeling and thought which arises in you. . . . The essential thing is not to let any feeling or thought arise without recognizing it in mindfulness, like a palace guard who is aware of every face that passes through the front corridor.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than simply being caught up in one's first-order feelings and desires, one learns to step back from them and become aware of them as they arise and subside. But this surely presupposes the reality of a subject who can step back from and be aware of the particular states and who cannot, therefore, simply be identified with them. Moreover, Buddhism seems to be committed to the reality of this subject, not just as a spectator, but as an agent. For mindfulness is about self-control and self-shaping; about making oneself this kind of person, rather than that. For instance, the *Dhammapada*, one of the most revered of early Buddhist texts, is full of comments like the following:

The wise man, by vigour, mindfulness, restraint and self-control, creates for himself an island which no flood can submerge. . . . Just as an arrowsmith shapes an arrow to perfection with fire, so does the wise man shape his mind, which is fickle, unstable, vulnerable and erratic. . . . How good it is to rein the mind, which is unruly, capricious, rushing wherever it pleases. The mind so harnessed will bring one happiness. . . . One who keeps a rein on the wandering mind . . . will be freed from the tyranny of the tempter. . . . One may conquer a million men in a single battle; however, the greatest and best warrior conquers himself. Conquest of oneself is the greatest victory of all. . . . Arrowsmiths fashion arrows; carpenters shape wood; the virtuous mould themselves. . . . Let one mould himself, in accordance with the precepts he teaches. . . . Only the self shelters the self. What other refuge could there be outside the self?<sup>37</sup>

I cannot see what sense to make of such precepts without acknowledging the reality of the subject to which they are plainly addressed. Such a subject need not be an unchanging superself, but recognizing its reality does commit us to there being more to the self than simply a stream of mental events.

That the agency involved in Buddhist practice seems incompatible with *anattā* is a familiar problem in Buddhist philosophy;<sup>38</sup> perhaps the most interesting response to it is to say that Buddhist texts such as those quoted above are addressed to those who are as yet unenlightened, and accordingly speak in language that will make sense to them. Belief in myself as a subject who can step back from and learn to control my passing desires is necessary for a beginner, but that belief is a ladder that can eventually be thrown away.<sup>39</sup> One who takes this line might even concede the

points I have made above about the phenomenological nature of the concept of the self. Insofar as we do experience ourselves as selves, we *are* selves. But it might seem that the converse is also true: if we could, through meditational discipline, cease to experience ourselves as selves, then this would mean that we would cease to *be* selves.

This suggests a radically different way of interpreting *anattā*—not as a theory describing how things are, but as a practical injunction, encouraging us to engage in a meditational practice that will, in the vivid phrase of an anonymous reviewer for this journal, “kill” the phenomenology of selfhood. Seeing *anattā* in this way would have the advantage of fitting with the very well-established tradition that the Buddha repudiated metaphysical speculation and confined himself to teaching what was practically necessary to gain liberation.<sup>40</sup> (*Anattā* should not, therefore, be a piece of neutral metaphysics that might be taken up by, for example, cognitive scientists with no soteriological concerns at all.<sup>41</sup>)

Interesting as this approach is, though, my problem with it is that I am quite literally unable to understand what the goal of this supposedly liberating process is supposed to be. Unlike Siderits’ eliminativism, this approach agrees that experience will continue after enlightenment, but claims that it will cease to be the experience of a self. But that “experience” is given to a subject is not only the basic structure of my experience as it now is; it also seems to be transcendently necessary, in that I cannot conceive of what “experience” could be without it. And although “Try undergoing the process of meditation and you will find out for yourself!” is not by itself an unreasonable response, it becomes very paradoxical when the whole point is that there will (ultimately) be no me to have the promised experience. Nor do I think my inability here simply reflects my own lack of imagination. For if even Buddhist texts directed to the outsider—or even the seriously committed beginner—have to use the language of selfhood, that seems to concede that nothing can be said to the unenlightened to make the notion of selfless experience intelligible.

