

Selfhood and the Metaphysics of Altruism

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ABSTRACT

Altruistic and greater-good considerations are not only fundamental aspects of ethical maturity, but also a basic means for coming to know each other. Rational egoism (the view that practical rationality requires some form of personal pay-off for the goal-driven agent) is not so easily snubbed, nor has it fallen terribly out of fashion in the social sciences and economics. I argue that it is not a truism that altruism is less natural than egocentrism for an ordinary self. It is false. I aim to reconceive the problem that altruistic considerations seem less rational than justified, egocentric considerations. I conclude that the self can identify with *subjectivity as such*, and thereby advance the interests of a “we-self.” While epistemically distant, the “we-self” is ontologically prior to the ego.

I conceive the problem in terms of a central distinction in Indian philosophy; the distinction between an ego-self (*ahankāra*) and either a bundle of property tropes (as we find in schools of Buddhist philosophy), or a persisting synthesizer of experiences that is not solely identified as “this body” (as we find in Monistic-Śaivism). For Mādhyamika-Buddhist thinkers like Śāntideva (c. 8th century C.E.), an error-theory of self provides good reasons for altruism. I argue that this is logically unconvincing. In chapter 3, I appropriate Levinas’s discussion of the Other/other to develop a Buddhist-inspired, Emptiness Ethics. However, I dismantle this in chapter 4, where I appeal to aspectual metaphysics, particularly, the notion of composition as identity (CAI), to clarify not only the rational status of other-centric considerations, but the very possibility of acting on such considerations.

In chapter 4, I offer a Śaivist-inspired solution to the problem of other minds. Borrowing from Abhinavagupta (c. 10th-11th century C.E.), I contend that the possibility of identifying with and acting for a larger whole lies in recognizing ourselves as both individuals and others (*bhedābheda*). I develop this by showing how normativity and a concept of selfhood go hand in hand; and, furthermore, the reflexivity of consciousness allows us to recognize a self that is not limited to only practical and narrative identities, but to *self as such*.

INTRODUCTION: AN ETHICAL DEFENSE OF SELFHOOD AS OTHER-CENTRICITY

It is not a truism that altruism is less natural than selfishness, or has less normative authority—for an ordinary self. It is false, or so I shall argue. The self can be naturally unselfish, and by that, I mean at least two things: self-regarding desires are not primary in any sort of ethically relevant sense, and the self is in large part constituted by its commitments to others. Moreover, the self can act *as* and *for* another, a metaphysical point I will develop throughout the entirety of this essay, but especially in my final chapter.

As early as Plato's *Republic*, the Greek and Euro-American traditions have grappled with the rationality of morality construed in terms of a potential conflict with prudence and rational self-interest. When Glaucon and Adeimantus challenge Socrates with the Ring of Gyges scenario, Socrates argues that it is better to be seemingly unjust (or, falsely perceived as exclusively pursuing egocentric considerations), but actually just, than to be seemingly just, but actually unjust. By the final chapters, Plato, through the mouthpiece of Socrates, argues that it is to our advantage to be moral. More specifically, he argues that it is to the *individual's* advantage to maintain moral integrity. For even Thrasymachus—the moral rascal and antagonist of Book I—would admit that there is obviously some benefit to society operating within a moral framework. However, the clever egoist will readily take advantage of that very framework, and, when possible, act amorally (and perhaps even *immorally*) to further his own advantage. To the contrary, Plato argues that it is always advantageous for the individual to lead a just life (in the sense of adequately promoting the greater good). Still, Plato's driving premise is construed in

self-regarding terms; the just person will enjoy the benefits of a healthy mental life, and the unjust person will not.

The problem is that a socially acceptable egocentric consideration sometimes comes into direct conflict with considerations for the greater good. For those of us who are unconvinced by Divine Command Theory, we do not want to be forced between sensible, reasonable action, and a moral command that runs against the grain of what it would otherwise make sense to do. More precisely, self-interest and prudence are eminently rational; it makes practical sense to advance one's own interests and to seek the best life possible for oneself in terms of personal rewards and achievements.

The first, and most obvious, question here is, "What sort of self-interest are we talking about?" I will limit the conversation to commonsense interests that operate within a legally and socially sanctioned framework. For example, say Mr. Price has been a law-abiding, and for the most part, good-natured citizen and neighbor. He has amassed considerable wealth in the health industry. He does not endorse a health mandate requiring healthy individuals to pay into a coffer that would cover the expenses of lower cost health insurance for the most vulnerable and poorer citizens. If Mr. Price has a legally sanctioned choice between keeping more of his salary or keeping less (by way of taxes), and he sees no personal reward in keeping less (it will not directly improve his life-standard), we would need to provide some good reason for him to keep less. Improving his own life-standard within a legally acceptable framework makes immediate sense. It makes so much sense that Mr. Price might argue that this mandate is an unjustified "penalty" for those who reap

no benefits from it. While those who disagree with Mr. Price might claim that *moral incentives* provide him with a good reason to pay into the coffer, they must either show him how moral incentives make rational sense, or convince him that morality in some instances overrides rationality (say, “rationality” understood as instrumental reason). But if they insisted on the latter claim, then they would be committed to the view that morality (specifically as it relates to altruistic and unselfish behavior) is either sometimes *extra-rational* or *irrational*. In other words, it represents either an entirely different order of practical motivations that (hopefully) encompasses calculative and instrumental reasoning, or somehow transcends it, or simply makes no material sense. We can safely rule out the last option here.

So, if we want morality to be reasonable, then we must assume that the following is true: altruistic and unselfish behavior are eminently rational; it makes sense not to always pursue what would secure the best life possible for oneself in terms of personal rewards and achievements.

Now, a parent might not want to sacrifice her time and personal goals to improve her child’s situation, but she often feels not only compelled to do so, but justified as well. However, like Mr. Price, she might not want to sacrifice a portion of income she could otherwise spend on her child (say, as an added boost that would allow her to send her child to an academy for gifted science students) to help secure services for her neighbor’s or a complete stranger’s child. The bone of contention lies in this seemingly innocuous statement. When exactly does the greater good override self-regarding and mildly hedonistic considerations? Perhaps there are

extra-practical reasons to endorse altruistic considerations and considerations for the greater good, but if we believe we can provide an answer to the question, “Why should I do that,” and if one serious answer is, “Because it is morally right to do so,” then morality is practical, in the broader sense that it has a right to be taken seriously, and sometimes followed at the sacrifice of one’s own good. Perhaps, then, we do not want to limit our sense of practicality to only instrumental reasons. If it is obvious that we have a moral reason to contribute to a coffer that prevents 24 million people from being uninsured, and if it is obvious that health care is a right and not a privilege, then we’d better have reasons to provide those who disagree, and fist-pounding moral declarations will not usually do the trick.

What sort of argument could one provide to Mr. Price? Mr. Price might offer his own moral argument: “Forcing me to give up some of my legally earned income to help others get along is a Robinhood scenario, and it is wrong to forcefully take from the rich simply because they are rich; allow me to decide when and to whom I provide charity.” We might counter with a utilitarian argument, to which he might counter with a rights-based argument: “I have a right to opt-out of maximizing total good when it directly harms me.” We’ve reached an impasse here.

Mr. Price insists that he is not a moral villain; if he could have it his way, the poorest and most vulnerable would be cared for, but not on the premise that he must be forced to participate through regulations and taxation. Why would he make such a claim? Perhaps, autonomy takes moral priority over equitable wealth distribution. In any case, he would be arguing that providing affordable services to the most vulnerable is a worthy goal. However, that does not mean that it should

be directly *his* problem, and that he should not have ultimate say in how and when he chooses to participate in that endeavor. The problem then becomes this.

- I. Prudential, egocentric considerations are eminently rational (within a framework of accepted legal and social sanctions).
- II. There are normatively-binding altruistic reasons and greater-good reasons that it sometimes makes sense to pursue.
- III. But there is no arbitrating principle that allows us to definitively settle a principled conflict between reasonable, egocentric considerations and altruistic and greater-good considerations.

I know that I would do better for myself *not* to contribute to the coffer, and I appreciate that doing otherwise would be good under some description, but there is no self-certified principle that says I should sacrifice my egocentric pursuit for the greater good *in this case*. Moreover, no one doubts the obvious fact that self-care is both justified and consists of a dynamic set of personal concerns that we must balance in nearly all situations. To better reflect this, I need to add the following claims.

- IV. Unless we have knowledge of an arbitrating principle, it would make more sense for us to pursue what benefits us personally (when in doubt, and all things being equal, self-care is the obvious choice.).
- V. We do not have knowledge of such a principle.
- VI. Conclusion: when in a conflict of principles, self-care is the obvious choice, which leads to the damning conclusion that:

VII. The altruist and do-gooder acts irrationally when confronting a conflict of principles between self-interest and altruistic and greater-good considerations.

We want to reject (VII). Why? Say a man hurls himself in front of a car to protect a stranger from being hit. This seems to be a clear case of potential conflict, and we want to say that his heroic deed is morally good. However, based on the points above, this forces us to accept the conclusion that the act is both morally good and irrational (or extra-rational). This implies that, to this extent, morality is irrational. But even if we reject (VII), we still do not know *how* or *when* we are justified in acting on those considerations when they conflict with egocentric considerations. This might motivate endorsing some form of ethical egoism (the view that we are morally sanctioned to always pursue an egocentric principle). However, aside from it being a flawed theory, it does not make immediate sense of our intuition that altruism and greater-good considerations are not always irrational (and certainly not morally bad). It rejects the moral worth of sincere altruism altogether. Another option is rational egoism (the view that other-regarding considerations are justified by improving our own situation in the long run). This is more promising, because we can certainly show how greater-good considerations can benefit us in the long run, but we would need some complicated principles to show how it accommodates altruism. However, an attenuated form of rational egoism might work. This would take the form of a so-

called harmonizing strategy.¹ If we can show that advancing our own practical interests can advance a maximally better state of the world, then both self and other are served. We would still need to show how altruism fits into this picture. But harmony seems to be the best bet.

Some of the thinkers I will assess pursue versions of this strategy. For example, Samuel Scheffler² argues that it is partly constitutive of value-driven creatures like us to include relationships and the good of others in the scope of our goals. My account of the so-called normative self (particularly in chapter 4) similarly argues that how we constitute our values, projects, and our own practical identity includes a primary acknowledgement and appreciation for the independent value of others; the self remains an underdeveloped notion without an appreciation for how it constitutes its own worth by coordinating with others, and by taking their needs seriously. Psychological egoism—the view that we are *always and only* driven by self-interest—is simply unconvincing when we consider how much our own self-interest is bound up with the good of our neighbors, our social peers, and our nearest and dearest. The ruthless or brazen egoist is simply an aberration, and more of a philosophical bogeyman than a standard (though he can materialize as a real President of an apparently real country!). Hobbes was wrong (see *Leviathan*, Part

¹ Caspar Hare, *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2. Hare describes this as the “peacemaker’s” strategy. Harmony consists of a situation in which: whenever a mild egocentric hedonist favors a situation in which she suffers less, she thereby favors a simply better maximal state of affairs.

² Samuel Scheffler, “Potential Congruence,” *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Also see, Samuel Scheffler, “Morality and Reasonable Partiality,” in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford, 2010): 41-76.

VII.1), and, bracketing the cogency of his argument, Plato's conclusion was mostly right.

On the other hand, the South Asian philosophical traditions provide an important distinction that considerably nuances the problem. For the early Pāli Buddhist texts, the ego-self—the historical, culturally situated, and practical self—is bound to cycles of suffering, because it “craves” existence, and attaches itself to the fruits of the world, while desperately trying to avert what it finds to be unpleasant. This is one sense in which the ego-self is always a “*duḥkha*-self” (a suffering-self). This pan-Buddhist belief is encountered in some key Mahāyāna texts as well. In fact, barring the intricacies of Indian and Indo-Tibetan Tantrism, we could say that this is simply a pan-Indian, religio-philosophical belief. In some sense, psychological egoism is a basic state of the constructed ego (*ahaṅkāra*). However, I think this goes too far. Oftentimes, our deep appreciation for the needs and well-being of others is also an attachment that keeps us tethered to cycles of suffering. It's not that we are all psychological egoists. Instead, we are desperately attached to the agonies and ecstasies that come out of our actions, which, in turn, constitute us and our loved ones in this world. For those South Asian philosophers that endorse the belief in an underlying self, the key to freedom and well-being lies in seeing through the veil of the ego. The metaphysical self is more than just substance or Aristotelian *hypokeimenon* (subject), but also an experiential ground that transcends the narrow needs and values of the ego (*ahaṅkāra*). On the other hand, for Buddhists, who reject the authority of the Vedas and Upaniṣads, the key to freedom lies in experiencing and understanding the illusion of the self without attaching to some

reified entity like the metaphysical self (*ātman*). How a thinker makes sense of the “essencelessness” or “emptiness” of self (*niḥsvabhāvatā* or *śūnyatā*), will, among other epistemological and ontological considerations, determine what sort of Buddhist philosophy she endorses. In chapter 2, I cover, from a logical point of view, a variety of No-Self views to help situate how one might reject belief in a real self.³

However, and to the point at hand, the distinction between an ego-reifier (*ahankāra*), and, either metaphysical selflessness or a transcendent subject, impact how we think about self-interest. One South Asian thinker, Śāntideva (c. 8th Century C.E.) seems to argue that seeing through the illusory persistence of the ego defuses obsession with narrowly prudential reasons, thereby providing rational grounds for altruism. However, as a Mādhyamika Buddhist (whose view is either deflationary or

³ Consider this a prolegomenon of sorts to an inter-cultural assessment of selfhood. I note this, because the No-Self, or, “without-Self” claim (*anātman*), and its practical and rhetorical uses, can take on decidedly distinct implications throughout the many “Buddhisms” that span the texts of the Pāli-Theravāda tradition, to first millennium Sanskrit texts, to the Indo-Tibetan and Chan and Zen texts. Much of what I have here is a rational reconstruction grounded more firmly in the robustly metaphysical debates of Indian-Sanskrit texts from roughly 6th century to 11th century CE. Dr. Peter Herschok, in a personal conversation, has pointed out that the early adoption of “without-self” for the Pāli tradition appears to have been more of a practical concept with minimal metaphysical commitment—especially because the Buddha was known to avoid deep metaphysical claims—and that an early adopter of Buddhist practice was enjoined to see the self *as no-self*; that is, to recognize that the self is not fixed or bound to Brahmanical caste (*varṇa*). Herschok suggests that given the large number of working class and agricultural (*vaiśya*) adopters of Buddhism, an existential crisis may have loomed for these early devotees, and *anātman* may have been a device for re-orienting the interpretive possibilities of selfhood, a call to *author* a self from outside the constraints of caste and Brahmanical society. While I do not have the space to explore this intriguing point through textual and historical analysis, one would do well in revisiting Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, a canonical Theravāda compendium that construes No-self in practical terms, and does seem to eschew a deeply metaphysical gloss of the concept. Much of how I treat what I call the Normative Self in chapter 4 is consistent with Herschok’s point that the “No-self” of Pāli texts is a practical self who must learn to author itself through its commitments and intentions.

radically dismissive of *any* metaphysical assumptions), Śāntideva does not endorse the view that there is a transcendent self that supports universalizable and impartial principles of justice and morality. Śāntideva believes that metaphysical selflessness is tantamount to an admission that, all things considered, prioritizing our future (non)-selves is really a matter of pragmatism and degree. Any reasons guiding us to focus on our (non)-futures are reasons we can extend to all other present and future (non)-selves. Like Derek Parfit after him, Śāntideva believes that recognizing metaphysical selflessness, to some extent, deflates the rationale for obsession with narrow self-interest. There is simply no persisting self in which to place too much stock. On the other hand, Śāntideva offers a controversial positive claim: it is precisely metaphysical selflessness that justifies impartial care and universalizable reasons. When we can view all suffering as *suffering as such*—something unowned and generalized—we can respond to it impartially and without concern for the ego's self-interest. In short, we can become altruists.

In chapter 2 (and more broadly in chapter 1), I examine this claim. I argue that metaphysical selflessness is consistent with acts of omission and negligence, and thereby consistent with some forms of practical selfishness. However, in chapter 3, I develop my own version of what I'm calling, Emptiness Ethics, which is inspired by Śāntideva's account. I ultimately argue that this account is deficient, primarily because I believe that a more robust notion of self explains *how* altruism is even possible. When we limit the conversation to the interests of the ego-self, we ignore the fact that selves are emotionally porous (to be explained in the body of this work), and they are porous *as selves*, not as bundles of psychophysical property

tropes. The metaphysical-ontological reasons that may support belief in the reality of a substantive, metaphysical self goes beyond the scope of the present work. However, as ethicists who believe that impartial standards describe an important part of what we mean by morality, we must to some extent invest in a view of reality that is not completely immersed in situation, historical context, and narrative self-identity. Still, thinkers like Michael Sandel,⁴ to name a few, resist such a view, and this is precisely why they take liberal thinkers like John Rawls⁵ to task. Whether Rawls has invested in a metaphysical self, or, instead, has operated from an “as-if” political model that makes better sense of the phenomenon of justice as fairness (as I understand him to argue in *Political Liberalism*), he envisions the possibility of a self both recognizing itself *as self*, and yet viewing itself as *possibly anyone* (hence, Rawls’s “veil of ignorance”). Christine M. Korsgaard⁶ attempts to navigate the divide between a radically situated, practical identity, and universalizable principles that emerge from an impartial view of the self as sharing in a kingdom of rational, universal ends. For Korsgaard, at the periphery of more local practical identities, we each have the capacity to identify with *the role* of humanity (and this is an exclusively practical rather than metaphysical consideration). As I point out in chapter 1, she believes that the metaphysics of self and personal identity do not

⁴ In addition to Sandel’s numerous articles critiquing contemporary liberalism, a classic text that lays out his communitarian thesis is: Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (1989): 101-132. Also see, Christine M. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

directly bear on practical, ethical questions. I also explain in chapter 1 why I disagree, which brings me to the outline of my argument.

The problem centers on the conflict in authority between self-interest and altruistic and greater-good considerations. My view is that thinking in terms of a strictly personal set of ego-interests versus consideration for strictly distinct others produces the problem; however, we do not need to limit our view of self to such a distinction, and this is the key to solving the problem. Interests are not ultimately a narrow band of outcomes that apply solely to an ego-self. But, as we've seen, not seeking the best possible, first-order outcomes for oneself does not always mean that one gives up self-interest and prudence; rather, it can also mean that at a higher-order of analysis, one can also include the good of others as part of what constitutes one's self-interest in terms of personal rewards and achievements. I am going to show how that is possible.

However, my solution should not be conflated with a similar, but importantly distinct solution. The distinct solution I refer to might look something like this: I can include the good of others as part of my personal value set. By "personal value set" I mean that in serving these others, I am, by extension, serving my radically situated self. Others come into the picture, but the rationale for caring about them is that I advance my higher-order interests. This is bound up with my narrative identity, my history, and my personal projects and goals. This does not mean that I do not care about others; on the contrary, I learn to identify closely with their good, and their good becomes part of my personal good. This is an oblique form of rational egoism,

because if I cannot personally identify with their good, I have no reason to promote it. I believe my solution is not a disguised form of rational egoism.

HOW I CAN BE AN ALTRUIST IN A NORMATIVE SENSE

I can include the feelings, motivations, and concerns of others as intrinsically valuable to the self **as such**; not the ordinary, ego-self, but the self that identifies with selfhood and **subjectivity as such**. When I do so, I advance the good of a “we-self” and not just a “me-self.” This is less an experience of personal reward, and more an experience of acting “because it **must be done**.”

