

4: Self and no-self

According to the Buddhist 'anatta', or 'no-self', doctrine there are no persisting people. There is simply the series of experiences that I think of as mine, but nothing underlying them that *has* them. The 'I' that existed five minutes ago is not the same 'I' as that which exists now. This doctrine is defended on the basis of my experience of myself (and sometimes also by appeal to split-brain research.)

The Buddhist view need not claim that there is *no* sense in which I survive from one day to the next: there is some kind of continuity in 'my' mental life. But there is not a 'deep' sense in which I survive. What this means is that there is no reason for me to feel a special concern for what I think of as 'my' future welfare. One who has fully assimilated the doctrine will regard all future pains and pleasures as on the same level.

The simple soul view may remove the fear of death through convincing us that there is a future life. The no-self view may remove the fear in a quite different way: through overcoming the concern about what happens to '*me*'.

David Hume

'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.' [David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part iv, sec vi]

'But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. ... They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind.' [David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part iv, sec vi]

'The true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are linked together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas, in their turn, produce other impressions. One thought chases another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expelled in its turn. In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more properly to anything than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity'. (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part iv, Section 6.)

Buddhism

We constantly witness the indisputable fact that things in the phenomenal world are changing all the time. Observation of change will bring us to the realization that things are not only constantly changing but momentarily so; they are not at all durable but

instantaneous. There is no reality other than separate, instantaneous bits of existence. The universal flux we experience in the phenomenal world is nothing other than strings of momentary events. Further reflection tells us that even this shortest moment (ksana) can be divided into smaller units ad-infinitum. Therefore, *things have no duration whatsoever; they disappear as soon as they appear*. The durable existence of things is an illusion. (Chang, Garma C. C. *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) cf pp 69-70.)

‘Buddha has spoken thus: "O Brethren, actions do exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not. There is no one to cast away this set of elements and no one to assume a new set of them. There exists no Individual, it is only a conventional name, given to a set of elements."’ [Cila Mara]

‘The mental and the material are really here,
But here there is no human being to be found.
For it is void and merely fashioned like a doll,
Just suffering piled up like grass and sticks’
(*Visuddhimagga*)

‘Strictly speaking, the duration of the life of a living being is exceedingly brief, lasting only while a thought lasts. Just as a chariot wheel in rolling rolls only at one point of the tyre, and in resting rests only at one point; in exactly the same way the life of a living being lasts only for the period of one thought’ (*Visuddhimagga*)

Derek Parfit

‘Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was a such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. When I believed the Non-Reductionist View, I also cared more about my inevitable death. After my death, there will be no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact. Though there will later be many experiences, none of these experiences will be connected to my present experiences by chains of such direct connections as those involved in experience-memory, or in the carrying out of an earlier intention. Some of these future experiences may be related to my present experiences in less direct ways. There will later be some memories about my life. And there may later be thoughts that are influenced by mine, or things done as the result of my advice. My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad. Instead of saying, 'I shall be dead', I should say, 'There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences. Because it

reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing.’
(Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p 281)

Pirsig

It was explained to me finally that ‘You have a new personality now’. But this statement was no explanation at all. It puzzled me more than ever since I had no awareness at all of any ‘old’ personality. If they had said, ‘You *are* a new personality’, it would have been much clearer. That would have fitted. They had made the mistake of thinking of a personality as some sort of possession, like a suit of clothes, which a person wears. But apart from a personality what is there? Some bones and flesh. A collection of legal statistics, perhaps, but surely no person. The bones and flesh and legal statistics are the garments worn by the personality, not the other way around. [Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 90-1]

Some questions:

- (i) Does Hume, in the first of the above passages, offer good grounds for the claim that he makes in the second?
- (ii) Can any sense be made of the view expressed in the passage from the *Cila Mara*?
- (iii) Present in your own words Parfit’s reasons for finding the ‘reductionist’ view liberating and consoling. Are there things to be said on the other side?