This means that we are left with something of a stand-off. I don’t doubt that some people who have engaged in disciplined meditational practice have had experiences that they have then tried to express by saying things like “There is awareness but no self.” But that does not, by itself, help to make intelligible to me what that could mean. And, of course, others, who have pursued equally rigorous meditative regimes in different traditions, have reported coming to experience their true selves as eternal, immutable, and identical with Brahman. I find it hard to avoid the suspicion that both are trying, with unavoidably inadequate language, to express what may be the same ultimately ineffable experience. But one should then be cautious about taking such utterances as articulating literal philosophical theses. In any case, it should be clear that a doctrine of this kind must be very different from the no-self doctrines defended in the West recently by empiricists and naturalists. For if it is *only* by engaging in deep meditative practice that one can even find intelligible the insights formulated in the *anattā* doctrine, then it can’t be identical with a doctrine that supposedly *can* be understood and accepted simply on the basis of thinking through a handful of thought-experiments (as in Parfit) or by reflecting on the alleged

consequences of modern science (as in Metzinger and Blackmore). But in that case, to try and appreciate *anattā* simply as an interesting piece of philosophy, one more option on the menu of “theories of personal identity,” would be to fundamentally mischaracterize it.

#### IV

Not all interpretations of *anattā* are reductionist. According to Miri Albahari, the proper Buddhist view does not see the self as merely a bundle, or even as merely a stream, of fleeting particular mental states. Rather, *anattā* allows for there to be a subject who has all the particular states. All the particular contents of consciousness are indeed, as I have argued against the bundle theorists, brought to a unified perspectival center (in Kantian terms, the Unity of Apperception). But this basic, perspectival self is, according to Albahari, essentially impersonal; the deep illusion that is overcome in the experience of *nirvāṇa* is that this impersonal pure subject is a personal owner of experience:

The heart of the self-illusion will, I contend, lie in the personalized *identity* that seems to place a boundary around the (real) unified perspective, turning it into what I call a ‘personal owner’ . . . What remains after the sense of self has dissolved is a unified, perspectival ‘witness consciousness’ that, insofar as it lacks the illusion of a personal self, is intrinsically ownerless.<sup>42</sup>

The illusion of a personalized self comes about through “the mechanism of identification [which is] the appropriation of mental content to the subject’s perspective such that the content seems to qualify (and hence filter) the very outlook through which the world is approached.”<sup>43</sup> Albahari goes on to propose that “nirvana, as a deep and transformative insight into no-self, be understood as the culmination of a process whereby the trained use of witness consciousness, through meditation, brings about a full de-identification from all mental and physical phenomena.”<sup>44</sup> The idea seems to be that the pure I, the “witness consciousness,” learns to detach itself from all its particular states, to say to each of them “This is not me.” This does at least seem to make the practice of mindfulness as described in the quote above from Thich Nhat Hanh intelligible in a way that I don’t think a bundle or stream theory can. Interestingly, it seems to postulate what is really almost the opposite of the bundle theory—a pure self so pure as to be detached altogether from the passing states, which drift across it like clouds passing over the pure blue of the sky. Albahari’s position does seem close to that of some Zen writers, such as Zenkei Shibayama, who compares Zen consciousness with a mirror:

The mirror is thoroughly egoless and mindless. If a flower comes, it reflects a flower, if a bird comes it reflects a bird. It shows a beautiful object as beautiful, an ugly object as ugly. Everything is revealed as it is. There is no discriminating mind or self-consciousness on the part of the mirror. If something comes, the mirror reflects; if it disappears, the mirror just lets it disappear. . . . [N]o traces of anything are left behind.<sup>45</sup>

Ironically, perhaps, if *anattā* arose historically as a polemic against the Brahmanical theory of the *ātman*, this idea of a pure “witness consciousness” seems very close to the views of some Hindu schools, notably Advaita Vedānta.<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Fasching notes that for many Indian schools,

The normal way we are aware of ourselves—that is, our self-awareness as a distinct psychophysical entity with particular characteristics and abilities, formed by a personal history, standing in manifold relations to other things and persons etc—is . . . really the construction of a *pseudo*-self that obscures what we really are. . . . Yet, whilst for Buddhism this means that the spiritual aim is to realize that it is an illusion that something like a self exists at all, for ‘orthodox’ schools such as Advaita Vedānta . . . liberation lies, on the contrary, in *becoming aware* of the true self (*ātman* or *purusa*). . . . This ‘self’ is, of course, radically different from what we normally experience as ‘ourselves’: It has no qualities at all . . . and neither does, nor wants, anything. . . . [It is] the very process of experiencing itself . . . which is the constant ground of our own being.<sup>47</sup>