To make sense of this, I must provide a view of subjectivity that distinguishes between an ego-self (*ahaṅkāra*) and an experience of subjectivity as such. Thus, a few preliminary points are in order. First, I believe our capacity to envision selfhood as such is bound up with intersubjectivity. Contrary to Korsgaard (as I read her), this is not a purely practical matter. In fortunate moments, we can radically share our emotional lives with one another, and this is not just a matter of inference, nor is it because the ascription of mental properties is strictly functional talk for physical behavior (either in the subjunctive, as the logical behaviorist might have it, or solely in the *use* of language, as one might read latter Wittgenstein). Rather, and secondly, I believe we can be open to sharing subjective worlds, because self-awareness is basic to consciousness, which is not to exclude the abundant unconscious thoughts and feelings we harbor; to the contrary, the kind of self-awareness I’m talking about is mostly an implicit sense of presence, and such background awareness is by its very nature not represented as being delimited by context, situation, or body. I am not

making the ontological claim that background self-awareness is *in fact* free of limitations, or unencumbered by a body. Rather, I'm pointing out how background self-awareness remains attuned to a broader expanse of possibilities that are not directly tethered to narrative identity and ego-hood; it relates to self as such, and not only to self as "this body" or "this history." Unencumbered by such representations, it remains open to the experience of subjectivity in general, and thus open to the expression and experience of other subjectivities. I also do not believe that we experience things like suffering and joy as radically ownerless (or something purely emergent from a selfless bundle of psychophysical property tropes). In some sense, when shared and co-owned, suffering can show up as *simply suffering* (and in this sense, there is a quality of ownerlessness), but that is only in contrast with the mundane view of the radically private ego-self, who can only indirectly experience another's feelings.

This underlying sense of self supports our capacity to share our world with others, and, at times, recognize that the individual ego supervenes over this larger sense of "we-ness." This is not so distinct from Buddhists like Śāntideva speaking (I suppose, metaphorically?) of a collective, interdependent field of selfhood. However, the point is not that we lose all traces of self, but rather, that the self does not always delimit its sense of presence (and responsibility) to a single, embodied, and historically situated entity. The self can identify with selfhood writ large, and when it encounters other agents who suffer or act toward their valued ends, it can identify with those purposive actions.

Whatever reason there is for a self to avoid needless suffering; whatever reason there is to respect the dignity that comes with autonomy, and the power that comes with agency and purposive action; such reasons apply to selfhood as such; to the sense of delighting in pure presence. In this state of identification, we do not recognize these reasons as being “only my” reasons; we can simply recognize them as motivating forces, which are sometimes represented as explicit principles, that extend to all those who share in selfhood. And this must mean that we recognize—not infer—other selves who share in that general presence. We can sometimes act purely for the sake of another as both other and as one’s self. The principle that might arbitrate between strictly egocentric considerations and altruistic and greater-good considerations emerges from an experience of suffering as such, which, given the peculiar nature of suffering, simply demands action. That experience shows up as “we who suffer, and must alleviate suffering.”

My argument is based on an analysis of selfhood within a normative and a metaphysical framework. First, I argue that the everyday self is constituted by a sense of relationality and social-embeddedness, which is articulated through the capacity and urge to communicate and be understood. I expect you to honor my wish not to suffer at the hands of cruelty, and I successfully communicate and understand that need to the extent that I recognize the applicability of that wish to you. It is therefore only natural that I recognize a reason to honor that wish, irrespective of its advantage to my personal projects and immediate desires. The normative framework this presupposes requires a self that recognizes reasons that transcend self-regarding desires (and, perhaps, desires altogether). If this is true,

then the concept of a robust divide between self and other—the sort of divide that sets the egoism and altruism debate into motion—emerges out of an initial experience of primordial relationality and porousness. The concept of self develops in tandem with the concept of other, and ties many of the reasons one has for caring about oneself to reasons applicable to caring about another. There are goods that guide and motivate the action of a self that can only be understood as shared goods, things like the value of avoiding needless suffering and cruelty, of caring and being cared for, of enjoying respect and companionship, and having the space to pursue projects free of arbitrary constraints. Such motivating reasons appear only to the extent that they apply universally. Anytime one recognizes such reasons, and thereby promotes the good of another—irrespective of personal desires—one acts in a mundanely altruistic way, that is, one acts without immediate concern for one’s own advantage. I say “mundanely,” because it is possible to help a stranger simply because the stranger needs help, and this can be as simple as listening to and allowing a person who needs companionship to engage you when it is taxing and inconvenient. In other words, the other’s needs may become the sole target and motivator of action.

Still, the talk of “reasons” remains somewhat empty without assessing the nature of motivations; what theoretical ethics has referred to as the Problem of Motivation. A theory of self also impacts how we make sense of empathic identification and the experience of responsiveness to the demands others make upon us. I believe that emotions like compassion, for example, serve important epistemological functions. I come to know something about you and your needs

through the contagion of how you feel and how that makes me feel. I come to know your frustrations and the urgency of your needs (not only my private response to your emotive behavior), because the self is also emotionally porous. The manifest fact that we commit ourselves to various actions by way of a guiding good, enacts a self that is mostly unthinkable outside of embodied normative constraints and sharable, emotively-charged and motivating states. An entirely selfish self—or one emboldened by the belief that its primary concern is with its own needs—does not only challenge our ethical intuitions, but also fails to recognize the very elements that constitute selfhood. Consequently, it fails to recognize the very elements that support and constitute self-interest.

To help explain this shared emotional and normative framework, I likewise contend that the self is sometimes *recognized* as expressing a real and larger whole. I will directly address the term of art, “recognition” (*pratyabhijñā*) in my assessment of the Kashmiri Monist-Śaivite philosophical tradition of c. 9th-11th century C.E. India. For now, I basically mean that in clear and honest moments the other who suffers does so as part of myself (or simply, *as self*), which is just to say that an experiential space of co-owned suffering (something that transcends the limitations of my immediate history and constellation of personal concerns) discloses itself and calls for a response that I can only learn to ignore. Just as I can learn to ignore my own suffering, I can learn to ignore the other’s suffering. However, the ordinary self rarely remains completely blind to the presence of another’s suffering; we can only learn to ignore what *shows up* to be dismissed, and I want to say that it shows up as

inherently motivational. So, let us not confuse ignorance with blindness, or the irresponsible and irresponsible person with the blind, moral monster.

I am also proposing that our ethical experience shapes the metaphysics that help organize our experiences, in the sense that the ethical attractiveness of a framework provides a reason to endorse it. We construct the world through an ethically salient and shared lens. When suffering occurs, in some sense, the whole suffers (to be developed in my final chapter), which may provide me with the shared motivation to thwart such suffering. Through shared feelings, we can sometimes experience reality without solipsistically fixed partitions, or, an entirely singular point of view. Ethical responsiveness and ethical responsibility—in the form of a gripping call to action—disclose and shape the space of our experiences.

This is not Mill's argument for utility. I do not assume that because each person values their own happiness, that each necessarily values the happiness of all. I find myself most pressingly concerned with a particular person's suffering, and not just an abstract principle or an abstract whole. On one level of description, I must bridge a metaphysical gap between my immediate first-person experience and a suffering that indirectly shows up as another's. And from this level of description, philosophy must contend with the epistemological and ontological problem of other minds. How is it that I come to know what you need, and know what motivates you or how to help you? How exactly do I come to recognize your needs as independently valid? But on another level of description, the gap was never there to begin with, which is just to say that the composite is not a fiction or conceptual imputation, but rather a background presupposition that allows me to share a world

with you. The part and the whole are real. I call this Mereological Holism, and I will describe this in detail in my final chapter. The upshot of this metaphysics is that it is possible to act from something far deeper than a principle or duty or rational constraint. This does justice to the manifest fact that we are motivated and affectively charged to shape our concerns into something like a principle, and that our concerns are often highlighted to a far richer degree in the face of our loved ones and our neighbors, with whom we more closely share a world. In this way, metaphysics finds its worth in its service to our basic ethical intuitions.

So, this is an essay about the nature of the self and the metaphysics of shared disclosure at the service of our ethical experience. The possibility I wish to explore is one that not only critiques what may seem attractive in ethical and rational egoism; I wish to examine the possibility of altruism being grounded in how we naturally constitute and share ourselves. The juggling act consists of developing a model of selfhood that supports the possibility of being rationally compelled to act solely for another's sake, while making sense of *how* we can know the other, and directly share an emotional life that grips us in the form of a motivating obligation.

The first possibility is grounded in what I call the Normative Self, which is constituted by embodied participation in the authoring of one's selfhood through commitments and avowals and disavowals. These commitments run more broadly than normatively rich social roles, or, what Korsgaard calls, "practical identity."⁷ These commitments presuppose a complex and dynamic process of deliberation and tacit appropriation, which forges a dynamic but unified and integrated self through

⁷ Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*.

speech-acts that partly constitute the introspective experience of *having a point of view*. I develop this point more fully in my final chapter. I contend that the normative self provides us with desire-independent reasons⁸ to take others seriously, but it falls short of explaining *how* we directly experience and are motivated by the affective life of another. In short, the normative self provides reasons and obligations, while what I'm calling the Metaphysical View provides the emotive channel that compels us to action. I do not believe these are ultimately separate domains—the cognitive versus the conative—but, instead, argue that the normative framework co-emerges with the metaphysical framework.

This last point speaks to the second feature of the juggling act; what I have referred to as the metaphysical view. This self is not empirically observed, nor is it entirely personal. Instead, it refers to a unity that supports an otherwise fragmented and dislocated flow of psychophysical events. The unity and integrating synthesis lies in something much broader than a historically located constellation of personal experiences. This is an experience of direct connectedness, which at the level of everyday empirical and embodied historicity looks like an ownerless event. This may be reflected in the experience of losing a part of one's self when another perishes, or experiencing the collective guilt that comes with a terrible collective deed, or the pride that comes with collective integrity.

⁸ John R. Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Hong Kong: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001).

The task here is to bridge the metaphysical gap between self and other, a gap that European ethicists like Henry Sidgwick⁹ viewed as an insurmountable obstacle to deciding which sorts of reasons—self-regarding or other-regarding—hold ultimate authority. For Sidgwick, both sorts of reasons hold equal authority, and therefore ethics will always reach an impasse when it comes to principled conflicts between egocentric versus altruistic and greater-good reasons.

In chapter 1, I lay out the landscape of this problem, and I develop a broad overview of a strategy developed in 1st millennium, Indian Buddhism. I am referring to various iterations of No-Self and Bundle-theory views of selfhood; basically, error-theories about the self. The idea is that, first, showing how the self does not exist can surmount the gap that fuels the problem, and, second, personal identity is not what matters most when it comes to examining the reasons we have for doing things. The usual critique of this strategy is that metaphysical non-commitments (and metaphysical views in general) do not deliver robust ethical upshots. The practical domain is as sharply divided from the ontological-metaphysical domain as the self is from the other. In chapter 1, I argue against this view to motivate the relevance of the No-Self and Bundle-theory options. I do so by arguing that speech-acts—even theoretical assertions and beliefs—commit us to various sorts of actions, particularly the adoption of further beliefs. In this sense, normativity is built into our discourse, and theoretical assertions importantly contribute to shaping and

⁹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981, republication of 7th edition, 1907).

guiding action.¹⁰ I also argue that the No-Self option—at least at its broadest level—does not necessarily motivate unselfish and altruistic action; but this is not because it attempts to derive an “ought” from an “is.” Instead, I argue that non-egocentricity—that is, a self that no longer recognizes selfhood in the world—may provide just as much reason to selfishly neglect required actions as it does to sacrifice one’s own advantage for the sake of another. In short, we need a more developed notion of selfhood to make sense of altruistic action.

In chapter 2, I situate varieties of the No-Self theory. I then examine a unique No-Self option provided by the Mādhyamika-Mahāyāna thinker, Śāntideva.

Śāntideva is a target for study, because his work arguably comes the closest in the Buddhist philosophical corpus to a worked-out, systematic ethical system. But more importantly, Śāntideva coins an argument from ownerlessness that I wish to appropriate in my final argument in chapter 4. I also engage some of the abundant literature assessing Śāntideva's ownerlessness argument. I conclude that only more robust metaphysical assumptions (in addition to a key normative claim) may allow the No-Self and Ownerlessness views to entail an ethics of altruism. The problem for Śāntideva is that he endorses the Madhyamaka (“middling”) view of Buddhism, which eschews metaphysics altogether (or at least presents a deflationary view that can hardly help itself to robust metaphysical claims). However, the value of his work for my purposes lies in its emphasis on the ownerlessness of suffering. For Śāntideva, suffering is inherently bad and ultimately ownerless. So, if there is any reason under any circumstances to thwart suffering, then it applies to all equally. I

¹⁰ Or, as Searle argues, all discourse is fundamentally practical. See *Rationality in Action*, especially chapter 2.

examine this line of argument thoroughly in chapter 2. The key fault I find with it (and develop in chapter 4) is that ownerlessness does not have strong ethical upshots without the support of a more developed notion of self. This sounds paradoxical, but my argument is that we can share motivations and feelings with others, and in this sense, they are “ownerless.” We could equally claim that motivating feelings are co-owned when they are shared. However, I stress them being ownerless, because these exalted experiences exist at a level of generality in which we are motivated by *suffering as such* (for reasons I have already provided). By recognizing integrated unity—both at the level of individual, sentient life-streams, and at the level of the whole—recognition of “ownerlessness” in terms of *shared fields of consciousness* provide motivating and emotively-charged reasons for action. My argument falls under a harmonizing strategy, with the caveat that both the individual and the whole are real. When we recognize this, we recognize ourselves acting *as* and *for* another: we achieve identity amidst difference.

In chapter 3, I attempt to provide a more worked-out and palatable version of Emptiness Ethics. I do so by appropriating the post-modern concept of “the Other” that we find in Levinas.¹¹ Basically, I try my best to develop a No-Self ethics by drawing from a deflationary-minimalist reading of Madhyamaka Buddhism in tandem with a general reading of Levinas. I examine the argument that self-regarding considerations are only attenuated forms of other-regarding considerations, which collapses the metaphysical distinction altogether. I try to show how in the practical domain, this amounts to a kind of harmony between self-

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969).

regarding and other-regarding considerations, a harmony that would justify and motivate altruism. However, in chapter 4, I point out where I think this version of the view goes wrong.

Altruism operates in more mundane ways, and it plays a foundational role in ethical maturity. Moreover, emotional states, like compassion, are bound up with the reasons we have for doing things. Without the sort of empathy that moves me to take up your cause as my own, I would not be attuned to the experience of ethical responsibility. It's not enough to say that when I'm egoistic and selfish I am primarily or only bound to myself, as though that were the experience of principled responsibility for myself. Such blind egoism is mostly not experienced as responsibility, but rather as impulse and natural inclination; it's purely motivational without a developed sense of the experiential modality of justification, which always requires a public world and an experience of otherness. The selfish person may know better, but nevertheless make morally bad and self-serving choices. But I believe that consistent and pathological selfishness betrays a muddled view of what is generally operative as a background presupposition for consciousness, namely, an integrating sense of general selfhood. Thus, recognizing justified motivations for altruism is a kind of gnosis. Extreme and pathological selfishness is both the amoral inability to experience ethical phenomena, and a distracted or delusional state (*moha*) that covers over what is operative in the reflexivity of consciousness.

In chapter 4, I'll develop an aspectual metaphysics that views the universe as multivalent,¹² which means its individuals are, under one aspect, distinct and singular, but under another aspect, simply an expression of the whole; and this means that we can describe the universe in distinct but equally true ways. As one aspect, the person I witness on the news leaving pipe-bombs in New York City is other, and the whole does not bear his sins. Under another aspect, the whole *is* that very act of aggression. This sort of metaphysics supports a phenomenology in which an individual identifies with the suffering of others, and experiences their needs as overwhelmingly motivational. According to this metaphysical model, the experience of overcoming egoistic considerations may reach an exalted pitch. Out of the experience of exalted fullness, we can overwrite egocentricity. The outcome amounts to what I call, Exalted Altruism. This refers to a state in which our deliberations take on an exceedingly other-centric tone, one that may be viewed as supererogatory from the everyday state of transactional reality.

¹² The classic paper in aspectual metaphysics is Donald Baxter, "Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense," *Mind* 97 (1988): 575-582. See also, D. Baxter, "Many-One Identity," *Philosophical Papers* 17 (1988): 193-216. For a recent publication that provides thorough analysis and clarification of what is at stake in such a metaphysic, see Jason Turner, "Donald Baxter's Composition as Identity" in *Composition as Identity*, eds. D. Baxter and A.J. Cotnoir (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014): 225-243. Turner captures the key thesis of Baxter's position as follows: "Baxterian CAI [composition as identity] ...holds that *each* part is identical to an *aspect* of the whole—which aspect is identical to the whole itself" (225-26). Thus, existence would be "count-relative" (226). This amounts to the claim that Leibniz's Law under certain counts can fail. So, Kevin-as-a-father may spend too much time traveling away from home, but Kevin-as-an-itinerate philosopher may not spend enough time away from home (on work related trips), or might spend an adequate and expected amount away from home. In some sense, then, a thing can be different from itself under aspects (not properties) which, taken as properties, would be contradictory.

To bolster this view, I assess the problem of other minds, and critique the view that we come to know the other through indirect inference rather than shared psychophysical states. As this problem was richly developed in the work of the Buddhist logician, Dharmakīrti (c. 6th century C.E.), who provided a unique account of the inference strategy, I will assess and critique his argument through the lens of the Pratyabhijñā (“Recognition”) School of Kashmiri-Monism in the likes of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta (c. 10th and 11th century C.E., respectively). While, for me, the metaphysics are mostly exploratory, I believe they are attractive from an ethical standpoint, insofar as they provide an attractive account of how one’s sense of self-identity may sublimate narrative and normative identity (in the Hegelian sense of an appropriative negation, or, *aufhebung*).

My key thesis is that altruism is not only a fundamental aspect of ethical maturity, but also a fundamental aspect of how we come to robustly know each other. By knowing each other, we simultaneously come to know ourselves. We neither entirely transcend our individuality, nor completely lose sight of the whole that *is* our individuality. We are identical as difference, and our difference expresses our identity. Politically, in so far as we act collectively while respecting this differential identity, we can make a difference.

CHAPTER 1. SELFHOOD AND ETHICAL AGENCY: OWNING MORAL

SELFLESSNESS

1.1 Introduction

We make plans, pursue goals, and fret over the outcomes of our actions. Even if choice is a grand illusion, we hold others to their promises and obligations, and sometimes let ourselves down, believing that we could have and should have done better. We also struggle to act on what we believe it makes better sense to do, and in this way, we are sensitive to the action-guiding force of reasons. This presupposes that in our everyday conception of what it means to be a person, we assume that we are the owners of our actions and our bodies. We at very least naturally believe that we must take responsibility for some of the feelings we experience and some of the motivations that impel us to act. We articulate this in our expectations and our relationships. Being responsible and forward-looking persons driven to make specific choices that are material to our aims requires conceiving of the agentive self as something that persists beyond the ephemeral moment.

These everyday presuppositions are enacted through social relationships, which require adept sensitivity to the requirements of reciprocity, mutuality, and cooperation. “Reciprocity” means that we are motivated to cooperate with those who cooperate with us, and we are likewise motivated to act nasty to those who act nasty to us. Overall, cooperation requires that we care about and take the plans of others seriously. We even sometimes take steps to promote those plans at our own individual expense. In fact, experiments have shown that when given an option to punish free-riders who take advantage of asymmetrical power relations, that is,

those who behave in ways that are perceived to be unjust or non-egalitarian, we frequently opt for punishment at considerable expense to our own advantage.¹ We also sometimes voluntarily act against our own perceived self-interest to reward or provide care for others. So on the surface, it seems that rational self-interest is not always a primary motivating force, and sincere concern for justice and the well-being of others may motivate action even at the price of the agent's own disadvantage or undoing.