The idea seems to be that we normally perceive things in terms of our interests, needs, desires, projects, sympathies, and animosities, as the “psychophysical entities” we are, with the “personal histories” that we have. However, we can, in principle at least, step back from everything that makes us the personal individuals that we are and consider ourselves simply as perspectively located subjects of experience. But can I experience myself simply as this pure witness consciousness? Can my mind really become a “mirror” which simply notes, impersonally, the birds and flowers as they come and go, without in any way relating them to anything that is specific to me? Albahari suggests that “evidence of perspectival ownership coupled with a complete lack of personal ownership feeling” may be found in “the pathological impairments of epileptic automatism, akinetic mutism and the advanced onset of Alzheimer’s disease.”<sup>48</sup> She does note, though, that this hardly seems to offer an attractive model for understanding *nirvāṇa*!<sup>49</sup> It would seem more promising to focus on the reported experiences of Buddhist or Advaitist meditators. If they claim to have had the sorts of experiences described, for instance, by Shibayama, then who are we to doubt the possibility of what is, for them, actual? All the same, the idea that we can experience things in a wholly impersonal, yet still subjective, way is puzzling.

I will come back to this point in a minute, but we should also note that, even if it is true that the personal self is “constructed”—built up, first by social/cultural pressures, and later also in part by its own decisions to identify with some but not others of its first-order desires<sup>50</sup>—it does not follow that it is illusory. Nor would that be shown even if it were true that it could (albeit with great difficulty) be deconstructed.<sup>51</sup> The personal self, as Albahari describes it, is entirely real; it really is built up from acts of identification. So it does seem that she is committed to what I have called above the “practical” interpretation of *anattā*, that it should not be understood primarily as a theoretical, metaphysical doctrine, but as a practical injunction to deconstruct the (all-too-real) personal self by withdrawing one’s acts of identification.

That it does interpret *anattā* practically is a point in its favor, and the fact that it allows for a subject, albeit a depersonalized one, to continue after the destruction of the personal self, means that it does not aim at the (to me) unintelligible goal of experience without an experienter. However, we still need to ask if the goal that it does posit is itself an intelligible one, whether the aim of de-personalising the self really makes sense.

In my ordinary experience of the world I perceive things around me not just in abstract or neutral terms, merely as objects possessing certain properties, but rather as having *significance* for me. I see not just a red book or a blue flower, but my familiar battered old copy of a much-loved novel, or the flower that I picked from the garden to brighten up the dining table. The point is not just about familiarity, though; I also experience unfamiliar objects as significant—and one aspect of their significance may be, precisely, their unfamiliarity. (I feel disoriented among them, or charmed by their novelty.) I perceive things in terms of their relevance for my activities, my projects, as useful or as obstacles, as ready at hand or annoyingly just out of reach. I experience them as emotionally or aesthetically significant for me—comforting or threatening, alluring or disturbing. They bring back agreeable or disagreeable memories for me, or make me think of the plans I need to make. I see the world in terms of the opportunities it offers or the threats it poses. (And this is itself only possible because of the person I am and the things that I want or fear.) Of course, things don't all have the same degree of significance—they matter more or less to me. Those that have more significance are the things that stand out for me, while the others recede into the background. And this distinction of focus is a crucial part of perceptual experience; things are never just noted in an equal, even way. There is always a distinction between what is at the center of one's attention and what is on the periphery.

Our world makes sense to us in terms of the projects we pursue in it. Without these projects nothing would matter to us, and so nothing would stand out for us as salient, so that even basic perceptual experience would reduce to a meaningless blur. There are some "projects"—getting enough to eat, avoiding injury, and so forth—which do not have much to do with the distinctiveness of character, but which still provide an organizing structure for our experience of the world (this is edible, that is dangerous, etc.). But that I pursue other projects—and even the ways in which I pursue the more basic ones<sup>52</sup>—is expressive of my having a certain character, a relatively coherent structure of interests, dispositions, and desires. The way I perceive the world, then, depends on who I am, on my character and personality, my virtues and vices, the projects I undertake, and the kinds of things I value or despise (which are themselves expressive of the character I have). But now recall Fasching's description of what a depersonalized subject would be. A pure "witness consciousness" would be without "self-awareness as a distinct psychophysical entity with particular characteristics and abilities, formed by a personal history, standing in manifold relations to other things and persons etc." It would have "no qualities at all . . . and neither does, nor wants, anything"—it would simply be "the very process of experi-

encing itself.” But if the arguments above are correct, it seems that “the very process of experiencing” must itself be a personal one. For it is hard to know what it would even mean to ascribe experience at all to a being that had no particular personal characteristics, desires, et cetera.

Of course, it may be said that this is the point: that the Buddhist or Advaitist meditator aims to enter a state utterly different from that of ordinary experience, one in which the contrast between subject and object drops away. Buddhist teachings place great emphasis on the inability of conceptual thinking to understand what *nirvāṇa* is. However (on pain of returning to something like Siderits’ nihilism), it must be that experience in some sense (and blissful experience at that) continues—and that (for the search for *nirvāṇa* to be intelligible as a goal for me to pursue) such experience must still be in some sense *mine*. So the depersonalized witness consciousness cannot be just some other entity; it must still in some sense be me—be already at the heart of what my personal consciousness is, even now.

Even if we grant that such a state of depersonalized experience, though ineffable, is still somehow possible, it would seem to be incompatible with continued psychophysical existence as a being-in-the-world, which requires things to stand out for me as personally significant. It is notable, therefore, that legends of the historical Buddha have him deliberately choosing not to pass fully into *nirvāṇa* after his experience of enlightenment, in order to remain in the world to teach.<sup>53</sup> Hence, his full passing into *nirvāṇa* could only occur after his physical demise.<sup>54</sup> (And this was the inspiration for the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism—that of the enlightened being who postpones entry into *nirvāṇa* in order to help others to attain enlightenment.) So one faces the question of what it would be to live as the historical Buddha did—that is, as one who has gained enlightenment but continues to function effectively as a psychophysical agent in the world. If the argument above is right, then such a consciousness could not be fully depersonalized. But, one might conjecture, it might experience the world in a non-egoistic manner, not seeing things around it simply in terms of what I can do with that, no longer driven by selfish feelings of greed, lust, anxiety, pride, and fear. Such a person would, however, still experience the world as full of particular significant entities that stand out for the particular significance that they have (this is a good opportunity for teaching; this is a person who needs to be helped, etc.). One might indeed suppose that, by lifting the veil of selfish concern that distorts our usual perception of things, the enlightened one would see things as having the significance that they really do have in themselves, rather than simply the significance they have for me.

One might start to get a sense of what this might be like by considering simple, everyday examples. Iris Murdoch has discussed how “The chief enemy of excellence in morality . . . is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.”<sup>55</sup> And she notes how, even apart from any meditational discipline, one can sometimes be jolted out of this haze of distorting, egoistic fantasy:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding, perhaps, on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to think of the other matter, it seems less important.<sup>56</sup>

Here we have a thoroughly existential, rather than metaphysical, version of “no self.” Metaphysically, of course, I am there all the time, first brooding resentfully, then appreciating the kestrel. But the nature of my experience has changed. It is still *my* experience, but it is no longer all *about me*. Buddhism—and other spiritual traditions—can reasonably be seen as suggesting ways to radicalize such a transformation of consciousness, and render it more permanent. Joel Kupperman claims that Zen practice can lead to a state of mind in which we experience the world with greater moral perceptiveness, but also with greater aesthetic sensitivity. Zen involves

an aesthetic claim that the world—anything in the world—is beautiful if seen with properly appreciative eyes. . . . Underneath the confused thoughts and emotional surges that dominate the lives of most of us, it is claimed, lies something that (when calm and peaceful) will have remarkably positive experiences—and also positive attitudes toward others.<sup>57</sup>

This, one might say, involves not so much the breaking down of the self as the rescue of the true self (the “something” that lies beneath our confused states) from the delusive cravings of one’s ego. And, although it might be seen as a preliminary to the full entry into the wholly depersonalized state of *nirvāṇa*, this freeing of one’s underlying true self might also be seen as a goal worth pursuing for itself, in its own right.