Making sense of this sort of agency requires a compelling account of selfhood. There seems to be little mystery when it comes to explaining self-interested actions: survival and genetic replication account for the adaptive success of self-interested motivations. But knowingly acting against one's own perceived self-interest remains puzzling. How do we make sense of such altruistic action? While biology and the social sciences have grappled with this question, I'm interested in developing a philosophical interpretation of selfhood that makes sense

¹ Francesco Guala, "Reciprocity: Weak or strong? What Punishment Experiments Do (and Do Not) Demonstrate," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 35 (2012): 1-59. In this article, Guala assesses some of the upshots of experiments designed around the "Ultimatum Game," which is a game theoretical construct. *A* is given a large sum of money, but told that she has to share some of it with *B*. If *B* declines the offer, then neither *A* nor *B* gets to keep the money. In a majority of cases, when *A* gives what's perceived by *B* to be an unfair amount, *B* declines the offer even though she would have earned something rather than nothing. In all fairness, Guala cautions us not to conflate the results of artefactual—or highly contrived experiments—with natural field experiments. The point of the article is to assess the methodological constraints and merits of two competing theories that social scientists have developed to make sense of actions that are not on the surface driven by rational self-interest. "Weak reciprocity" theory claims that this is done in a forward-looking way, and is ultimately derivative of prudent and self-interested considerations. "Strong reciprocity" theory claims that we have evolved certain social preferences toward equitable and just relationships, and will often forfeit self-interest in order to secure such relationships.

of this dynamic range of motivations. In doing so, I will draw from classical (1st millennium) Indian philosophy, which has provided a trove of novel analyses of selfhood, some of which radically revise our everyday conceptions. For some, like the Indian Buddhists, such revisions are thought to make sense of how an agent can be motivated to act unselfishly. In fact, throughout the corpus of both Buddhist and Brahmanical Sanskrit texts, emphasis is placed on cultivating a greater range of motivations that transcend the narrow limits of the ego. For the Mahāyāna Buddhist, successfully transcending perpetual cycles of anguish and suffering requires curbing self-interested actions, and cultivating compassion and altruistic motivations.

I want to assess conceptions of selfhood that compellingly makes sense of unselfish agency. While radically reductive or revisionary views of selfhood, the sort we find in Indian Buddhist philosophy and Derek Parfit's work, may lead one to view agency and ownership as a useful, conventional fiction, we still need a view of selfhood that makes sense of responsibility, desert, commitment, and the shared practices presupposed in carrying out the intentions involved in linguistic communication.² After all, Buddhist philosophy is developed in tandem with a practical curriculum designed to achieve enlightened, compassionate, and ethically attuned agency. The Buddha wanted to change both what you think and what you do. Likewise, Parfit believes that his revisionary metaphysics has a transformative,

² See Paul Grice, "Meaning," *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 377-388. Cited in Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights About Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 28. Sorabji writes: "If I am right that 'I'-thoughts enter into intentions, they will enter also into much else that is essential to human life. Much of our agency involves intention. So too, I believe, does our linguistic communication. For I accept Paul Grice's further view that for a speaker to mean something, except in the special case of soliloquy, is to *intend* to produce an effect in the hearer."

ethical upshot.³ In this regard, both the Buddhists and Parfit seem to argue that we not only *can* revise our view of selves as owners of experiences, but we ethically *ought* to do so. Revising this everyday conception, and endorsing the view that we are complex streams of connected and continuous psychophysical events is meant to curb the obsessive focus on rational self-interest, and produce a more utilitarian-leaning concern for the overall quantity of suffering and good in the world.

But even if we revise (or eliminate) first-person “I-thoughts” with an impersonal description of streams of consciousness, we need a clearer sense of how non-egocentric considerations for the greater good—arguably, a basic ingredient in moral considerations—are better cultivated by embracing an impersonal description of the self as a complex stream of psychophysical events. I’m interested in examining how such a view motivates the ethically attuned agent. What conception of selfhood compellingly makes sense of a self feeling rationally motivated or impelled toward unselfish, non-egocentric, other-regarding, and altruistic agency?

To be sure, these four notions are not synonymous, but they are all relevant to making sense of sociability, mutuality, and moral considerations. So, in 1.3, I will analyze these notions, and lay the groundwork for a conception of selfhood that makes sense of their employment. In doing so, I hope to better clarify what we might mean by morally “selfless” action. In 1.2, I lay out the problem—famously identified

³ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, corrected edition, 1987), 281. Parfit writes, “When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year...When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared...There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer.”

in Sidgwick⁴—of the conflict in authority between self-regarding, prudential concerns, and other-regarding, altruistic concerns. The goal here is to show how the Buddhist and Parfitian revision of self-talk is meant to address this problem by collapsing the metaphysically deep distinction between self and other. I go on to consider—and critique—counter-arguments to the view that an impersonal revision of selfhood has important ethical upshots. My main argument is that structural beliefs, particularly metaphysical beliefs, can have important normative upshots when we consider how descriptive facts in general commit language-users to basic sorts of actions. Descriptive statements can structure what it makes sense to want, prefer, or do. However, I do not ultimately believe that the Buddhist revision does the ethically relevant work it aims to do. Nevertheless, in 1.2, I am mainly countering the argument that our practical identity—the “*who*” of agency rather than the “*what*” of selfhood—is the only level of description that carries normative weight. This chapter lays out the general problem in broad strokes. I then go on to examine in more detail throughout the whole of this work how, and if at all, a Buddhist or Parfitian theory of self has any especially practical or ethical upshot that might motivate endorsement of the revisionary view. In this sense, I am asking whether the ethical outcomes of such a view are attractive enough to motivate our metaphysical position. My considered view is that they do not, and I will offer a different position in chapter 4 that I believe carries enough ethical weight to motivate the endorsement of the metaphysical position that I call, “mereological

⁴ See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981, republication of 7th edition, 1907).

holism” (see chapter 4). I build this view by fusing it with a normative account of selfhood.

However, I am only asking in broad strokes here what it means to act selflessly, and what it means to act selfishly. How are these concepts related to views about the nature of the self? Various philosophical-spiritual practices enjoin us to pursue “selfless” behavior. However, in Buddhist thought—as I’ve said, construed broadly—an ambiguity exists between acting “selflessly” in a moral sense, and acting from the belief that no real self exists. For the 1st millennium Indian Buddhist, nothing metaphysically unifies the psychophysical events that constitute the flow of an individual stream of consciousness. According to the Buddhist philosopher, these two senses of “selflessness” are intimately related.⁵ However, the debate about metaphysical selflessness seems, at least on the surface, not only morally neutral, but also irrelevant to practical deliberation. What impact, if any, does metaphysical selflessness have on our practical deliberations? What does it matter if we’re not, as the Buddhist and Parfit argue, persisting selves? I will set the stage in this chapter for answering that question, while clarifying some ambiguities surrounding moral and metaphysical selflessness. I hope to provide some preliminary conceptual resources for making sense of the relationship between these two senses of selflessness. I will argue in the next two chapters, and, in more detail in chapter 3, that metaphysical selflessness is not the most important concept

⁵ Particularly emphasized in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, reissued version, 2008), 8.134: 100 (henceforth, *BCA*): “The calamities which happen in the world, the sufferings and fears, many as they are, they all result from clinging onto the notion of self, so what good is this clinging of mine?” I use Crosby and Skilton’s English translation unless otherwise noted or translated by me.

a No-Self view brings to the table with respect to ethics. Instead, this view has important ethical and practical ramifications when it seeks to clarify the “sense of self” that we experience. Madhyamaka Buddhist thinkers like Candrakīrti (c. 600 CE) wanted to clarify the *sense of self*, that is, the phenomenological “mineness” and “what-it’s-likeness” of first-person experience—that is, *ownership* and *appropriation*. This focus provides a view of self and identity that forges a practical link (not necessarily a deductive entailment) between the two sorts of selflessness. However, I’ll argue that while this is the strongest reading we can provide for the link between the two sorts of selflessness in classical Indian Buddhism, it does not compellingly make sense of some of our most ineluctable ethical intuitions, nor does it provide a robust enough account of agency—the very sort of agency that would allow us to make sense of being unselfish ethical agents. So, I will examine what I think we mean when we call someone “selfish” and when we call someone “selfless” in an ethically relevant way. In doing so, I’ll make an important distinction between egocentric, non-egocentric, and selfish considerations. But first, and as a preliminary measure, I want to clarify in a very general way (to be assessed further in the next chapter) what the Buddhist might be up to when she critiques self-talk, and tries to make it relevant to practical deliberation. This will help motivate the Buddhist and Parfitian claim that radically revising our commonsense notion of selfhood will have an ethically relevant upshot.

1.2 Self-talk and Practical Deliberations: The Gap Between Self and Other

The Buddhist, like Henry Sidgwick,⁶ might believe that the distinction between oneself and another produces a metaphysically deep rift in normative perspectives.⁷ On the one hand, as distinct and separate selves, we are faced with the personal task of securing our own well-being by advancing our individual self-interests. “Self-interest” might be understood broadly, and from the first-person perspective, as whatever one believes will make her life go as well as possible. While

⁶ Sidgwick and the reductionist-minded Buddhist (the sort of Buddhist philosopher whose view pre-dates and parallels Hume’s fictionalist account of self) have diametrically opposed views about the self. The latter takes the self to be a pernicious fiction, while the former takes it to be inescapably and ontologically basic. Yet they share this conditional assumption that if one retains a strict boundary between self and other, then certain momentous moral and motivational consequences follow. Sidgwick entertains and then quickly dismisses the Humean-empiricist view as failing to make sense of egocentric prudence. See *Methods*, 419: “Grant that the Ego is merely a system of coherent phenomena, that the permanent identical ‘I’ is not a fact but a fiction, as Hume and his followers maintain; why, then should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?”

We can compare this to Madhyamaka-Mahāyāna Buddhists like Śāntideva, for whom Sidgwick’s *reductio* becomes a premise for an argument promoting universal compassion and altruism (*BCA*, 8.97-98: 96): “If I give [others] no protection because their suffering does not afflict me, why do I protect my body against future suffering when it does not afflict me? The notion ‘it is the same me even then’ is a false construction, since it is one person who dies, quite another who is born.” While we can read this in terms of a future, reincarnated self, we can also read this in terms of a future “surrogate-self” that replaces its predecessor in a single life-time. Śāntideva points out that we care about our future-selves, even though, strictly speaking, we are not the same (or identical to) these future iterations. Why not extend such cares to strangers in our current field of interactions? In some implicit sense, we are always caring for what is other. So instead of dismissing this as incoherent, we might incorporate this deliberately into our motivations. I will develop this line of thought in chapter 3.

⁷ *Methods*, 498. Also, see Samuel Scheffler, “Potential Congruence,” *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 117-136. Scheffler aims to revise the terms under which we speak of conflicts between morality and self-interest, and takes issue with construing these concepts as metaphysically distinct domains, or, “distinct normative perspectives.”

there may or may not be an objective list of what those things are, this is immaterial to the discussion at hand;⁸ my broad construal is adequate for my purposes here.

Now, concern for advancing one's self-interest over time has been called "prudence." This already highlights an important feature of agency, namely, it's forward-looking nature. We each anticipate our individual future welfare and suffering in a way that we simply cannot with respect to another's future. Even if I am highly empathic, a simple burn I incur from accidentally touching a hot kettle will present itself much more vividly and viscerally than watching or hearing about thousands of others burning themselves.⁹ My own pain is directly present in a way that your pain can never be. I can say that my pain is directly experienced by me, while your pain is vividly imagined—or, only indirectly experienced—by me. To be

⁸ For thorough analysis of plausible theories about self-interest, see Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, Appendix 1.

⁹ See Caspar Hare, *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2009), 35. Hare inspired this example. Hare's notion of insulated and private "presence," or the manifestly immediate and un-shareable first-person experience informs much of my work in chapter 4. Hare argues that perceptions being "directly present" (versus indirectly imagined in the case of *other*, "less important subjects"), are relevant to the task of harmonizing egocentric-hedonistic considerations with considerations of the greater good. He calls his view "Egocentric Presentism." Basically, he argues that his considerations, whether self-regarding or other-regarding, can naturally "harmonize," because his considerations are the only directly present goods he is privy to. For Hare, the problem of other minds is empirically intractable. However, we can imagine, and in that sense, *expand* our constellation of considerations and motivations through a fictionalist-semantics of other minds: the other is always only *indirectly present*. The point is that egocentric considerations are not always inconsistent with concern for (fictional) others, and this can collapse the distinction between rational egoism and altruistic considerations. In chapter 4, I pursue a similar strategy, but ultimately part with Hare in arguing that at a conceptual (and metaphysical) level, we do sometimes directly share feelings. Like Hume and the Buddha, Hare is tethered to the conceptual limitations of empiricism. But consciousness can be witnessed in the conceptual requirements of perceiving agency, or better, in distinguishing between an agent-subject and an ordinary object. This will be a major feature of the view of self I develop in chapter 4: the normative *and* metaphysical view.

sure, emotional contagion and empathy can trigger a deep connection between another and me. However, my actions are more directly causally relevant to securing my own well-being over time. The intuition is that I can more directly control the variables involved in securing my own goods, which includes psychological goods, than I can in securing yours. Finally, I am naturally motivated to secure my own well-being, and, more importantly, I believe that I *ought* to secure my own well-being. While I may also be motivated to tend to and care about others, I cannot so easily determine which motivations and reasons have authority in a case of conflict. Something like this seems to be part of the intuition driving Sidgwick's famous claim:

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently "I" am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual.¹⁰

In most cases, we are naturally motivated to prioritize the things we are directly capable of doing to direct the successful unfolding of our own lives, and this is bound up with a real and irreducible distinction between persons. Presumably, then, my being distinct from you and from your suffering has normative relevance with respect to rational action. Something about my pain (and well-being), and its being *mine*, privileges it in a normatively relevant way. This, in turn, determines reasons that I have for action. So, my headache gives me normatively relevant

¹⁰ *Methods*, 498.

reasons to act that are not necessarily present for me when your head hurts. This passage, and a host of other arguments presented in Sidgwick's *Methods*, aims to point out how rational egoism—the view that the most primary rational constraint on action is that we each secure our own self-interest—cannot be so easily snubbed. Rational egoism accommodates the commonsense distinction between self and other, and it accommodates the vivid distinctness of the first-person experience, which underlies the ordinary privilege we give to our own individual suffering.¹¹ If Sidgwick's claim is compelling, then what the token-reflexive "I" denotes when used by me, and what it denotes when used by you, gives us both grounds to be concerned with our own welfare in a very personal, and therefore, partial way.

On the other hand, we can also view ourselves more objectively as selves situated in, and dependent upon, a world of other selves, who likewise pursue their individual interests. We recognize that nothing objective privileges our own valid needs above others. Sidgwick calls this the commonsense "axiom of personal irrelevance." He argues, "The good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other."¹² At least in this very abstract sense, we take the needs, values, and desires

¹¹ Sidgwick goes so far as to say that recognizing a rational ground for benevolence does not effectively supplant this very basic and egoistic rational constraint: "...even if a man admits the self-evidence of the principle of Rational Benevolence, he may still hold that his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other; and that therefore a harmony between the maxim of Prudence and the maxim of Rational Benevolence must be somehow demonstrated, if morality is to be made completely rational. This latter view...appears to me, on the whole, the view of Commonsense" (*Methods*, 498). Thus, Sidgwick leaves ethicists with the task of securing a harmony between prudence and other-regarding and benevolent, or, altruistic considerations.

¹² *Methods*, 382.

of others seriously; we appreciate the independent validity of other's interests. We can impersonally recognize that if anyone's welfare matters, then everyone's welfare matters. Nothing makes my pain so unique and important that in a utilitarian calculation it should, in principle, supersede the pain of others. But when this impartial view comes into conflict with rational self-interest, we sometimes find ourselves in *aporia*, because both perspectives appear to have equal authority over action. And this is where the Buddhist and Parfit might claim that we've mistakenly invested too much in the notion of distinctness. If there is no metaphysically deep distinction between self and other, then the very premise that drives Sidgwick's worry is false. The assumption that some sort of persisting self underlies the flow of psychophysical events—like pleasure and pain—drives us to carve out privileges between self and other. When we come to revise this view of the self as an *owner* of mental and physical states, we obsess less on who endures these states. Instead, we focus on the overall quantity of such states. As the c. 8th century Indian Buddhist philosopher, Śāntideva argues, "Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?"¹³

But in response, one can easily claim, metaphysics notwithstanding, that conventional, transactional reality still produces conflicts between self-interest and morality. I'll use the catch-all phrase, "morality" to broadly include any normative strictures and recommendations placed on action, which presuppose both other-regarding considerations for the independently valid interests of others, and

¹³ *BCA*: 8.102: 97.

sensitivity toward rules of conduct that enjoy more far-reaching generality than the normative constraints arising out of contingent social roles and occupations. Again, I do not use “self-interest” here in any sort of narrow economic sense. Nor do I downplay the complexity involved in cashing out just what sorts of things count as “self-interest.” In my broad construal, “self-interest” will include eudaimonistic consideration for one’s meaningful projects and aims—that is, concern with leading a fulfilling and good life. The response here is that we do not need metaphysically robust distinctions to find ourselves in philosophically, not just psychologically, significant moments of conflict and contention. So, contra the Buddhist and Parfit, metaphysical revision of what constitutes selfhood will not play a significant role in defusing conflict when that revision is based on the contention that metaphysical selves do not exist. As I’ve interpreted Christine M. Korsgaard, the question of *who* we are—our practical identities that both shape what it makes sense to do in the practical domain, and unify our agency—supersedes the impersonal question of *what* we are.¹⁴ Metaphysical insights notwithstanding, one’s conception of the good life might be seriously jeopardized by the requirements of morality (whatever those turn out to be).¹⁵ So, as Samuel Scheffler has effectively argued, it is worth assessing

¹⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard, “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (1989): 101-132. “I argue that from a moral point of view it is important not to reduce agency to a mere form of experience. It is important because our conception of what a person is depends on our conception of ourselves as agents in a deep way” (103). She further claims, “Your conception of yourself as a unified agent is not based on a metaphysical theory, nor on a unity of which you are conscious. Its grounds are practical...” (109).

¹⁵ See Scheffler, “Potential Congruence.” Scheffler argues here that the distinction between two presumably distinct and conflicting normative domains, “morality” and “self-interest” are not metaphysically deep distinctions, and do not, when viewed in Sidgwick’s manner, account for value pluralism and a host of other

how those conflicts are mitigated, and what aspects of morality, mutuality, and human psychology, allow such conflicts to remain exceptions rather than rules.¹⁶

However, the Buddhist (and Parfitian) may have stronger reasons for believing that metaphysical selflessness both takes the wind out of Sidgwick's sails, and also remains relevant to tensions between morality and the good life.

The Buddhist maintains that, under analysis, the persisting persons and agents we believe ourselves to be are fictions reducible to an impersonal description. Thus, normative and moral considerations ought to better reflect that fact. Contra Korsgaard, *who* we are should be tempered by *what* we in fact are. In spite of our psychological proclivities and practical identities, a rational assessment of our individual moral worth supports an impersonal and egalitarian, rather than partialistic account of ethical considerations.¹⁷ If my own welfare and suffering ought to be considered in deliberation, but under analysis, I recognize these states

operative motivations driving rational action. However, he argues that when we sufficiently account for the complexity of motivating values and moral motivations, and the various ways in which moral constraints interact and intersect with psychological proclivities, the question of morality coming into conflict with one's meaningful projects and values remains a philosophically significant one. He describes this as potential conflict between "morality and the good life, or between morality and the standpoint of eudaimonistic reflection, rather than as a conflict between morality and self-interest" (133).