## V

It really isn’t for me to say if this is what Buddhist Enlightenment while still in this world would be like. But this account does have several advantages: it posits a comprehensible existential or soteriological goal; it describes a radical transformation of our ordinary consciousness that would be very hard to attain but does not seem unintelligible; and it does not depend on a metaphysically dubious denial of the self. If we see *anattā* in this way, then it appears as a radical soteriological injunction, not as a contribution to philosophy of mind. And if we want to find parallels to it, we should look not to contemporary cognitive science but to other religious traditions. (I am well aware of how unwelcome this suggestion will be to the contemporary enthusiasts for “naturalized” Buddhism!) All the major “post-axial” religious traditions have sought ways to bring about something like the transformation of consciousness outlined above, though they have conceptualized it in different ways. For the theistic traditions, one tries to come closer to seeing the world as God sees it. St. Paul says “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.”<sup>58</sup> Most Christians have interpreted this as a call to become more Christ-like, but some mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, have spoken more radically about the annihilation of the personal self, its transformation into a pure channel for divine perception. Such

views can also be found in Islam, especially in Sufism: “In itself, this self has nothing to call its own. . . . [I]ndividuals have no self other than what they are with God and all of what they are belongs to God, not to them. Our true and proper self is no self at all, that is, no self of our own. . . . [O]ur true self is the face of God that looks on us at each instant.”<sup>59</sup> And Pierre Hadot describes the not dissimilar view of what seems superficially a very different tradition:

In Stoicism, [the] objective was the conformity of our individual will with reason, or the will of universal nature. . . . Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world and does not see the world qua world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality.<sup>60</sup>

I don’t want to deny the significant differences between all these accounts, or between them and Buddhism. But in all these cases one finds the goal of transcending one’s ego, not in order to reach a state of blank impersonality, but to experience the world in a way that is truer to its real nature—one of appreciation, love, insight. John Hick argues that, in all these traditions, the aim is to bring about

a change of the individual from an absorbing self-concern to a new centering in the supposed unity-of-reality-and-value that is thought of as God, Brahman, the Dharma, Śūnyatā, or the Tao. Thus the generic conception of salvation/liberation, which takes a different specific form in each of the great traditions, is that of the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness.<sup>61</sup>

One might worry that if we all put aside our personal selves in order to experience the world in a more universal way, then we would all, in the end, become indistinguishable. But accounts of Saints, Hassidim, Zen Masters, et cetera in the various traditions seem, on the contrary, to reveal very distinctive—and often highly eccentric—personalities. A kind of experience that is both selfless and yet personally distinctive may well seem paradoxical, but I think we have good evidence that it is possible to achieve.

To repeat: I am not claiming that this is an accurate account of “the” Buddhist view, or that this is what *anattā* “really” means. I have no doubt, in fact, that it has meant many different things in different contexts and different schools, and some of them may indeed have turned it into the sort of reductive metaphysics that some contemporary interpreters admire, and which I clearly do not. But the account sketched above is one that respects the Buddha’s primarily soteriological concerns, and is one that offers (to my mind, at least) an intelligible goal to aim at. Of course, it involves substantive and controversial metaphysical commitments of a strongly non-naturalistic variety.<sup>62</sup> And this will make it unappealing to those who have looked to Buddhism to flesh out or support the sort of skepticism about the self that is popular in some Western naturalistic circles. But I think we have excellent reasons to reject eliminative, reductive, or skeptical views about the self, and I have found nothing in the recent attempts to shore up such views by drawing on Buddhist sources to make me revise this judgment.

I do not, then, think that Buddhism provides us with helpful answers to the post-Lockean metaphysical problem of personal identity. But I suspect that it is a mistake to look to it for that sort of thing in any case. Thich Nhat Hanh warns that Buddhist concepts like no-self have an essentially practical role. It is an abuse of them to use them as the building blocks of an objective, metaphysical system:

The meditation on interdependence is intended to remove the false barriers of discrimination so that one can enter into the universal harmony of life. It is not intended to produce a philosophical system, a system of interdependence.

Try to see . . . that impermanence is a concept, non-self is a concept, emptiness is a concept, so that you will not become imprisoned in the concepts of impermanence, non-self, and emptiness.<sup>63</sup>

I will conclude with the words of a Western Buddhist and scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze: “Those who look to Buddhism for startlingly new and unheard of ideas on the problem of self will find little. Those who look for advice on how to lead a self-less life, may learn a great deal.”<sup>64</sup>

## Notes

- 1 – Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 502–503.
- 2 – See Susan Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness* (London: Oneworld, 2011). Also see Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 550, 566, and James Giles, *No Self to be Found: The Search for Personal Identity* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), pp. 128–132, 143–144.
- 3 – A pioneer in this respect was Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). More recent works include Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (London: Ashgate, 2003), and Miri Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 4 – Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, eds., *Self, No Self? Perspectives From Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I will be drawing heavily on this anthology since it contains clear recent statements of a wide range of different Buddhist-inspired theories as well as some important critiques.
- 5 – I should say that I am very grateful to my colleague, Anantanand Rambachan, for help with linguistic matters.
- 6 – *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, IV.353, quoted in John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan,

- 1989), p. 285. Hick quotes from the English translation in E. M. Hare, ed. and trans., *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara Nikāya) or More-numbered Suttas Volume IV* (London: Luzac, 1965), p. 233.
- 7 – See, e.g., Christmas Humphries, *Buddhism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 85–87.
- 8 – Dan Zahavi, “The Experiential Self: Objections and Clarifications,” in Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* p. 66.
- 9 – Mark Siderits, “Buddhas as Zombies: A Buddhist Reduction of Subjectivity,” in Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* p. 309 n. 5.
- 10 – Ibid., p. 329.
- 11 – Ibid., p. 327.
- 12 – Ibid.
- 13 – Ibid., p. 329.
- 14 – *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1.140; quoted in Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 285, from I. B. Horner, trans., *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya)*, vol. 1 (London: Luzac, 1954), p. 180.
- 15 – Of course, traditional Buddhism does have an answer to this point: suicide would bring not cessation but an unhappy rebirth.
- 16 – Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, “Introduction” to Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* p. 26.
- 17 – Parfit indeed claims that the Buddha was the first bundle theorist; see Derek Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons,” in Brie Gertler and Lawrence A. Shapiro, eds., *Arguing About the Mind* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 231. Miri Albahari and Georges Dreyfus both note the prevalence of this interpretation while dissenting from it; see Albahari, “Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness,” in Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* p. 81, and Georges Dreyfus, “Self and Subjectivity: A Middle Way Approach,” in *Self, No Self?* p. 115.
- 18 – This does seem to be central to the argument of one important Buddhist text often cited by Western defenders of no-self doctrines; see the extracts from *The Questions of King Milinda*, in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. and trans. Edward Conze (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), pp. 147–151.
- 19 – See Wittgenstein’s comments, aimed in part at his own earlier “logical atomism,” in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), sections 46–64.
- 20 – I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for encouraging me to consider these strategies.
- 21 – The anonymous reviewer seems to take this “no alternative” view by claiming that if we reject the idea that self-scrutiny involves a “separately existing

substantial entity taking a look at a mental state,” then “the evaluation *must* consist in one mental state taking another as its object” (the reviewer’s italics). Parfit likes to claim that reductionism about the self is the only alternative if one rejects Cartesianism; see Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 223–228, and “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons,” pp. 230–232.

- 22 – For some examples, from several different philosophical traditions, see P[eter] F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), chap. 3; Paul Ricoeur, *One-self as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), “Introduction” and passim; John McDowell, “Reductionism and the First Person,” in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), chap. 6; Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Lynne Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also my paper “Narrative, Expression and Mental Substance,” *Inquiry* 48, no. 5 (2005).
- 23 – See Metzinger, *Being No One*, and Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), chap. 13, which argues that the self, though not quite an illusion, is a necessary fiction.
- 24 – It is worth noting that this radical materialism would be rejected by many no-self theorists, too, classic Phenomenalists in the West; but surely also by the great majority of Buddhists.
- 25 – Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 61.
- 26 – Or, at least, as realists think they do.
- 27 – Although I cannot doubt my own existence as a mental subject, this does not mean that self-knowledge—in the sense of understanding my character or personality—is automatic or easy. That is certainly far from being the case. On this see my *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chaps. 3 and 9.
- 28 – Dreyfus, “Self and Subjectivity,” p. 133.
- 29 – *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 133.
- 30 – *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 31 – Sue Hamilton, *Indian Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 51. For detailed accounts of early Buddhist thought along these lines, see Hamilton’s *Identity and Experience* (London: Luzac Oriental, 1996) and *Early Buddhism: A New Approach: The I of the Beholder* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).
- 32 – Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 98.
- 33 – In distinguishing *persons* from other mental subjects in this way I am following Harry Frankfurt; see his classic paper “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of