¹⁶ Scheffler, "Potential Congruence." Also, see Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1 (3), April (1972): 229-243. Singer, as I've interpreted him, draws a similar conclusion, without committing himself to any sort of view about the nature of the self. Singer points out that partialism highlights the way in which certain psychological facts influence our moral considerations. However, these do not necessarily override the rational, moral constraints that we would presumably endorse in his famous thought experiment. Someone's suffering being more or less distant from our own (physically and psychologically) does not override the intuition that when someone is suffering, and we are in a material position to help, that we ought to help.

of pleasure and pain do not really belong to anyone—that is, they are not really owned by any sort of persisting entity—then, pragmatic considerations aside, anyone’s welfare and suffering ought to be considered equally. Anything that counts as ultimately good or bad cannot be limited in scope to what’s good or bad for me, since there ultimately is no “me.” On this reading, the No-Self view of selflessness is meant to motivate an egalitarian thesis about impartial considerations concerning what is morally good or bad. We might all agree that injustice and undeserved and pointless suffering are inherently bad things. However, persons, or, owners of mental and physical states, are only useful and ultimately dispensable fictions. So, if my suffering provides me with a reason for action, then anyone’s suffering ought to provide me with a reason for action.¹⁸

Just to recap: Sidgwick argued that two motivating forces—rational prudence and impartial consideration of other’s interests—produce a practical dilemma. The Buddhist and Parfitian argue that revising the everyday view of self, a view that entrenches difference and partiality, can defuse the dilemma. However, if metaphysical difference between self and other is immaterial to practical deliberation, then revising our metaphysics should not defuse Sidgwick’s problem. Nor should it defuse the conflicts and tensions that may arise between morality and our practical identities.

¹⁸ See Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 102-103. This is my interpretation of Siderits’s gloss on Śāntideva’s famous passages, 101-103, in chapter 8 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. The upshot of Śāntideva’s argument here is that pain and suffering exist; these are inherently bad things; but owners of such suffering do not exist. Therefore, if ownership is what justifies privileging one quantity of suffering over another, then no real limit justifies partiality (other than pragmatic considerations).

However, as a counter-argument, the Buddhist might claim that metaphysical revision can defuse the problem, because we can derive normative conclusions from descriptive and factual statements. I'll develop this contentious point below. But for now, consider the point that a statement deduced from accepted premises commits one to accept the derived statement. This means that what *is* the case is pertinent to what one *ought* to do (namely, accept a new belief, and therefore act from this new belief).¹⁹ Likewise, when one revises the belief that a metaphysically deep distinction exists between self and other, this commits one to recognize that from an impersonal point of view, nothing distinguishes one instance of suffering from another. Of course, convention and our practical identities can still produce conflict and partial evaluations. But if we accept that an impersonal point of view is something we can hold, then we are committed to accepting beliefs derived from such a view. Moreover, if we believe that certain normative constraints are not purely derivative of psychological facts, but, instead, play a role in structuring such facts, then the normative conclusions we derive from an impersonal point of view may be justified despite our psychological proclivities. These would operate as very general background constraints on what sorts of desires and preferences we ought

¹⁹ See John R. Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Hong Kong: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001), 136-137. As I understand him, Searle argues that theoretical rationality presupposes various speech-acts, and this defuses the presumed rift between descriptive and normative claims. When we deduce a conclusion from a set of accepted premises, we are committed to *accepting* the derived conclusion. So an act of theoretical rationality presupposes commitments that are normatively binding: "I have been emphasizing the sense in which theoretical reason is a special case of practical reason: deciding what beliefs to accept and reject is a special case of deciding what to do" (136). Searle adds, "To say that something is true implies that you ought to believe it. Suppose I have conclusive proof that *p* is true. Since belief involves a commitment to truth...I ought to believe (accept, recognize, acknowledge) that *p*" (137).

to endorse. Granted, these two points are controversial to say the least. However, I am simply trying to motivate how the Buddhist view might withstand the objection that metaphysical conclusions have no bearing on our conventional and practical lives. A bit more formally, the argument would look like this.

1. Descriptive statements commit us to other normatively binding statements. For example, when we derive a conclusion from accepted premises, we *ought* to accept the derived conclusion. That's part of what it means to be rational.
2. From an impersonal point of view—that is, revising our belief that persisting subjects are the owners of psychophysical events—we recognize that suffering and pleasure do not strictly speaking belong to anyone.
3. However, suffering and pleasure are not just conventional constructs—as talk of persons and “I-thoughts” are.
4. Pointless suffering is inherently bad, and therefore ought to be alleviated.
5. Therefore, (by 2-4), if a reason exists to alleviate suffering, then no person's suffering and pleasure has any ultimate privilege over any other person's. In other words, the reason holds for *all* suffering, and we ought to alleviate suffering.
6. Normative conclusions from an impersonal point of view are not just derivative of psychological facts; instead, they can structure what it makes sense to desire, want, or prefer.
7. Thus, (by 5-6), if we can achieve an impersonal point of view, it makes sense to desire or prefer that suffering should be alleviated impartially. In short,

we have good reason not to privilege anyone's suffering and pleasure over anyone else's (pragmatic considerations aside).

One might take issue with any of these premises, but the more controversial premises are (1) and (6). However, with independent and cogent arguments for (1) and (6), we can deny the claim that metaphysical conclusions (and, by extension, metaphysical revisions) are always normatively and morally neutral. If we can achieve the impersonal point of view, and the normative conclusions we derive from such a point of view can structure what it makes sense to desire, want, or prefer, then despite certain psychological proclivities, metaphysics can have a bearing on what it makes sense to do.

Finally, metaphysical selflessness aside, the Buddhist might contend that we each have a *sense of self* that cannot be explained away as pure fiction. Even the Buddhist must provide an account of how we develop a conception of selfhood. The Buddhist may go on to argue that a radically revised way of viewing the self in terms of the sense of self (without recourse to a real metaphysical entity) cures us of existential suffering. This transformative view is meant to play an important role in practical deliberation, since it impacts the motivational resources that drive action. Initially, the voluntary pursuit of this sort of existential transformation may start out from an entirely egoistic concern for one's own welfare.²⁰ The practitioner-philosopher aims to put an end to her own anguish once and for all, and this is the most important concern that drives her actions. As she progresses in the pursuit,

²⁰ *BCA*, 8.108: 97. "Those who become oceans of sympathetic joy when living beings are released, surely it is they who achieve fulfillment. What would be the point in a liberation without sweetness?"

she recognizes that radically appropriating the needs and values of others into her own sense of self is constitutive of this transformation. This requires effacement of the limited ego through an expansion of what it includes in its sense of self.²¹ The self is “selfless” by expanding its self-identity to include the concerns of all suffering creatures. Expanding its concerns and self-identity broadly enough, it comes to recognize that there is a broader and unified field of pleasures and pains, which it learns to care about in a motivated way. Admittedly, this is a process, and not a one-off gestalt-switch in perspective. So it requires practice, and a host of other cultivated virtues that support that practice. I will develop this further in the next chapter, and assess what may or may not be compelling in such a view.

But for now, it’s fair to ask what exactly motivates this practice. It may not be something “selfish,” since the practice ultimately frees one up for more compassionate other-regarding considerations. However, I contend that it is ultimately egocentric, and in the next chapter, I’ll explain why. To set this discussion up, I will conclude the chapter by clarifying what I think we can mean by calling someone “selfish,” “unselfish,” “egocentric,” and “non-egocentric.” I’ll also assess how this informs what is involved in altruistic motivations, and how it informs the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations. These concepts are crucial both for making sense of what is involved in unselfish agency, and for developing a conception of selfhood that would support such an account.

²¹ *BCA*, 8.115: 98. “In the same way that, with practice, the idea of a self arose towards this, one’s own body, though it is without a self, with practice will not the same idea of a self develop towards others too?” Also, see 8.112: “Why can I not also accept another’s body as my self...since the otherness of my own body has been settled and is not hard to accept?”

Moreover, disambiguating these concepts will help support my further contention that revising our belief in the unity and persistence of self—the view we find in Buddhism and Parfit—does not provide the unselfish and altruistic payoff thinkers who endorse the view believe it does.

1.3.1 Conceiving Moral Selflessness: Unselfish Egocentricity

I want to provide an account of selfishness that can help make sense of what morally relevant “selflessness” looks like. By doing so, I want to provide a better sense of what the Buddhist might be up to when claiming that the No-Self view (whatever that amounts to) supports “selfless” action.

Now, I’ve been called selfish many times. Is that because I’m often concerned with outcomes that benefit me? At first glance, I may be considered “selfish” when I am solely motivated by the good that an action affords me alone: if the action did not afford me that good, then I wouldn’t have pursued the action. But this could be called, more neutrally, an “egocentric” action rather than a selfish action. I cook myself lunch solely because the action affords me a good, and if cooking lunch for myself didn’t afford me that good, I wouldn’t do it. But this hardly warrants calling me selfish. Nor does it warrant calling the action selfish. In the very bland way I’ve described things, cooking myself lunch is not selfish, but it’s certainly egocentric, because I’m entirely concerned with satisfying myself in pursuing that action.

But let me get a bit more specific about my wholesome lunch. Let’s say I prepare myself some chicken. I buy a major corporate brand of chicken breasts, say, Tyson® chicken. I do so because this sort of flesh is most affordable for my budget, and Tyson® has perfected the art of producing unnaturally plump and white meat. I

know that an animal suffers for me to enjoy its cooked corpse. But let's say I've come to terms with that (or devised a principle that justifies my eating the flesh of a sentient creature). Still, I do not relish unnecessary suffering, and I'm even squeamish when it comes to the idea of killing and procuring meat by hunting it myself. However, the corporate meat I've bought requires that the animal suffer more than it would have to if bottom line profits did not solely dictate their chicken farming practices. Moreover, I know that policies of the corporate meat industry, which outsources its chicken farming to local farmers, causes harm to those farmers. The farmers often remain poor, because the payment schedules are drafted to maximize shareholder profits, which requires paying the farmers substandard wages. Also, the farmers often suffer from terrible health conditions because of corporately mandated farming practices that could be adjusted at the expense of shareholder profits. When farmers complain, the corporate entities threaten to pull support and supply from them, thus despoiling their livelihoods. When the farmers decide to change farming practices without corporate sanction, they are fired, and left saddled with debt for the machinery they've been mandated to purchase on credit. Corporate policies are drafted and enforced at the expense of both the farmers and the chickens. I know this, but I cook the meat anyway, because it tastes good, and it makes me feel good. I know that I have other options, and I know that I'm contributing to forms of unnecessary suffering and injustice, but I decide that my hedonistic desires and my budget outweigh these concerns. I cannot afford cage-free and organic chicken, and I like the taste and feeling of meat too much to give it up altogether. This highlights a more specific feature embedded in what I call,

“selfishness.” *I am selfish when I not only pursue an egocentric consideration, but I do so knowingly at the expense of others, and I do so without motivating consideration for their valid needs, desires, and values.* I can act egocentrically without being selfish, but I cannot act selfishly and non-egocentrically. If this is true, then non-egocentric action entails that I am not acting selfishly, since egocentricity is a necessary condition for selfishness.²² There may be other requirements for calling an action selfish, but egocentricity is a fundamental, although not sufficient, ingredient.

A general belief in Buddhist philosophy, basic to Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts, is that the sense of “I” (*ahaṅkāra*: the “ego-making” component of consciousness) perpetuates craving desire, which in turn, leads to cycles of suffering and “thirst” (*triṣṇā*). Breaking free from the hedonic treadmill requires cultivated detachment. But, according to the Buddhist, detachment is not possible so long as one believes in the persistence of the “I.” Even at the conventional level of practical identity, if we remain fixated with the roles we’ve carved out for ourselves, we

²² This raises the question of omissions. Suppose that I apathetically refrain from activities that will clearly benefit me. Go further, and say that I engage in self-destructive behavior. In some sense, I am not acting egocentrically (certainly not with prudence, anyway). Now, I may very well ignore doing much for anyone—it’s all the same gray palette as far as I am concerned. But if someone were in need of help, and I know that I am in a position to help, but in my apathetic state, I simply ignore them, then it seems my omission and neglect is selfish. However, knowing that someone is in need, and not raising a finger to help when I am in a good position to do so, means that I knowingly ignore another’s need without any motivating consideration for those needs. Moreover, the fact that I “cannot be bothered” means that my apathetic equilibrium (or “oblivious equanimity”) is more valuable for me than another’s needs. So in this problem case, what seems like a non-egocentric state is dictated by something other than an obviously positive concern with my own perceived self-interest: I am selfish to the extent that an important omission highlights a self-regarding value that, through neglect, I obliquely prioritize over the other’s needs. My apathy shows up as selfishness to the extent that I am in a position to help another who requires help.

remain tethered to the whims of needs and preferences that perpetuate suffering. Being more flexible and less dogmatic with one's practical identity, which may be supported by revising the everyday belief in a persisting subject, produces a sort of agency that is less blinded and burdened by egocentric and hedonistic considerations. Consider two distinct pairs: "ego-centric/other-centric" and "hedonistic/ascetic." Is there a problem with being hedonistic and other-centric in one's motivations while being committed to the Buddhist mission to achieve impersonal and altruistic motivations? Now, I may be other-centric in my motivation to deliver hot meals to shut-ins on Thanksgiving: I gain no material advantage from this volunteer work, and I lose time that I could have spent acquiring goods that provide me with pleasure. But it's not as though I view my volunteer work as only good for others. I derive pleasure from my volunteer work. Is there a problem with me deriving pleasure from volunteer work? My instinctive response is, "No," because otherwise my volunteer work would be a very grim and colorless endeavor. However, the danger is that pleasure is always self-regarding. From the Buddhist perspective, it may further entrench the view that I am a persisting subject who pursues actions with the hope of achieving some emotional and material benefit from the consequences. That's not to say that deriving pleasure from the action makes me selfish, but without some emotional and material benefit, I may be hard-pressed to pursue the action (it at least requires more convincing than recognizing that pursuing some action will lead to a "win-win" outcome). Moreover, my hope to achieve congruence between self-regarding rewards and other-regarding requirements or values, may lead to further fixation on the self by

clouding the other-directed motivation with my emotional and material gains. After all, these gains are immediately present to me in a way that the relief or happiness I produce in another is not. We may both share *in* pleasure, but we cannot share each other's pleasure, and this seems to further punctuate the gap between self and other. Therefore, the advanced Buddhist practitioner stresses effacing the ego and vanquishing the thought of a giver and a receiver. By doing so, the gap is no longer highlighted, and no longer material.

However, does self-abnegation and asceticism necessarily produce a more other-centric set of motivations and concerns? If what I've sketched above is at all correct, then an egocentric action does not directly entail selfish behavior. Whether it perpetuates suffering is a different issue, but acting unselfishly does not seem to require abandoning egocentric considerations *en masse*; nor does it seem to require deprivation of pleasure in the act of giving. So, if Buddhist philosophy is relevant at the level of applied ethics—not only soteriology—it needs to show us why the principle of *anātman* (No-Self) is especially relevant to unselfish, altruistic, and other-regarding considerations.

Moreover, selfishness and egocentricity are rather crude concepts that do not adequately encapsulate nuanced conflicts of loyalty and reciprocity. Two people may be deserving of a job. One is a friend, and the other is a stranger who might be a better fit for the organization. I feel bound to offer the job to a slightly less-qualified and dear friend. I'm partial to friends and family, and if I was not, you might think I'm "cold," and do not understand the loyalty and reciprocity that comes with sincere friendship. Partialism is a thorny issue in ethics, and building and nurturing

partialistic obligations seems basic to the human condition. Bolder arguments contend that sensitivity to—and appreciation for—normative and ethical considerations are derivative of the sort of partialism cultivated in intimate relationships; it is through partialistic relationships that we learn to cultivate and embrace more general ethical considerations. Thus, the moral life may fundamentally require partialism.²³ Part of what it means to be a loving father, say, is that I favor my child. I might lament the loss of another’s child in a horrible fire, but if it’s between my child and her child, and I have the capacity to rescue only one person, I’ll have to rescue my own child. The care I show, and the commitment that I act upon, might be basic to my capacity to develop more far-reaching and less partialistic commitments. This is a large leap, and it requires independent argument and support. However, the virtue of my gloss on selfishness is that it does not require taking a definite position on partialism and the moral life. I may enter a burning house, and rescue my child while knowing that other children will inevitably and tragically perish, and in this very broad sense, I knowingly act at the expense of others. Saving my child means allowing another’s child to perish. But when I do this, I do not necessarily do so without regard for the independently valid needs, desires, and values of those other children and their parents. I am

²³ Samuel Scheffler, “Morality and Reasonable Partiality,” in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford, 2010): 41-76. Scheffler entertains this possibility, and while it may be a stretch to say that morality *presupposes* partiality, Scheffler aims to defend the rational necessity of partiality: “The general aim of this line of thought is to establish that what I will call *reasons of partiality* are inevitable concomitants of certain of the most basic forms of human valuing. This means that, for human beings as creatures with values, the normative force of certain forms of partiality is nearly unavoidable. If that is right, then for morality to reject partiality in a general or systematic way would be for it to set itself against our nature as valuing creatures” (43).

egocentrically bound to “me and my own,” but I’m not necessarily selfish: partialism is not equivalent to selfishness. Partialistic and egocentric action is motivated by reasons that make essential reference to the agent’s own needs, desires, and values, and this runs more broadly than selfish action. If I did not feel the weight of the house-burning tragedy, that is, if I did not even view it as a tragedy, then calling me selfish would be warranted. I would show no regard for the independently valid needs and desires of others. And when we’re dealing with children and burning houses, this disregard would reveal a lot more than selfishness—it would be borderline sociopathic. This sort of twisted partialism allows a gangster to sob over his dead son while unrepentantly committing atrocities against someone else’s.

But in other cases, say, in a war campaign, a soldier or country may remain partial to their own, without necessarily being selfish in the narrower sense. Still, selfishness does not linger too far behind partialism. For example, during the early phases of George W. Bush’s war against Iraq, all the American news stations highlighted the U.S. death toll without much mention of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilian deaths. I had to make considerable effort to determine the devastation and destruction exacted upon the Iraqi civilian. For some, it was not so difficult to view Iraqi deaths as a necessary evil, and perhaps, in that sense, they were not entirely selfish—after all, they sincerely considered Iraqi deaths a necessary *evil*. But when military commanders prefer the use of drones, which minimize American deaths, but lead to greater numbers of civilian casualties, they believe an American soldier’s life is worth more than an innocent Iraqi civilian’s life. Again, this may be a case of tragedy and partialism, and not a case of pure

selfishness. And perhaps, by appealing to a nuanced “Just War” theory, biased supporters can sleep easier at night. But if securing more oil fields to sustain our petroleum-rich infrastructure is premised upon something like hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties, then it’s hard to chalk this up to “necessary” evils. When we lose sincere interest in the valid needs and desires of others, and knowingly pursue actions at their expense, we exhibit both partialism and selfishness. There’s a lot of work to do to clarify and distinguish the various shades of personal and collective selfishness from justified forms of partialism, but the basic point, I hope, is clear: *selfishness is not only a form of partialism, but it’s partialism without sincere regret, and without sincere consideration for the independently valid needs and desires of others.*

With that said, I will clarify what’s meant by morally-relevant “selflessness.” In the case of eating unnecessarily harmful chicken, I can adjust my habits. After some practice, when I no longer desire chicken, that is, when there’s no strong desire to eat chicken, I may be leading a less selfish life. But am I acting “selflessly” in a moral sense? After all, I no longer fret over eating chicken, because I simply don’t desire eating chicken. This seems different from a case in which I never desired to eat chicken in the first place. Does a morally selfless action require that while I do *A*, I have a more than trivial inclination not do *A*, or at some point took this inclination to be a motivationally live option for me? I might be inclined not to eat chicken, which seems structurally no different than my inclination to eat lunch. Certainly, there’s nothing selfless about my satisfying the desire to eat lunch. For an action to count as “selfless,” must I perform a Herculean feat of the will to override

an opposing and gnawing background preference? Does moral selflessness require internal strife or tension? If so, then moral selflessness seems much too demanding, because it requires something most of us would consider inherently bad: persistent internal conflict.