- a Person,” in Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 34 – See Frankfurt, “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” in his *The Importance of What We Care About*.
- 35 – See “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person” and “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” in Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 21–22 and 164–172.
- 36 – Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: an Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 37–38.
- 37 – *The Dhammapada*, trans. Ananda Maitraya, revised by Rose Kramer (Novato CA: Lotsawa, 1988), 2.5, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, 8.4–5, 10.17, 12.3–4 (citing chapter and verse numbers).
- 38 – See, e.g., William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield, eds., *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chaps. 24 and 25.
- 39 – On this pedagogically calculated Buddhist practice of teaching simplified versions of the truth, or even salutary falsehoods, to beginners, see David Burton, “Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire: Buddhist Philosophical Therapy,” in Jonardon Ganeri and Clare Carlisle, eds., *Philosophy as Therapie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 203–209. As Burton notes, different schools differed as to which teachings were the ultimately true ones and which were simplifications or falsehoods, while some argued that *all* doctrinal formulations (including, therefore, *anattā*) were supposed to be ultimately rejected by the enlightened. See Burton, “Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire,” pp. 206–208.
- 40 – *Poṭṭhapāda Sūtra*, in Trevor Ling, ed., *The Buddha’s Philosophy of Man: Early Indian Buddhist Dialogues*, Everyman’s Library (paper) (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), pp. 62–63.
- 41 – Burton, “Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire,” pp. 189–190.
- 42 – Albahari, “Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness,” in Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* pp. 81–82.
- 43 – *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 44 – *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 45 – Quoted in Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 6.
- 46 – Albahari recognizes that her view “aligns Buddhism more closely with Advaita Vedānta than is usually acknowledged” (Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism*, p. 2).
- 47 – Wolfgang Fashing, “‘I am of the Nature of Seeing’: Phenomenological Reflections on the Indian Notion of Witness-Consciousness,” in Siderits et al., *Self, No Self?* p. 194.

- 48 – Albahari, “Nirvana and Ownerless Consciousness,” pp. 105–106.
- 49 – Ibid., pp. 105, 112.
- 50 – See Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”; Charles Taylor, “What Is Human Agency” and “The Concept of a Person,” both in his *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 51 – My own view is that the self is partly a construction—and in part its own self-construction. For more detail on this see my *Self, Value, and Narrative*. But the “construction” of the self, in the sense of the building up of a particular personal character, presupposes the reality of oneself as a continuing mental subject. And this subject, I think, always already has some distinctive characteristics. A newborn baby does not come into the world as a little *tabula rasa*.
- 52 – For instance, whether I am cautious or reckless in regard to dangers, ascetic or gluttonous in regard to food, etc.
- 53 – See, e.g., the *Ariyapariyesanā* (“Noble Search”), in Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), pp. 111–114.
- 54 – See *Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta*, in Ling, *The Buddha’s Philosophy of Man*, pp. 197–198.
- 55 – Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 59.
- 56 – Ibid., p. 84.
- 57 – Joel J. Kupperman, *Six Myths About the Good Life: Thinking About What Has Value* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), pp. 58, 61.
- 58 – Galatians 2:20.
- 59 – William Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2008), p. 56.
- 60 – Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. with introd. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 268, 273.
- 61 – Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 36. Some may think this assimilates the different religious traditions too much; in particular, it will be objected that Buddhism has no God (or God-like being) to become centered on. I will leave Hick to answer that charge: “Nirvana is not regarded in the main Buddhist tradition as simply the psychological state of unselfcentredness, but rather as the fundamental and eternal reality that can only be realized through this state of unselfcentredness. Nirvana as a psychological state constitutes the immanence of the Eternal in human life” (Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 286). In support of this interpretation, Hick cites a well-known remark ascribed to the Buddha in the Pali Scriptures: “Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that not-born, not-become, not-made, not-compounded

were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded" (*Udāna*, 80.iii; quoted in Hick, *Interpretation*, p. 286, from F. L. Woodward, ed. and trans., *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon: Part II, Udāna*. . . . [London: Oxford University Press, 1948], pp. 97–98). I will leave it to Buddhists to decide whether or not Hick represents their views accurately.

- 62 – Though I think one might be able to take on at least some of the ideal of a purified consciousness without getting too deep into the metaphysics.
- 63 – Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, pp. 55, 92–93.
- 64 – Edward Conze, *Buddhism: its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 20–21.