Surely, a more promising set of moral requirements allows one to lead a life that is better overall, and not marred by internal strife.²⁴ We want to avoid moral strictures that are overly demanding. If I agree that eating factory farmed chicken perpetrates injustice, then my having the character traits to resist eating factory chicken without having to persistently grapple with internal conflict is both morally laudable and desirable. Moral requirements ought to sufficiently align with our motivational resources.²⁵ So perhaps moral selflessness is simply a way of characterizing morally-relevant unselfish action, and by “unselfish” action I mean any action that is at least partly motivated by—and takes into strong and more than trivial consideration—the valid needs and desires of others. When one acts in a morally praiseworthy and unselfish way, one acts “selflessly.” One may be partly motivated by egocentric considerations and cultivated inclinations, but that does not mean one acts selfishly. To be selfless, one is not required to always feel the pressure of opposing inclinations coming up against normative constraints. And

²⁴ Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 6: “...although moral considerations and considerations of self-interest can diverge, and although morality sometimes requires significant sacrifices of us, nevertheless the most demanding moral theories are mistaken.” Scheffler adds that “Taken together, these accounts of morality’s content, scope, authority, and deliberative role...will provide support for the [claim] that the relation between the moral and individual perspectives is one of potential congruence” (7).

²⁵ Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 7: “...it is in part a social and political task to achieve a measure of fit between what morality demands and what people’s motivational resources can supply.”

selflessness does not have to presuppose internal strife between opposing normative perspectives; it does not require overcoming a dilemma between self-interest (in the broad way I've construed it) and moral demands.

However, when viewing selflessness so benignly, we risk losing sight of its subtler and more exalted features. The problem might lie in fixating on the motivations behind single actions. I may not eat the chicken because I don't eat chicken—that is, I'm the type of person who doesn't flinch at abstaining from meat. I seamlessly avoid eating meat without any sort of struggle or second thought. I don't have to consciously endorse vegetarianism every time I cook a meal. In that sense, my values become transparent: my inclinations and my values reinforce each other. However, by being able to justify this way of living when asked why I endorse it, I recognize that I am importantly motivated by the valid needs and desires of others. My choice is not just a matter of inclination, alone, nor is it a matter of rigid adherence to a moral duty. I could easily learn to like chicken, but I strive not to for reasons of, say, promoting justice and respecting the value of sentient life. The fact that I could easily learn to like chicken shows that selfless action is in some way connected to the material possibility of strife between what I desire and what I believe I ought to do. At some point in my career of decision-making, I'll have to deliberate and justify this practice to myself. At some point, I'll have to decisively determine that I *must* do *A* rather than not do *A*, regardless of any opposing inclinations. But the “selfless” component comes with weighing the valid needs of others and caring about the greater good. Viewing selflessness in this way highlights the fact that I have been directly motivated by consideration for the valid needs and

desires of others. Moreover, deliberation, and a more than abstract potential for strife is material to the action that I commit. What's key is that consideration for others plays an important role in shaping my current motivations, however transparent and fluid they become, and this is what distinguishes morally relevant selflessness from garden variety inclinations that I may acquire by happenstance.

Just to summarize things here, I've illustrated how egocentric considerations are not necessarily selfish. I've also argued that selfishness is necessarily egocentric. "Selflessness" refers to actions motivated by the normative weight of other-regarding considerations, which, in a non-trivial way, come up against potentially opposing inclinations. With time, I integrate these considerations into my basic practices, and so I do not need to experience strife between what I want and what I think is required of me. At some point in the history of my deliberations, the primary source of a selfless action has to be the recognition that I ought to do *A*, because *A* is the right thing to do when I take another's valid needs into consideration, despite potentially opposing inclinations. I recognize the independent normative force of *A*, and this is premised on consideration for others.

Buddhism adopts the view that we must view suffering and pleasure impersonally, and this is presumably supported by the view that such states do not, strictly speaking, belong to anyone. For the Buddhist, when there is some lingering sense of ownership involved in one's self-conception, there will be "clinging" motivations that disrupt our capacity to exhibit moral selflessness. Thus, viewing the self as an ownerless stream produces non-egocentric motivations, thereby supporting unselfish action. However, if what I've sketched above is at all

convincing, then we can be selfless actors without having to purge ourselves of all traces of the ego. While the soteriological ambitions of Buddhism might require achieving a deeper revisionary view of the self as an ownerless stream, from the standpoint of applied ethics, such a view is supererogatory, and even overshoots its mark. Achieving an impersonal viewpoint does not require jettisoning the view that we are owners of our mental and physical states. And given the importance ownership plays in our conception of agency, it may not only be supererogatory, but also counterproductive. Here's why.

Viewing your needs—and pleasures and pains—as ownerless states may erode my appreciation for the unique person that you are (conventionally speaking). By focusing too much on the overall quantity of states, rather than the owner of such states, I miss the nuances that come with pain and pleasure being *your* pain and pleasure. I may become less interested in the specific plight of, say, you and your family, and more interested in plight as it pertains to an abstract whole. When I empathize with you, and I view your plight with compassion, I take an interest in what it means to be the sort of creature and person that you are, which will partly determine the sort of actions I should promote for your benefit. While the more abstract, impersonal and non-egocentric approach may not amount to selfishness, it becomes harder to understand what the target of my compassion and concern is: it becomes harder to be truly selfless in the way I've sketched things above. Since to some extent your pain is occluded, that is, I cannot *completely* know what it's like to be you suffering right now, I must take into consideration whether my actions are suitable to treating you. I cannot view things so abstractly as mere

“pain-instances” that must be vanquished. I must focus on your unique relationship to the pain right now. In short, I must focus on your *personhood* as well as your selfhood. And this means that I must view you as a unique owner of your suffering—a unique bearer of personality traits strung together by a personal history. Granted, Buddhists like Śāntideva admit that for the sake of ethical agency I must embrace the conventional understanding of persons as persisting owners of their mental and physical states.²⁶ But if that’s the case, it’s hard to know what the payoff of the No-Self view is. In fact, it seems that the more I treat you as a real person who owns her mental and physical states, the more I can help alleviate your very specific and contextually-grounded suffering.

The Buddhist might respond that a lasting way I can treat your suffering is by helping you revise the view that you own mental and physical states. *Anātman* is supposed to be a liberating view, and it is supposed to specifically liberate you from suffering. By establishing the reasonableness of this view, I help you become less fixated on your anguish and pain. But then the problem is that motivation becomes less intelligible. If you, that is, this very specific person who is suffering, will not actually benefit from this revised view, then what’s the point in you endorsing it? If fixation on anguish and suffering is the problem, then surely you can become less fixated without abandoning the belief that you are a person who owns mental and physical states. In fact, the payoff in believing that you do own such states is that you

²⁶ *BCA*, 9.75-76: 122-23: “If you argue: for whom is there compassion if no being exists?, [*sic*] [our response is] for anyone projected through the delusion which is embraced for the sake of what has to be done. [Objection] Whose is the task to be done, if there is no being? [Mādhyamika] True. Moreover, the effort is made in delusion, but, in order to bring about an end to suffering the delusion of what has to be done is not prevented.”

can experience the benefits of becoming less fixated on anguish and suffering. This can motivate you to take proper action. Granted, if one were to dispense with belief in a real, persisting person, one may be less motivated to fixate on self-interest, which in turn might deflate selfish ambitions. However, this may not have the payoff a Buddhist might hope for. One might not see any reason whatsoever to pursue either self-interested considerations or other-regarding considerations. “Non-egocentricity,” understood as acting on the view that the self is a dispensable fiction, does not necessarily motivate unselfish action, even if it helps deflate the motivation to pursue selfish actions.²⁷ The way that I’ve sketched “selfless” action does not require this sort of non-egocentricity. There may be other reasons to endorse the No-Self view, but it’s hard to see why ethical considerations should motivate that endorsement.

So now that I’ve sketched my view of what is involved in non-egocentricity and unselfish or “selfless” behavior, I’d like to finish the chapter by providing a basic schematic of these important concepts. I do so, because they will be amply employed throughout the whole of this work. In chapters 2 and 4, I will develop a more thorough-going critique of the view that reducing the person to an ownerless stream of consciousness has important ethical upshots. I will more thoroughly examine distinct versions of the Buddhist No-Self argument, the “reductionist” vs. the “emptiness” (deflationary and minimalist) schools of thought, and expose various problems I believe these have in accounting for ethical agency and unselfish, altruistic action.

²⁷ In fact, it may even promote a deeper, disguised selfishness that comes with neglect and acts of omission. See fn. 22.

1.3.2 Non-egocentricity, Unselfishness, and Other-regarding Considerations

Non-egocentricity can be viewed in a purely negative manner. In the context of Buddhist thought, it may refer to the view that the machinations of the ego, and the influence of one's practical identity are tempered by the view that the self is either "empty" (wholly non-existent) or reducible to a complex and impersonal psychophysical stream, unified by various causal connections and relationships of contiguity. The Buddhist who no longer recognizes himself as a "self," may infer that there is no reason to be either obsessed with rational self-interest or to fear death. For example, Madhyamaka Buddhism (the "emptiness" school I will further discuss in the following chapters) rejects the view that any sort of real reduction base—like the body, or the substratum of unanalyzable psychophysical events—underlies the conception of selfhood. This is what I'm calling the "emptiness school." Adopting this view may reduce one's fixation on the notion of selfhood. But this means that one comes to view all ownership, and, as I'll argue, *agency* as "empty." This may or may not amount to nihilism. But we can infer that such a person is less inclined to hoard or think only of himself—there's very little reason to fret over the interest of something that simply does not exist! So, in this sense, the view supports non-egocentricity. But this does not offer any *positive* reason to emphasize other-regarding considerations. There's no direct reason to link other-centrism with metaphysical self-abnegation or practical asceticism, especially when self-abnegation can lead to acts of omission that disguise oblique forms of selfishness. The loss of self may come at the price of a loss of concern for others. I'm reminded of the Troglodytes in Borges's, *The Immortal*. The questing Roman soldier, Rufus finds

himself horribly wounded in the city of the immortals. The immortals, having achieved transcendence beyond the mortal pining of the ego, and remaining in meditative equipoise while contemplating the infinite, are not motivated to help Rufus. Nor are they particularly concerned with self-care. From such a transcendent and impersonal vantage-point, why bother nursing the wounded soldier? Neither self nor other-regarding motivations play a role in this infinitely stretched-out state of transcendence. The upshot here is that non-egocentrism does not directly entail compassion or altruistic-minded, other-regarding considerations. What's worse is that a seemingly non-egocentric pattern might simply disguise a pernicious form of apathetic egocentrism, which prizes the personal state of apathy over morally relevant, other-centric actions that one may pursue or promote. While unselfish actions do not place undo importance on self-interest, and in this way, they are "non-egocentric," non-egocentric agency is not a sufficient condition for altruism. This becomes abundantly clear when considering how "non-egocentricity" can cut across the integrity of self and other in the belief that no one, strictly speaking, owns mental or physical states.

However, *unselfishness*, as I've construed it, is a more positive notion: it is commissive. We do not call someone "unselfish," because she neither obstructs nor contributes to someone else's well-being. Nothing about Borges's Troglodytes is unselfish. By withdrawing and remaining detached, one may not be very egocentric in her concerns. She attains a sort of non-egocentricity by not being overly obsessed with herself or others. But our ethical intuitions, at least by my lights, view "unselfishness" as something positive, and characterized by exemplary *deeds*. When

one appreciates and cares for the valid interests of another, and when one actively puts another's concerns above her own, or does not make her own interests the primary motivating factor, then one is acting in an unselfish way. Far from being a detached state, this requires that one recognizes and places some value on another's interests, and allows concern for those interests to motivate her action while downplaying the importance of her own. This may not be synonymous with altruistic action, but it is a necessary condition for altruism.

Finally, I'd like to clarify what I mean when I speak of "*other-regarding considerations*." This is a term of art, and, as employed by Sturgeon, it simply means recognizing that "someone, namely *X*, has a reason to do or want or strive to promote *A*."²⁸ When I recognize that someone, namely *X*, has a reason to do or want to promote *A*, then I am exhibiting an "other-regarding consideration." Likewise, when I recognize that I, myself, have a reason to do, want, or strive to promote *A*, I exhibit a "*self-regarding consideration*." This distinction helps us articulate at a very general level reasons we have for doing things. Some things pertain solely to the self, and some things pertain to others. Considering the intricate minutiae of motivating reasons for action, these considerations often overlap. However, the distinction helps highlight an important logical structure that renders Buddhist non-egocentricity (as I've glossed it here without too much attention to the variety of Buddhist schools) problematic to say the least. When I value another's interests, say, in an unselfish action, or when I sacrifice my own good for the good of another in an altruistic action, I can more formally be said to recognize that "someone, namely *X*,

²⁸ Nicholas L. Sturgeon, "Altruism, Solipsism, and the Objectivity of Reasons," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (1974): 374-402, cf. 376.

has a reason to do *A*." I come to see that since this is an accepted and general rational structure, it applies to anyone. Thus, I have a reason to promote this person's aim, and promoting or fulfilling the aim does not need to necessarily benefit me. But if Buddhist non-egocentricity has the potential to amount to a transcendent, and for that reason, potentially nihilistic outlook, then achieving such a state may lead me to lose grip on why anyone has any reasons to do anything. I can no longer formulate my motivations in terms of either self-regarding or other-regarding considerations; nor does any sort of overlap come into play. Rather than resonance, I seem to encounter a cancellation pattern: I am no longer driven by ego-thoughts and self-interest, but neither do the values and interests of others drive me. The threat is that Buddhism collapses the distinction between self and other, and thereby collapses the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations (and their overlap). This threatens to render compassionate and altruistic action, as well as positive forms of unselfishness, formally unintelligible. Moreover, it has the danger of disguising—and in this sense, perpetuating—a more pernicious, because transparent, form of selfishness, namely, apathetic acts of omission.

CHAPTER 2: SELFLESSNESS AND NORMATIVITY: ŚĀNTIDEVA AND EMPTINESS

ETHICS

2.1 Introduction

My central thesis here is that the No-Self view fails to provide us with a clear account of agency, particularly, ethical agency. In chapter 1, I argued in a very general way that our intuitions regarding what it means to be an ethical agent are better accommodated by a conception of the self as the owner of its mental and physical states. Furthermore, I pointed out that influential early and late 20th Century thinkers like Henry Sidgwick and Derek Parfit argued—albeit from two different standpoints—that normative, rational, and ethical considerations are importantly shaped by our conception of selfhood, particularly with respect to how we conceive of the distinction between self and other. I also, in a very broad way, reconstructed a version of the Buddhist No-Self view (*anātman* or *nairātmyavāda*), which likewise places considerable ethical weight on how we conceive of the self. I then argued that entertaining such a view in the practical domain might not only prove to be unnecessary for making sense of other-regarding considerations and altruistic motivations, but may even collapse or greatly destabilize a vital distinction that underlies such considerations: the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding motivations. The metaphysical self-effacer may end up failing to distinguish between being selfish and being altruistic, and thus prove incapable of being altruistic. Practical unselfishness may turn out to be incompatible with No-Self

metaphysics. While this, on its own, might not be a highly original claim,¹ I wanted to better clarify what morally relevant “selflessness” might mean. In doing so, I showed how egocentric considerations might in fact be consistent with unselfishness (just as abolition of the ego can be practically consistent with selfishness of the sort that, in popular imagination, Yashodhara must have charged Prince Siddhartha, who with the aim of achieving enlightenment, abandoned her and their baby).

The crucial issue to examine here is the relationship between the Ownership view of self, which compellingly accommodates many of our firm intuitions with respect to agency and ethics, and the various theoretical programs that revise our belief in an owner of mental occurrences. In section 2.2, I address some of the glaring challenges No-Self views face in terms of providing both a compelling, general account of agency, and a specifically convincing account of ethical agency. I argue that No-Self views require re-description of some fundamental features of forward-looking agency and language-use, and I show how such re-descriptions face formidable problems that are better met by an Ownership view.

I only broadly covered this problem in chapter 1. The problem is that agency and ethics crucially appeal to notions like volition, voluntary action, freedom,

¹ Paul Williams, *Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra: Altruism and Reality* (Dehli, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998). While Williams does not describe the problem in this way, I am capitalizing on a key insight in his critique of Śāntideva's argument for impartialism and altruism. Williams has claimed, more or less, that emphasis on *anātman* is consistent with moral nihilism. On the other hand, adopting the conventional belief in a self might motivate altruism and make sense of normative considerations, but conventional considerations can also support the ethical intuition that prioritizing one's own future welfare is not immoral.

intention, and persistence and duration. The view that we are owners of our mental lives nicely accommodates the deeply held intuition that we can be rational or irrational agents who are responsible for our lives, and that some sense of endurance justifies prudence and concern for the welfare of our nearest and dearest. These are basic aspects of the lived, human experience, and these notions are ineluctably stubborn organizing principles that have been emphasized to greater or lesser degrees throughout the history of civilized life. Moreover, these principles make social living conceptually intelligible. Theoretical advancements, ontologically revisionary insights, and compelling reductionist programs either force us to abandon some of these basic notions, or proceed along an insulated domain of discourse that simply remains neutral to the reality of agency and ethical phenomena. The radical implications of some these revisionary models for our ethical intuitions and for models of agency and practical rationality can be crudely compared to the difficulties quantum mechanics presents for Newtonian physics and Relativity Theory. These physical models, certain aspects of which are mutually inconsistent, are *all* indispensable to the advancement of physics—none have so far been abandoned for the other. Similarly, the social aspect of the human condition that produces ethics cannot be “transcended” or dispensed with merely in order to accommodate ontological models that dispense with person-involving and ethical terms. And this is precisely why Buddhist views, and the work of Parfit, are so attractive: they provide possibilities of a sort of “grand” or “unifying theory” in which the theoretically compelling project of reductionism may be able to provide

us with normative-ethical insights. Thus, it is crucial for ethicists to take these projects seriously.

While various No-Ownership and/or No-Self views might distance themselves from normative discourse, those views that do attempt to develop an ethical orientation—or to derive normative principles from their ontological commitments—would be attractive to those who want to retain the normative gravity of “I should do the right thing” while also adhering to eliminativism or reductionism that construes “I” as an empty term. The ethical orientation of the Buddhist and Parfitian projects are just the sorts of views that want to derive moral conclusions from ontological commitments (or, ontological revisions in the form of metaphysical non-commitments). I sketched one way in which metaphysical views about the self—especially revisionary metaphysical views—can importantly impact what it makes sense to do in the practical domain. This was in response to the claim that metaphysically deep categories do not matter so much in ethical questions as do considerations of practical identity. The counter-argument I offered in chapter 1 claimed that if we can achieve a certain impersonal view about selfhood, then such descriptive views might in fact have normative implications. Moreover, we might achieve an impersonal view through theoretical dialogue with metaphysics. For example, one version of the No-Self view in Buddhism, the “reductionist view” that we find in Vasubandhu (c. 4th-5th C. CE), which is arguably rehearsed in Śāntideva’s argument for rational altruism in chapter 8 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (passages 101-103), claims that under analysis we can view the psychophysical stream in totally impersonal terms. We can do this without appealing to any sort of further

underlying and unifying thread. The idea here is that psychological continuity, and various forms of causal relationships between psychophysical events, underlies the erroneous view that there is a persisting self that owns its mental and physical states. When we unburden ourselves of the belief that we are persisting owners of our experiences, we not only free ourselves up for other-regarding considerations in the conventional, practical domain, but also recognize that altruistic motivations are rationally justified.

I also briefly discussed a variant of this view. Acknowledging that we need a more robust view of how we develop a conception of ownership and “mineness,” Buddhists like Candrakīrti (c. 6th C. CE)—on Jonardon Ganeri’s reading²—argued that the sense of self is forged through an appropriative activity in the practical domain. I gloss “appropriative activity,” as involving the capacity for the stream to “grasp” or “take ownership” of (or fuel and feed itself) various sensations, volitions, and physical objects. Appropriation is a gloss on the term, “*upādāna*,” which is a word for fuel.³ The psychophysical stream is “fueled” by what it wants and does not want, which is reflected in its positive pursuits and its various aversions. The stream operates relationally and fluidly like a fuel appropriating oxygen. Without hypostasizing the stream, we can say that psychophysical elements show up as intimately related by the sorts of intentional objects at which such states aim, and by which the stream feeds itself. The fuel of desire determines the directionality of those aims. Desire produces a kind of closure wherein states of consciousness knit a

² Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), at Part III, 155-185.

³ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 200.

seemingly unified tapestry out of the sentiment, “I want, therefore I *am*.” The “I” appears to be singular and self-same as it is a term that arises out of desire for existence and for sensual objects. To want is to make the object of want one’s own, and this process holistically produces the sense that “this is *mine*,” and “I *am*.” There is lust for the lover’s body, or desire to smell and taste something sweet. There is pride in the supple movements of the body, and a certain experience of power in exerting physical force and maintaining social equilibrium. Contiguity and continuity between desires and volitions produce a first-person sense of unity, which is neither a mere sum of parts nor a real whole. We might think of this in terms of a sort of “vortex” of desires and perceptions that forge a *sense* of unity amid the “grasping” action that Buddhism believes fuels sentient existence.

While this produces an egocentric closure, I independently suggested that a more other-centric manifestation of the appropriative activity could be one way of creatively glossing “selflessness.” When we learn to more consciously view the self as a dynamic *activity* with porous borders (not a substantive thing), and dispense with the belief that the sense of self is the result of a real, persisting entity, we may better learn to identify with the needs and sufferings of other people. We understand that no real metaphysical limits sustain a hard and fast individuation between the more intimate needs we experience, and the needs that others attest to having. The very boundary between the intimate and the objectified “other” grows blurry, and the result is a sense of “exchange” and dynamic unity between self and other. On the practical level, the so-called appropriative self is one built out of the various mental and physical occurrences that are either appropriated and identified

with, or disavowed or transcended. This sort of “self-activity” or “self-ing” is more or less coherent, but always porous and dynamically in flux, and it is fueled by the mental occurrences and values that it endorses. The idea here is that with the right practice we can expand the view of self to radically incorporate others (and by “others,” I mean other constellations of mental and physical occurrences available for appropriation). When this is supported by the Buddhist soteriological goal of liberation from cycles of suffering—which the Buddhist argues are chiefly produced by attachment, egoism, and narrow obsession with one’s own desires and projects—we can cultivate a deeply other-centric orientation. This is presumed to be a liberating and salvific orientation—an “enactment,” if you will, of non-egocentric being. I will develop a slightly different, but I think, more attractive version of this argument in chapter 3. However, in chapter 4, I will point out some of its shortcomings, and argue that a more normative gloss on the “appropriative self” offers a contemporary and respectably embodied, naturalistic view. The important difference between the two versions is that the latter supports the belief that authorship of one’s life through practical identity and embodied avowals and disavowals is not an illusion to be seen through.

In section 2.3 of the present chapter, I will lay out the conceptual territory of contemporary views on selfhood. My goal is to better situate No-Self views. I specifically set up the conversation in light of the Madhyamaka-Buddhist “emptiness” thesis—the view that nothing in reality has intrinsic existence or inherent essence (*svabhāva*). I focus on Madhyamaka, because its ethical champion, Śāntideva provides one of the more systematic ethical treatises in the Mahāyāna

corpus. Moreover, I need to situate Madhyamaka and Śāntideva's altruistic project in terms of competing Buddhist No-Self views.

In 2.4, I cover with greater detail the utilitarian-leaning ethics we may extract from Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and his *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. Śāntideva provides us with a version of the No-Self view that presumably aims to derive moral conclusions from ontological insights. Furthermore, as theorists like Charles Goodman have contended, Śāntideva's work aims to justify a version of act-consequentialism, which promotes altruism and agent-neutral ethics.⁴ This should be taken seriously, because there are independently compelling reasons to disavow the belief in a real self or a real owner of experiences. So if we can develop a workable ethics out of such insight, then we may have an ethically compelling reason to dispense with our belief in real selves.

Goodman provides a nice overview of some of the independent reasons Buddhists have for rejecting belief in the self. For example, Buddhists are fond of appealing to vagueness arguments. Mereological vagueness, which drives various Sorites problems, destabilizes a realist account of composite objects, thereby problematizing our capacity to individuate objects and identify parts that belong to a whole. Moreover, it implies that identifying *P* as a part of *W* is a function of conceptual construction, and not an isomorphic depiction of fixed structures in nature. Thus, all composite items—like the complex stream that Buddhists believe account for the self—are conceptual imputations that disappear under analysis. As Goodman writes, “Plants and animals, artifacts and natural objects, all have vague

⁴ Charles Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006).

spatial boundaries; once we look at them on the atomic level, they are clouds of tiny particles, which constantly exchange matter with the environment in such a way that there is often no fact of the matter about whether a particular particle is part of them or not.”⁵ And of course, at the normative level, vagueness drives many of the controversies involved in the abortion and assisted-suicide and euthanasia questions. Parfit famously capitalizes on vagueness to argue that there is not always a fact about the matter as to whether or not someone has survived a process of change. This, of course, has important implications for theories about personal identity, and for the ethics of punishment and responsibility. So, if Śāntideva's revisionary work can provide us with normative conclusions, then it's a theory worth taking very seriously. However, to better situate Śāntideva's work—and show how it may differ in important ways from Parfit's project—we need a more thorough taxonomy of views about the self, particularly No-Self views, since not all Buddhists mean the same thing by denying the existence of a self.

I will tackle this, as I said, in 2.3. In doing so, I will utilize Ganeri's helpful taxonomy.⁶ Accordingly, I will assess Śāntideva's work in light of this taxonomy. Finally, in 2.5, I will also assess some of the leading reconstructions of the crucial passages, 101-103, in chapter 8 of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. In these passages, Śāntideva argues that we must endorse robust altruism. I will ultimately conclude, like Harris,⁷ that denying the existence of the self fails in any straightforward way to

⁵ Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion*, 101-102.

⁶ Jonardon Ganeri, *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Experience* (New York: Oxford, 2012), chapter 1.

⁷ Stephen Harris, “Does Anātman Rationally Entail Altruism? On *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8:103,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18, 2011: 93-123.

justify an altruistic moral imperative. There may be better ways to reconstruct Śāntideva's work. However, I cannot currently devise a strategy for rescuing Śāntideva's argument (although I provide some original takes on the leading critiques of his argument, while providing a metaphysical option that might bolster Śāntideva's thesis). It seems to me that the most compelling reason I might have for helping someone—or for being committed to altruism—is through some form of identification with that person. At some general level of empathic identity, your pain might as well be my pain: this is something we can *share*. At some level of metaphysical description “we are all one,” and so any suffering is suffering for all. At some level of social generality, I would want to be free of pain, and I believe that this is a right that anyone who is sufficiently unbiased would have to extend to everyone in a Rawlsian-contractualist sort of way. However, in all these scenarios—*pace* the Buddhist emphasis on “emptiness”—the important distinction between self and other is always maintained. The key to altruism, I believe, rests somewhere in the paradoxical notion of forging real identity amidst accepted difference.

2.2 Ownership and No-Self Views

South Asian thought, from its rich philosophical inquiry into the nature of the self in the *Upaniṣads*, to early Buddhist practical philosophy, and medieval Buddhist epistemological-metaphysical speculation, has viewed the question of the self as one of the most central philosophical and spiritual-religious questions to pursue. A general belief pervading the constellation of diverse texts we monolithically call, “Indian philosophy” (*darśana*) is the belief that understanding the nature of the self is necessary for commanding a clearer sense of what one should *do*, in both the

social-normative sphere, and in one's private life. Moreover, and particularly in the case of Buddhism, understanding the nature of the self is thought to be necessary for achieving maximum well-being, for understanding one's duties and social roles (*dharma*), and for freeing oneself from the existential suffering that presumably arises from holding mistaken views about the self.⁸ In fact, one way of viewing the Buddha's mission, and the philosophical thought that has grown out of that mission, is to see it as a deeply pragmatic labor aimed at healing various "psychological sicknesses" that arise—not out of aberrant mental disorders and neuroses, but rather, out of the ordinary experience of living under erroneous, but dominant practical and philosophical paradigms. So the Buddha may be viewed as a kind of "psychological doctor,"⁹ or "philosophical healer." Especially with such foundational Madhyamaka thinkers as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, Buddhism becomes a philosophical therapeutic and corrective in its critique of the reifying habits and practices of language-users, a move we've taken very seriously in the Euro-American tradition following Wittgenstein's lead. Also, in a move paralleled by Hume in British philosophy, the Buddha's project might be viewed as a kind of

⁸ See Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 157. Ganeri points out in citing Richard Gombrich: "We ought not to conclude, however, that the Buddha's interest in persons is merely statistical, and this is because of another claim he makes, namely, that the path to the removal of suffering rests in freedom from mistaken conceptions of the self, or mistaken ideas about what having this concept consists in." Ganeri draws on Gombrich's claim that "the most fundamental doctrine of Buddhism [is that] Enlightenment consists in realizing that there is no soul or enduring essence in living beings." See Richard Gombrich, "Review of J. T. Ergardt," *Numen* 26 (1979): 270. Ganeri adds in his note (157: n. 2): "It is perhaps worth stressing that the claim is not that we labor under a *self-deception*. Self-deception has to do with willful errors in my *de se* judgments about my own motivations and desires; the error to which the Buddha refers has to do with mistakes about the possession of a concept of self as such."

⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

empirical philosophical-psychology, or, proto-psychology. This is especially visible in the Abhidharma tradition, which aimed to provide metaphysical support for the leading conceptual tenets of Buddhism: the teachings of nonself (*anātman*), impermanence (*anitya*), and suffering and its healing (*duḥkha* and *nirodha*).¹⁰ Abhidharma articulated what it believed were the fundamental building blocks (*dharmas*), or, matrices of basic experiential data that underlie our mental lives and express the structures of our consciousness. Thus, Buddhist philosophy, with its pragmatic-empirical and therapeutic orientation, and the equally therapeutic but deeply metaphysical Yoga tradition, emerging out of Patañjali's c. 4th century CE, *Yoga-Sūtras*, along with the analytic and logic-driven discourse of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realists all set the stage for what Ganeri calls, "substantive truth-directed debate about the self" in the Indian tradition.¹¹ The Buddhists were particularly concerned with locating the source of error that perpetuates erroneous thinking about the self.¹² One does not exaggerate in saying that all the major schools of Indian philosophy believed that getting it right about the self is essential for achieving a fully realized life (construed in both transcendent terms, and with respect to social harmony and the proper view of one's social roles and duties).

Mahāyāna-Madhyamaka Buddhism, in the likes of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva's 9th chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, "Perfection of Wisdom"

¹⁰ *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, translation and commentary by Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 4. Siderits and Katsura do not mention any relation to Hume here, but they give a succinct outline of the metaphysical aspects of the Abhidharma project that Mahāyāna-Madhyamaka thinkers would later deconstruct. See the introduction.

¹¹ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

(*prajñā-pāramitā*), adopts a radical global-irrealism by attacking epistemological foundationalism, and deconstructing substance ontology altogether. If the Sautrāntika-Abhidharma philosophy of Vasubandhu (c. 4th-5th C. CE) sought to locate and analyze the basic experiential stuff out of which our mental lives are constructed, the Madhyamaka School, growing out of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (“Root Verses of the Middling Path”), sought to problematize the epistemological assumptions that grounded such a pursuit. This inspired the Mādhyamika philosopher to develop a radically relational philosophy, eschewing any references to either real natural kinds, or foundational knowledge obtained through allegedly certified and truth-producing instruments (*pramāṇa*).¹³ Thus, it is necessary to clarify the nuanced iterations of the No-Self view that arise out of the trove of diverging texts called, “Buddhism.” It is also necessary to provide a broader scope of the different concerns that drove the evolving critique of belief in a persisting, substantial self. Helpfully, Ganeri has distilled two basic research targets running throughout the variegated strands of the Buddhist project:

1. Identify false constitutive accounts of the concept of self, and provide instead a true account of what our concept of self consists in.
2. Consider whether the concept of self, correctly described, has any place in a properly constituted mental life.¹⁴

¹³ For an updated interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (“The Dispeller of Disputes”), a text devoted to critiquing epistemological foundationalism, particularly, the realism endorsed by the Nyāya philosophers with respect to the existence of justified knowledge obtained through use of the *pramāṇas*, see *Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*, translation and commentary by Jan Westerhoff (New York: Oxford, 2010).

¹⁴ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 159.

No-Self views may be oriented against the background of these two trajectories. First, one must provide a convincing account of what is conceptually constitutive of selfhood. Second, one must determine the practical and ethical upshot of employing this correct, or, *corrected* account of self. With that in mind, I'd like to articulate several philosophically relevant iterations of the No-Self view in order to more closely assess, in light of chapter 1, whether a more compelling account of ethical agency and justified altruism can be developed by departing from the view of the self as an embodied owner of its mental and physical states. I will begin by adopting a useful taxonomy from Ganeri's work.

But before turning to that taxonomy, I'd like to emphasize that in order for a No-Self view to be convincing, especially those views claiming that even a correctly described *concept* of self is a moral ill that somehow impedes one from achieving optimal ethical clarity and maturity, it has to overcome some formidable ontological and ethical obstacles surrounding the concept of agency. As I've claimed above, chapter 1 was a broad and very generic rehearsal of what is ethically at stake when we consider the metaphysics of selves. But the epistemology of selves is equally important when considering agency. How I come to know that certain plans and preferences are in *your* interest, and how I come to relate to the various beliefs, desires, and intentions that fashion my plans and interests, as being *mine*, require that I employ some conception of selfhood. Ownership and an attendant conception of self are key components that make agency and self-regarding and other-regarding considerations intelligible. As Ganeri argues, the concept of self "is important because it enables me to think of my ideas and emotions, my plans and aspirations,

my hopes and fears, as *mine*—as *belonging* to me, and the proper focus of *my* self-interest.”¹⁵ The discussion of conflicts between self-interest and considerations of the greater good does not get off the ground without some working conception of selfhood. In chapter 1, I showed how the strategy of collapsing the distinction between self and other does not necessarily defuse the conflict between self and other. It may either: (1) leave us with no motivations, or, (2) disguise a deeper selfishness that comes with apathetic acts of omission. Moreover, lacking a concept of a self is tantamount to lacking a robust sense of agency: one would lack the capacity to consider how intentions and interests coincide or conflict. Altruism would not make sense unless one had a clear sense of whose interests are at stake, and whose interests are either advanced or impeded.

Also, as Marya Schechtman has pointed out, some sense of duration and persistence is conceptually essential in a convincing notion of selfhood, and this is straightforwardly supported by an Ownership view of the self. Duration and connectedness is required for making sense of talking, listening, working, acting, having beliefs, desires, goals, intentions, and for thinking, and vacillating, and being inconsistent.¹⁶ Indeed, as Arindam Chakrabarti has pointed out, the self has been used to conceptually make sense of the forward-looking nature of desire, and to make sense of our capacity to recognize persons and things, and to communicate

¹⁵Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 191.

¹⁶ Cited from Sorabji, *The Self*, 270. See Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996), 137. Sorabji writes: “There is yet another difficulty [for No-Self views and Parfitian style reductionism]: a person’s activities are linked together in a far greater variety of contexts than the few that Parfit considers, and normally the linkage involves the idea of the same owner, so that, if we drop that idea, all these cases would need to be re-described.

and use language.¹⁷ So, in summary, a No-Self and/or No-Ownership view must address three general problems.

1. In terms of ethical agency, the No-Self view, at least on the surface, threatens to destabilize the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations, and this is a basic distinction that makes altruism intelligible.
2. Again, in terms of ethical agency, the equanimity that the Buddhist believes is achieved in fully realizing the No-Self view, seems, at least on one interpretation,¹⁸ to produce a dilemma. On the one hand, when the importance of conventional selfhood is stressed, the close and personal conventional relationship to one's own future-self seems to justify at least moderate egoism (or a privileging of one's own future welfare). On the other hand, by de-emphasizing conventional selfhood, equanimity may be achieved, but equanimity is not logically inconsistent with apathy and neglect; so de-emphasizing conventional selfhood is consistent with moral nihilism. Clearly, moderate egoism and nihilism undermine the demanding commitment to altruism that texts like *Bodhicaryāvatāra* endorse.
3. There are all sorts of problems for the No-Self view that concern broader notions of agency. For example, everything from developing a full-fledged intention, to entertaining self-doubt, anticipation, repentance, or engaging in

¹⁷ Also cited in Sorabji, *The Self*, 295. Sorabji cites Chakrabarti's translation of the 10th century CE Nyāya philosopher, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, who argued that linguistic communication, from the successive apprehension of ordered phonemes, to the holistic apprehension of a whole sentence, bolsters the view that an enduring self is operative in synthesizing fields of data. See Arindam Chakrabarti, "The Nyāya Proofs for the Existence of the Soul," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 10, 1982, 211-38, at 225.

¹⁸ Harris, "Does Anātman," 102: Harris refers to this problem as "Śāntideva's dilemma," and develops his assessment out of Paul Williams's critique in *Studies*.

inconsistent or illogical thinking requires some sense of persistence and duration. We require some sense of persistence and duration to even connect the phonemes that make up words, which then produce intelligible sentences. In short, the future-directed, or forward-looking nature of agency requires a sense of duration and persistence that the Ownership view more easily accommodates.

So I've basically boiled down the problem with No-Self and/or No-Ownership views to two general problems concerning ethical agency, and one general problem concerning the forward-looking nature of agency and linguistic communication. However, in fairness to the No-Self view, which has several nuanced versions, we cannot simply assume that No-Selfers deny the importance of conventional selfhood and ownership, especially when doing so produces a glaringly incoherent account of everyday, transactional reality. And yet, as stated in (2) above, it remains to be shown how a No-Self view that emphasizes an impersonal perspective escapes the egoism/nihilism dilemma. Moreover, it remains to be shown just how normativity can be derived from the revisionary metaphysical assertions various Buddhist No-Selfers endorse. As Harris has shown,¹⁹ this is a formidable problem, and we've yet to produce a satisfactory account of how the ontological claim of No-Self and No-Ownership entails the moral imperative that we should be committed to altruism. Accordingly, I will develop a broad sketch of Ownership and No-Self views, and examine where we might place the arguments for altruism that Buddhist philosophers like Śāntideva employed. I want to specifically examine how

¹⁹ See the conclusion in Harris, "Does Anātman Rationally Entail Altruism?"

Śāntideva’s argument holds up against some of the conceptual requirements that an Ownership view of self more easily accommodates.

2.3 Ownership and Individuation: Varieties of Selflessness

Ganeri has provided one of the most succinct contemporary taxonomies that organize the intersection and conversation between contemporary views of self and classical Indian No-Self views. He employs a crucial organizing principle extracted from the Indian tradition: the distinction between “place” (*ādhāra*) and “base,” or, “resting place” (*āśraya*). These are terms of art that address both the issue of ownership, that is, the question of who owns a set of mental occurrences, and addresses the issue of metaphysical dependence, that is, the issue of accounting for that upon which a mental life is metaphysically dependent.²⁰ “Place,” answers the ownership question, and “base” answers the question of what individuating ground supports an individual’s experiences.²¹ Put still another way, we can ask where we should *place* mental occurrences, like glee or anxiety, and how we should establish *the basis* of individuation. Ganeri organizes views about self into four types, and eleven basic views.

*Figure 1.*²²

Type-I: One-dimensional Views

²⁰ Ganeri, *The Self*, 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²² Ganeri, *The Self*, 36-49. This schema is pulled almost verbatim from 40-47. I include it, because I will draw from it throughout the rest of this essay. Moreover, I provide independent analysis.

1. Cartesian View

- ***The self is both the place and the base.***
- The self is both the owner of the experience, and that upon which it adjectivally depends; just like a knot depends adjectivally upon the existence of the rope out of which it is a knot, so mental experiences are not possible without a basic substratum, or bare particular, which is the self.

2. Materialist View

- ***The body is both the place and the base.***
- This ontology is monistic with respect to the underlying entities that account for mental and physical properties. However, materialism also accommodates type-identity theory and property dualism (for example, Strawson's M and P predicates, and other forms of *non-reductive* materialism).

3. Reductionist View

- ***The stream of psycho-physical occurrences is both the place and the base.***
- Hume and Parfit provide examples of this view: a stream of experience collectively provides mental states with both an individuating identity and an owner.

Type-II: Real Self Views

4. Ownership View

- ***The self is place, and the body is base.***
- Constitution View: the relation between body and self is a constitution relation, like that between gold and a ring; that is, the body constitutes the self. However, the self is *not* identical with or reducible to the body.
- Natural Self View: the self is the basis upon which there can be a mental life. It is not a Cartesian *res cogitans*, that is, it is not something whose essence is thinking and consciousness. Our mental lives, however, are metaphysically dependent upon a body.
- Minimal Ownership View: the self is more aptly characterized as an embodied and invariant sense of reflexively attuned presence.
- What unites all these threads is that the self is metaphysically dependent upon the body, but the self is not reduced to the body.

5. Phenomenal View

- ***The self is place, and the stream is base.***
- The self may be emergent from, or constituted by, a stream of mental occurrences, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to the stream, which is its individuating base.

6. Pure Consciousness View

- ***The self is place, but there is no base.***
- Self is pure consciousness, self-owning, and metaphysically dependent on *nothing!* For example, the “witness consciousness” (*śakṣin*) of Advaita Vedānta.

Type III: No Place (i.e., No Ownership) Views: Buddhist Schools

7. NP-1: *The body is base, but there is no place (Abhidharma).*

8. NP-2: *The stream is base, but there is no place (Yogācāra and Sautrāntika).*

9. NP-3: *There is no base, and there is no place (Madhyamaka).*

Type IV: Stream is Place

10. Tornado View

- ***The body is base, and the stream is place.***
- The self is an emergent phenomenon that arises from dynamic and sufficiently complex systems. Supervening over the body, it displays autonomy. In the Tornado view, “We would then think of the mind as a tornado-like occurrence within a dynamic flow of experience. What characterizes the Tornado View, above all, is the thought that mind is an emergent macrostate of the non-linear dynamical behavior of aggregated particles, here mental events.”²³

²³ Ganeri, *The Self*, 47.

11. Flame View

- ***The stream is place, and there is no base.***
- The Flame View dispenses with the idea that the self is emergent from an underlying microstate of shifting patterns of aggregates. Instead, on the model of a flame, the self emerges out of a constant fusion and mutation of non-persisting particulars.

Figure 1.

The advantage of using “place” and “base” terminology is that it nuances and complicates the conversation about selves. The notion of an enduring self disappears in the Materialist and Reductionist views. However, these views embrace the idea that some sort of ownership, or “place,” is operative in the processes that produce the sense of self. In other words, “it is open to stipulate that what the term ‘self’ really means, in any of these views, is whatever it is that the view takes to be the place: the body or the stream.”²⁴ So Ganeri’s point clarifies the radical nature of the Buddhist No-Self views. It is not just a reductionist project that revises and stipulates a distinct place of ownership. These views, articulated as they are here in terms of “place,” deny that it ultimately makes sense to speak of any ownership at all.²⁵ However, not all Buddhists maintained such a view. The Vātsīputrīya Buddhists argued that some sort of “person” (*pudgala*) supervenes over micro-elements, and is emergent from, but non-reducible to such micro-states. They would not embrace NP1-NP3. When Vasubandhu summarily discounts this view, of which we have a paucity of texts to draw from, he does not envision the more complex emergentist, systems-dynamical views that would gain such popularity today. Like

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

the reductionists, the Vātsīputrīya Buddhists wanted to minimize ontology by eschewing the view that an immaterial soul exists distinct from the body. However, they were not willing to reduce mental life to just a functionalist-causal model of impersonal psychophysical occurrences. For the Abhidharma Buddhists, particularly the Vasubandhu of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, sequences of tropes supervene on the physical body,²⁶ and this accounts for the erroneous belief in an enduring, Cartesian self. The “mind-only” (*Citamātra/Vijñānavāda*) schools, also known as “Yogācāra,” are interpreted to be idealists of one sort or another. They are represented by NP2, in that they believe a sense of self arises out of relations internal to a mental stream, and does not supervene on a physical body. Finally, Madhyamaka Buddhism, which denies that anything has independent and intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*), rejects any sort of real supervenience or real determining relations.²⁷

This latter view may be read in an eliminativist sort of way. For the Mādhyamika, in order for *X* to be metaphysically independent, it needs to be free of any sort of causal or ontological dependence on anything else. Showing that nothing conceptually fits the bill of having an essence, or, having metaphysical independence reveals that all things are essentially “coreless” (*asāra*), and appear as co-relational terms in an interdependent field of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). However, in a contemporary context, we can say that the Churchland eliminativist believes that we can abandon talk of the theoretical entity “eliminated” by a compelling reduction discourse. Once we find an impersonal and purely physical-functional way of

²⁶ Ganeri, *The Self*, 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

describing the mind, for example, we need not speak of minds at all. That is, we can replace talk of minds with talk of neurons and/or functional systems. I doubt that we can read the Madhyamaka project in this way. In fact, some theorists have suggested that we can read Madhyamaka philosophy as a form of deflationary-minimalism.²⁸ What's nice about this reading is that the radical, and often inscrutable, nature of Madhyamaka is reconstructed as a philosophy that prizes epistemic humility, while eschewing the need for deep metaphysics to provide justification for our practices.²⁹ For the Mādhyamika, *all* metaphysical views, particularly the belief in an enduring self, ensnare us in dichotomous and angst-inducing thought; thus, divesting ourselves of such metaphysical commitments is the key to liberation. Indeed, even the claim that all is “empty,” or, interdependent and without essence, should not be entertained as a positive metaphysical claim.³⁰ This clearly supports the deflationary reading. We can embrace the conventional understanding of phenomena without believing that the entities we have commerce

²⁸ Roy W. Perrett, “Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (July, 2002): 373-385.

²⁹ Perrett, “Personal Identity, Minimalism, Madhyamaka,” 375: “According to Minimalism, metaphysical pictures of the justificatory undergirdings of our practices do not represent real conditions of justification of those practices. Any metaphysical view that we may have of persons is not indispensable to the practice of making judgments about personal identity and organizing our practical concerns around these judgments.”

³⁰ See Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, (*Saṃskāra-parīkṣā*), 13.8.

*sūnyatā sarvadr̥ṣṭīnām proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ|
yeṣāṃ tu sūnyatādr̥ṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire||*

Emptiness is declared by the Victorious ones to be the expedient for all [metaphysical] views.

For those for whom emptiness is a view, they have been said to be incomplete and incurable.

with arise unmediated by conceptual imputation. Of course, revealing that we impute concepts on our experiences does not mean that we have to embrace radical skepticism. It's one thing to say that something is mediated by concepts, and quite another thing to say that, as a result, we've falsified our experience.³¹ The deflationary and minimalist reading tempers Madhyamaka by viewing it as a rejection of the traditional realist project of describing things from a purportedly God's-eye view, or, a "view from nowhere." So it views justification as solely a product of convention and conceptual construction.³² All entities arise out of a web of interdependent conceptual schemes, and seeing the scheme *qua* scheme is presumed to be a liberating achievement that frees us from the pangs of "views" (*dr̥ṣṭi*). Thus, we can read Madhyamaka as a therapeutic and self-corrective philosophy along the lines of Wittgenstein.³³ However, all this notwithstanding, it seems uncontroversial—or problematically ambiguous—that Madhyamaka philosophy eschews the belief in any sort of metaphysical ownership or firmly-fixed

³¹ This point has been brought home by Bernard Williams with respect to Nietzsche's claim that all conceptual mediation is falsification of one sort or another. Cited in Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 168. See also, Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 17.

³² Perrett, "Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka," 379: "I want to claim that the...Madhyamaka position on personal identity as a Buddhist analogue of the Western Minimalist position on personal identity. Both believe that any metaphysical view that we may have of persons is not indispensable to the practice of making judgments about personal identity and organizing our practical concerns around these judgments. Both believe that the presence or absence of "deep facts" about personal identity is largely irrelevant to justifying our ordinary normative practices because these are founded not on metaphysics of person but on our circumstances and needs."

³³ *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, "Nāgārjuna's Reason Sixty with Candrakīrti's Commentary," translation by Joseph Loizzo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). See Part III of Loizzo's introduction, "Dereification and Self-Correction in Chandrakīrti and Wittgenstein."

individuating base, and this becomes a problem when we're trying to make sense of agency and the altruistic program endorsed by Mahāyāna Buddhism. Accordingly, I will now turn to *Bodhicaryāvatāra*—a text glossed as an example of Madhyamaka philosophy—and assess with more detail whether or not Śāntideva's project can withstand the conceptual obstacles I addressed above.

2.4 Bodhicaryāvatāra: Altruism, Egoism, and Utility

The 8th century CE Buddhist philosopher, Śāntideva composed one of the most lyrical and sincere expressions of the Mahāyāna-Buddhist ethos in the Sanskrit language. In doing so, he also provided a more systematic and ethics-driven treatise that more closely parallels the generality, strategies, and aims of contemporary ethics than do other texts in classical Buddhism and Indian philosophy.³⁴ In fact, Charles Goodman argues that the shift in the ethical orientation between early Theravāda Buddhism and later Mahāyāna Buddhism lies in the latter's more systematic articulation of values that parallel universalist-consequentialism and classical act-utilitarianism. In support of this claim, it's worth citing in whole the

³⁴ Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion*, 96: "It has become a commonplace among scholars that the Buddhist tradition did not produce any systematic ethical theory. There is some truth to this assertion; the Theravāda tradition and such Mahāyāna texts as the "Chapter on Ethics" do not present reasoning about the nature of morality or the rationale for particular ethical norms that rises to the level of generality found in numerous ancient and modern Western treatments of the subject. Of all the productions of the Indian Buddhist tradition, the texts that come closest to a worked-out ethical theory are the two works of Śāntideva: the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, and *Śīkṣā-samuccaya*, or *Compendium of the Trainings*...The sophistication, generality, and power of Śāntideva's arguments give him a legitimate claim to be the greatest of all Buddhist ethicists."

passage from Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* that Goodman believes epitomizes the Mahāyāna project.³⁵

Through actions of body, speech, and mind, the Bodhisattva sincerely makes a continuous effort to stop all present and future suffering and depression, and to produce present and future happiness and gladness, for all beings. But if he does not seek the collection of the conditions for this, and does not strive for what will prevent the obstacles to this, or *he does not cause small suffering and depression to arise as a way of preventing great suffering and depression*, or does not abandon a small benefit in order to achieve a greater benefit, if he neglects to do these things even for a moment, he is at fault (italics mine; translation, Goodman).³⁶

Bracketing the intricate distinctions and philosophical differences that characterize the various Mahāyāna schools since c. 100 BCE to the present day, we can be sure that all Mahāyāna Buddhism converges on the general belief that cultivating “great compassion” (*mahākaruṇā*) is partly constitutive of the goal of achieving Buddhist enlightenment and Buddha status. For the Mahāyāna Buddhist, achieving Buddhahood is the supreme goal. While the Buddha could have remained a lonely forest-dweller, saved by his own transcendent accomplishments, he instead chose to teach out of compassion for the existential suffering of other seekers. Not only motivated to seek personal liberation, the Mahāyāna Buddhist-heroes, or, Bodhisattvas delay their own release in order to liberate all sentient beings from the throes of *saṃsāra* (cyclic existence), and the various “hell realms” believed to exist in classical Buddhist cosmology. Bodhisattvas strive to cultivate the “awakened

³⁵ Goodman, 97

³⁶ Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion*, 97: “Not one of the major characteristics of classical act-utilitarianism is missing from this passage. The focus on actions; the central moral importance of happy and unhappy states of mind; the extension of scope to all beings; the extreme demands; the absence of any room for personal moral space; the balancing of costs and benefits; the pursuit of maximization: every one of these crucial features of utilitarianism is present.”

mind” (*bodhicitta*), which amounts to the cultivation of noble attainments, or, “perfections” (*pāramitā*). By attaining unshakeable *dhyāna* (meditative one-pointedness of mind and yogic detachment), which is the key *pāramitā* developed in chapter 8 of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Bodhisattvas recognize the interdependence of self and other, and they practice an exalted “exchange” or identification with all suffering beings. This is in fact so exalted a state of achievement that it is regarded as a sort of “secret” (*guhya*) drawn out of a cavernously inward, obscured, and not fully articulated sense of fellow-feeling. Śāntideva notably captures this in the *BCA* at 8:120:

Whoever longs to rescue quickly both himself and others should practice the supreme mystery (*paramam-guyam*): exchange of self and other (*parātma-parivartanam*).

The merits that Bodhisattvas accrue through these practices are devoted to the salvific release of those who are still corrupted by the pangs of mortal existence. The revisionary/reformative Mahāyāna schools viewed the so-called lesser vehicle Buddhists (*hīnayāna*) of the early Theravāda tradition (a designation fashioned by Mahāyāna) as insufficiently concerned with the altruistic spirit of the Buddha. While Theravāda presumably emphasizes individual liberation in the image of the *Arhat*, Mahāyāna emphasizes the altruistic compassion of the self-sacrificing *Bodhisattva*. Mahāyāna schools further distinguish themselves by viewing achievement of Buddhahood as the greatest goal. Part of what it means to be a Buddha, they believe, is to devote oneself to universal salvation. This dedication is expressed through altruistic and consequentialist-oriented acts of self-sacrifice.

For one who fails to exchange his own happiness for the suffering of others, Buddhahood is certainly impossible—how could there even be happiness in cyclic existence? (*BCA*, 8:131)

Hey Mind, make the resolve, 'I am bound to others'! From now on you must have no other concern than the welfare of all beings (*BCA*, 8:137).

If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise (*BCA*, 8:105).

Through my merit may all those in any of the directions suffering distress in body and mind find oceans of happiness and delight. As long as the round of rebirth remains, may their happiness never fade. Let the world receive uninterrupted happiness from the Bodhisattvas (*BCA*, 10:2-3).

This exalted sense of concern for all beings resonates with the agent-neutral ethics and impartialism found in utilitarian and consequentialist discourses. Rather than placing emphasis on the owner of suffering, the utilitarian-minded philosopher places ultimate import on the total quantity of suffering. In chapter 1, I briefly discussed Śāntideva's argument for viewing suffering in an egalitarian, impersonal, and therefore impartial light. The rational and motivational economy required to practice such an ethic is what early 20th century utilitarians like Sidgwick called, "rational benevolence." In achieving an impersonal view, one recognizes that "from the point of view of the Universe," her own suffering is not privileged over anyone else's. Given that more good is better than less, one recognizes a reason to take particular interest in the total sum of good and bad in the world. And in order to actually act upon that insight, one must cultivate the capacity to sacrifice one's own egocentric considerations for considerations of the greater good. Likewise, Bodhisattvas are called on to delay their own release until all sentient beings achieve enlightenment. They selflessly devote themselves to the good of all.

The philosophical question that arises for me is this: How, and under what conditions, would it make sense to set aside my optimal advantage for another's advantage? In an applied-ethical context, this would have to be assessed on a case by case basis. But I'm asking how we can make sense of this structurally, that is, with respect to a general framework of reasons for doing things. As far as clichés go, we can always say, "To help others, you must first help yourself." But we can always ask why, as a general rule, or in a normative sense, we must be motivated to help others. Being motivated to help my nearest and dearest is not such a mystery to me, but how far-out does rationality demand I extend this concern? Now, if we reverse the cliché, we might say, "To help yourself, you must help others." We may even interpret the logic of Śāntideva along this line.

Those who become oceans of sympathetic joy when living beings are released, surely it is they who achieve fulfillment. What would be the point in a liberation without sweetness? (*BCA*, 8: 108).

Some sort of carrot must motivate the reasonable person to delay her valid needs and aspirations for the sake of someone else's well-being. When I act prudently, I delay gratification for myself right now for the sake of a greater balance of happiness on the whole. I do this because, ultimately, *I* will benefit from this in the long run. Would it make sense to delay my valid needs now for the sake of someone else, without pursuing a state of affairs in which I am also well off in the long run? What am I supposed to ultimately aim for when I engage in acts of charity and altruism? One consequentialist-minded response is that I should aim for a larger total quantity of happiness or good. But when I consider the manifest fact that I am one individual among many individuals striving for a more pleasing and fulfilling

life, I cannot help but wonder why that quantity of overall good should not necessarily include my own welfare. Let me begin to develop an answer to these questions by examining some of the leading reconstructions of passages 101-103 in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

2.5 Bodhicaryāvatāra: Altruism and the Anātman Dilemma

Chapter 8 of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* may be reconstructed to endorse the following views: (1) impartial concern for the welfare of all is rationally justified; (2) all suffering, regardless of whose suffering, ought to be eradicated. Taken together, these provide a working definition of “altruism,” glossed in normative-ethical terms, rather than purely socio-biological or game-theoretical terms.³⁷ The more recent cottage industry emerging out of chapter 8 of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* centers on passages 101-103. This is largely due to Paul Williams’s seminal study of the text, and his controversial claim that Śāntideva’s position not only fails, but also unwittingly undermines the Bodhisattva path it aims to endorse.³⁸ A key controversy that philosophers like Williams, Siderits, Pettit, Clayton, and Harris³⁹ have engaged is

³⁷ Harris, “Does Anātman Rationally Entail Altruism? On *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8:103,” 93-123: “Throughout this essay, I will use ‘altruism’ to refer to the position that one should have an impartial concern for one’s own and others welfare, and should strive to remove all suffering, regardless to whom it belongs” (95). He also notes (n. 2, 95) Jon Wetlesen’s gloss on altruism. Wetlesen calls the altruistic person one who “has an impartial concern for the welfare of all parties concerned, without discriminating between the welfare of himself or herself and others.” See Jon Wetlesen, “Did Śāntideva Destroy the Bodhisattva Path?” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 9, 2002: 34-88, at 42.

³⁸ Paul Williams, *Studies*, 174-176.

³⁹ Barbra Clayton, “Compassion as a Matter of Fact: The Argument from No-self to Selflessness in Śāntideva’s Śikṣāsamuccaya,” *Contemporary Buddhism*, 2:1, 83-97. See also, John Pettit, “Paul Williams: Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 6, 120-137. See also, Mark Siderits, “The Reality of Altruism: Reconstructing Śāntideva,” *Philosophy East and*

whether or not the No-Self view provides rational justification for altruism. While this has spawned an extensive conversation in the literature, I'd like to provide only a brief account of some key philosophical reconstructions of the said passages, which have been succinctly tackled in Harris's essay.⁴⁰ I'll examine whether or not the text can stand up to some of the conceptual problems I've addressed above. So let me begin with the passages themselves:

The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong? (*BCA*, 8:101)

Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this? (*BCA*, 8:102)

If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone (*BCA*, 8:103).

Verse 101 addresses the orthodox Buddhist view that person-involving concepts ultimately refer in one way or another to an impersonal continuum or "stream" (*santāna*) of psychophysical aggregates (*skandhas*).⁴¹ But the verse also warns us not to hypostasize this dynamic complex or view the stream as an enduring and real composite entity (*samudāya*). Śāntideva is enumerating a premise here accepted by nearly all of his Buddhist interlocutors, that is, that a person is nothing over and above the individuating, stream-like psychophysical constituents,

West, 50(3), 412-424. Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publications, 2003).

⁴⁰ Harris, "Does Anātman Rationally Entail Altruism?"

⁴¹ The aggregates (*skandhas*) are: *rūpa* (physical form/structure), *vedanā* (emotional coloring/feeling), *samjñā* (conception/recognition), *samskāra* (volition/habit/impulse), *vijñāna* (discernment/synthesizing consciousness). Abhidharma philosophy derives various species of *dharmas* from these larger categories.

and the “stream” is not a real composite entity. Just like a string of beads or an army, a whole is merely a conceptual imputation (*prajñapti*), derived from ultimately independent elements conceived to appear as parts of a whole. In fact, the Ābhidharmika Buddhist who adopts the “momentariness” thesis (*kṣaṇabhāṅgavāda*) believes that every *dharma*, or, metaphysically atomic entity arises as an independently ephemeral point-instance. The arising of a new *dharma*, which in some way or another appropriates certain aspects of its predecessor, follows from the perishing of a preceding *dharma*. These *dharmas*, which are species of the five basic psychophysical aggregates, serve as the reduction-base for all entities. Given their radically ephemeral nature, we can attribute the appearance of persistence of these seemingly real composite entities to conceptual construction. These *dharmas* are not parts of a real whole, nor are they the properties of an underlying subject; thus, mental occurrences are not ultimately properties, because no enduring subject exists to bear them. What we have here are ephemeral property-tropes. So, if the self is a composite entity constituted by, or emergent from the five *skandhas*, and composite entities are only conceptually constructed fictions (*mṛṣā*), then the self must in turn prove to be a sort of fiction or error.⁴²

So, as Śāntideva claims in 102, without a real self, there is no owner (*svāmika*) or ultimately enduring locus of suffering, and *if* suffering ought to be removed, then it ought to be removed simply because it is suffering. Śāntideva is addressing the egoist who believes that a quantity of suffering being “mine”

⁴² Harris, “Does Anātman,” 95: “Verse 101 points out that since a person is a partite entity, accepting that partite entities do not exist entails accepting that persons are fictions.”

relevantly restricts practical considerations, and justifies privileging one's own future welfare. The fact that my burnt hand provides me with compelling practical reasons to tend to myself in a way that hearing about a stranger burning her hand in New Mexico does not might compel me to believe that, in general, my own interests are especially privileged. Śāntideva counters that without the restriction of real ownership that comes with the existence of enduring subjects, there are no ultimate limitations (*niyama*) that justify partial concern for one's own or another's suffering. If suffering ought to be prevented, then it must be prevented because it is inherently bad. If one were to object to that point, as Śāntideva points out in verse 103, then he or she would be committed to the view that *no* suffering ought to be prevented. However, this latter option is a *reductio* that allows Śāntideva to derive his conclusion that one must remain committed to preventing all suffering. As in all sūtra literature, these pithy passages require detailed unpacking. I will therefore provide a brief sketch of leading reconstructions of the argument in order to better situate my own gloss on Śāntideva's project.

For Paul Williams, Śāntideva commits a basic fallacy. He makes the ontological, descriptive claim that real selves are nonexistent, and then tries to derive the normative conclusion that we must be committed to altruism.⁴³ On the surface, then, Śāntideva wants to appeal to our rationality, but cannot successfully bridge the *is/ought* gap. As Harris has pointed out, "Drawing upon the Tibetan commentarial tradition, Williams interprets Śāntideva's argument as an appeal to our rationality. Once we understand reality correctly, and accept the self is

⁴³ Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, 104.

nonexistent, it will no longer be rational to remove one's pain before removing the pain of others."⁴⁴

A general problem I have with Williams point is that I think he exaggerates and oversimplifies the ontological weight of the argument. The idea that selves do not exist at the "ultimate" level of analysis is not necessarily a purely descriptive claim that carries no normative force. The Buddhist-hermeneutical device of distinguishing between conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-sat*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-sat*) should not be so straightforwardly glossed as the Platonic distinction between appearance and reality. It's not so clear that in these passages Śāntideva simply wants to make the truth-functional claim that persons in fact do not exist, and that a presumably more accurate description of reality will not include person-involving concepts. It's not just that when we talk in person-involving ways we're not "getting it right" in an absolute sense. A more literal interpretation of the concept, "*saṃvṛti*," would be that of a "concealing" or a "cloaking" truth,⁴⁵ thus admitting some degree of concept-mediated universality. Ganeri has provided an excellent alternative to the typical subjective/objective *cum* appearance/reality dichotomy often foisted on to these Buddhist concepts.⁴⁶ The cloaking truth, and its cousin, the conceptually fashioned truth (*prajñapti-sat*) are not necessarily "subjective" or purely falsifying truths, so much as they are indicative of observer-dependent, conceptually-mediated positionality. Viewing an impressionist painting

⁴⁴ Harris, "Does Anātman," 96. Also see n.4, 96. Harris cites Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, 105.

⁴⁵ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, Part III: *A Selfless Person's Sense of Self*, "The Imperfect Reality of Persons," 155-185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 155-185.

from a distance, I see a grassy field fashioned out of vivid colors and delicate forms. I see couples strolling along under parasols. However, as I close the distance, what seemed like solid forms become tiny points of color. I lose the image of couples enjoying the bright and cloudless day. The images from the painting can be said to lose “stability under analysis.”⁴⁷ But that does not mean that the images emerging at a distance are purely personal and subjective images that falsify reality. If any fiction (*mṛṣā*) is involved, it’s the belief that the person-involving level of description is a solid, unanalyzable fact that stands on its own. Once we achieve a non-person-involving level of analysis, we come to appreciate an impersonal perspective that levels off viewing things in terms of owners and bearers of properties. We come to recognize an impersonal field of relations. The self, which is an experienced aspect of reality when one “zooms out” at a certain cognitive distance, is not as much a perniciously falsifying concept as the *rigid view* (*dṛṣṭi*) that the self is an enduring substance that exists with an essence (*svabhāva*), independently of its causes and conditions.

Some of the leading interpreters of the text, while diverging on important details of the argument, agree that Śāntideva, the Mādhyamika, is provisionally adopting the Ābhidharmika position here.⁴⁸ Remember, the reductionist-minded Ābhidharmika, like Vasubandhu, believes that there is no self over and above the stream of psycho-physical constituents. However, for these philosophers, the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 171. Ganeri writes: “These definitions [between cloaking and ultimate truths] suggest that what is really at issue is not so much the existence of social practices or conventional fabrications, but what we might call ‘stability under analysis’. An impressionist painting ceases to represent anything when investigated too closely: the perceptual image is *unstable* under analysis.”

⁴⁸ See n. 35, p.27.

constituents like form (*rūpa*) and affective-coloring (*vedanā*), for example, remain stable under analysis. When we shift our cognitive frame, these constituents remain unanalyzable and basic. Śāntideva, the *Mādhyamika*, adopts the *Ābhidharmika*'s position as a dialectical tactic. Showing that from both the *Madhyamaka* and *Abhidharma* perspective one must be committed to altruism allows Śāntideva's interlocutor to embrace altruism without necessarily rejecting his prior doctrinal commitments. If we accept this reading of Śāntideva, then things like suffering—at least in the context of the argument in chapter 8—are fixed aspects of unanalyzable *dharmas* such as affective-coloring (*vedanā*). Thus, from the cloaking level of reality, selves exist, while from the stable or unanalyzable level of description they disappear. Suffering, however, remains a stable aspect of the unanalyzable *dharmas*.

It's important not to confuse Ganeri's concept of stability and non-stability under analysis with *Madhyamaka* anti-foundationalism and irrealism. If, through a purely deconstructive analysis, *Madhyamaka* claims that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth, Vasubandhu's distinction between the two truths is not irrealist and anti-foundationalist, nor is it eliminativist in nature. Rather, his view is reductionist, with the caveat that person-involving concepts, and therefore, concepts concerning bearers of suffering, provide a useful enough glimpse of reality that universally shows up at a particular level of cognitive-framing. However, from the analytically stable perspective, owners of suffering completely disappear. This means that instead of solely examining whether or not one view is "more objective" in nature, which is of course appropriate in certain contexts, we should also be asking ourselves what the pragmatic upshot of viewing the world in one way rather

than the other amounts to, and we can do this without succumbing to full-blown relativism or Madhyamaka anti-foundationalism. In other words, one perspective is not simply “better” than another just because it captures more basic and unanalyzable aspects of reality—it’s not as though we should claim that the physicist is “more important” than the biologist, because she deals with more basic items. The biologist deals with complex, organic systems that are not amenable to talk of quarks, neutrinos, and black holes. Pragmatically, we can ask ourselves what we get when we operate from the unanalyzable conceptual perspective as opposed to the conceptually unstable perspective. Now, it’s part of the basic message of Buddhism that the person-involving level generates attachment and grasping that produces suffering. Buddhist interlocutors already accept the normative claim that suffering is something bad and ought to be overcome. So any Buddhist will agree that we should strive to avoid seeing the world from a perspective that contributes to suffering—that’s just part of the commitment that comes with asserting that all suffering is bad. To be sure, under the Abhidharma banner, there are things that really exist, and things that really do not exist. However, the point of emphasis is not solely on the ontology. Buddhism always remains pragmatic to one degree or another.

So where does this leave Williams’s claim that Śāntideva fallaciously tries to derive an *ought* from an *is*? If we can achieve an impersonal view, then the egoist’s claim that a distinction between self and other justifies egoism does not apply at this level of analysis. When Śāntideva ontologizes here, he does so to undercut the egoist’s sticking point that the distinction between self and other—particularly the

first-person experience of pain versus a third-person description of another's pain—justifies privileging one's own future welfare. From the metaphysical level, no such distinction applies, and given the commitment to end suffering, we ought to maintain this perspective to the best of our abilities. The normative force of the Buddhist view on suffering allows Śāntideva to derive his desired conclusion. The speech-act of sincerely asserting *X* comes with a commitment, namely, a commitment to act in light of that truth, and accept any truths derivable from it. So, if we find that the most stable analysis does not include person-involving concepts, then we are committed to accepting any truths derivable from that assertion. Likewise, if we accept that suffering is intrinsically bad, and ultimately real (that is, stable under analysis), then we're committed to accepting any derivable claims from that assertion. Part of what it means for something to be bad is that it should be eradicated if possible, and it's part of the Buddhist worldview that we should avoid perspectives that produce suffering. Thus, we can adopt an impersonal view, and given the Buddhist thesis on suffering, we *ought* to maintain that perspective since it arguably defuses suffering. The egoist's primary justification for egoism disappears from the analytically stable perspective. Śāntideva is not deriving a normative from a descriptive claim. Rather, he's addressing an interlocutor who argues that the only sensible limiting condition that justifies partialism with respect to suffering is ownership. But from the conceptually stable perspective, ownership disappears. However, from this same, stable perspective, suffering presumably remains intact, and the concept of suffering already has normative force, and carries with it a host of commitments.

Nevertheless, Williams has pointed out a much deeper problem with Śāntideva's argument, and Siderits has in turn come to Śāntideva's defense in a strategy similar to what I've sketched above. I will briefly develop these points, and then assess Harris's analysis of the debate, because I think ultimately Harris *cum* Williams have outlined a dilemma in Śāntideva's argument that is not so easily defused. What I would add is that, specifically with respect to other-centric and altruistic considerations, bridging the gap between self and other in a normative context is best served by concepts of identity and *real relationality*, and not by concepts like "emptiness" and non-ownership. In other words, the integrity between self and other must be maintained—and not just as a matter of "conventional reality"—in order to impel one to find a motivating and ethically-relevant bridge between self and other.

Now, Williams and Siderits argue that Śāntideva is employing the Ābhidharmika perspective as an example of skillful, or, pragmatic means (*upāya*). Ābhidharmikas are mereological irrealists, that is, they do not believe that a whole exists over and above the parts that are thought to make it up. However, they do believe that there are ultimate physical and mental events, or, *dharmas* that are the really existing building blocks over which conceptual imputation operates. As Ganeri has more recently shown, Ābhidharmika philosophers like Vasubandhu may very well believe in the conventional validity of medium-sized objects along with the validity of the conventional self.⁴⁹ Vasubandhu would instead argue that our

⁴⁹ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art*, 172: "Vasubandhu's statement that persons are 'real with reference to conception' is to be taken as saying that one can think in a person-involving way only as long as one does not analyze or 'mentally divide' the person

belief in the self as an *enduring* entity, which exists *independently* of its causes and conditions, is a pernicious fabrication that produces suffering.

With this in mind, Williams argues that Śāntideva must, nevertheless, deny the validity of the conventional self. He argues this on the basis that all we need to potentially prioritize the interests of person *A* over person *B* is the ability to distinguish between *A* and *B*. In the conventional context, we can make this distinction. Thus, accepting the validity of the conventional self is enough to justify at least moderate egoism, where one believes that it is sometimes perfectly justified to prioritize one's own welfare. Put still another way, moderate egoism claims that it is not immoral to prioritize one's own future welfare. This is enough to undercut a demanding ethics of universal altruism. If Williams is right, then Śāntideva must reject the validity of the conventional self in order to maintain the view that we ought to be unwaveringly committed to altruism. This means that Śāntideva cannot just attack the belief in an enduring metaphysical self, but must also deny the validity of the conventional and transactional self. But this is a glaring problem for Śāntideva's argument. The conventional, transactional world is where things like altruism and egoism make sense. Agency in general—and ethical agency in particular—draws on the sorts of conventions that only make sense at the transactional level of reality. This is the level of reality in which I do not just see suffering, but I see that *you* are suffering, and that *I* am in a position to help you, or sacrifice my interests, or simply ignore your pain. Moreover, I am in a position to identify the fact that not all pain is my pain, and that you have a stake in your life

into a flow of experience...So Vasubandhu's view is not that there are no persons, but that person-involving conceptual schemes are unstable."

that is worthy of my attention and respect. Thus, by denying the validity of such a world, Śāntideva renders altruism unintelligible.

Harris tentatively objects that we need not foist this view onto Śāntideva.⁵⁰ He offers a quick gloss on Barbra Clayton's interpretation of passages 101-103 to illustrate the point. Clayton sees a parallel between Śāntideva's argument and anti-discrimination arguments.⁵¹ If all beings equally desire happiness and freedom from suffering, and it is ethical for me to ultimately prioritize my own welfare, then I need to provide an ethically relevant distinction that justifies my bias. If my future self that I am concerned with turns out to be identical to my current self, then that would provide the distinction that justifies my temporal neutrality with respect to my own happiness, and my bias with respect to the happiness of others. But in the light of Śāntideva's argument, my current and future selves are not really identical, but only conventionally so. Thus, I cannot provide the ethically relevant distinction that would justify my partiality with respect to the common good of happiness. If I regard suffering as an ill to be removed in my own case, then I ought to apply that view to all cases of suffering. As Harris writes, "Śāntideva can be seen as claiming that although conventional selves exist, when we realize they are only convenient fictions we will accept that we should not prioritize our own conventional self's welfare above that of other persons."⁵² But, as Harris points out in the context of Williams's argument, when we emphasize the conventional nature of the self, we might not only learn to become less fixated on our own suffering, but also learn to

⁵⁰ Harris, "Does Anātman," 99.

⁵¹ Clayton, "Compassion," 91.

⁵² Harris, "Does Anātman," 100.

become less fixated on anyone's suffering. In other words, altruism is not the logical outcome of such a belief. One may lose all concern for suffering in general.

Verse 103 may be interpreted as a response to this sort of problem. Suffering is not something that can be viewed as morally neutral: it is not something we can ever really feel justified in ignoring. As *Bodhicaryāvatāra* puts it: "No one disputes that!" So Śāntideva appeals to commonsense. But, as Harris points out, the opponent "can respond that most people agree to this because they believe their self, and the selves of the ones they care about, endure."⁵³ While it might be the case that *anātman* provides altruistic motivations for some, it may very well provide no such motivations, or even apathy, for others. If Śāntideva were to respond that psychological connectedness and physical continuity motivate us to care about our conventionally established future suffering, then he would play into the hand of the egoist, who claims that close ties to our future-self warrant special concern for our future welfare. Thus, Śāntideva's argument faces a dilemma.

However, the dilemma developed in Williams's argument relies on a crucial assumption: our obligation to remove pain requires that there be selves to experience this pain.⁵⁴ In particular, the apathy/moral nihilism horn of the dilemma assumes that without the belief in an enduring self, and without emphasizing the importance of psychological connectedness and physical continuity, we lose motivation to care about any suffering. But why do we need these views to motivate the cultivation of compassion and other-centric action? According to Siderits,

⁵³ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁴ Harris, "Does Anātman," 103.

Śāntideva rejects this key assumption. Here's a reconstructed version of Siderits's interpretation:⁵⁵

1. The person, being an aggregate, is ultimately unreal.
2. Hence if pain is ultimately real, it must be ownerless or impersonal.
3. We are in agreement across the board that pain is bad (even though concern over pain is often restricted to one's own case).
4. Either pain is ultimately and impersonally bad, or no pain is ultimately bad.
5. But it's not the case that no pain is ultimately bad; therefore, it is impersonally and ultimately bad.

So given (5), we can say that pain is impersonally bad, which just means we have no reason, other than pragmatic considerations, to restrict our concern to ourselves or our nearest and dearest. As Harris glosses Siderits, "It is our commitment to removing this pain, which ultimately exists impersonally, that leads to us adopting personhood conventions in which we identify our current and future collection of causal constituents as being the same persons."⁵⁶ Siderits makes the original and controversial point that *personhood conventions are useful for removing suffering, since, often times, we are in a unique position to successfully alleviate the suffering that appears closest to us*. Thus, personhood conventions become a stratagem for removing pain, which is ultimately impersonal. We can gauge the extent to which we must pay attention to ourselves and our nearest and dearest by employing a consequentialist calculation of one sort or another.

⁵⁵ Siderits, *Personal*, 103.

⁵⁶ Harris, "Does Anātman," 104.

Harris points out two problems with this interpretation.⁵⁷ First, as Williams has claimed, it is questionable that most Buddhist philosophers would buy that personhood conventions are useful devices employed to remove suffering. The orthodox view is that belief in an innate conception of self, that is, identification with the ego and its ambitions, produces self-attachment and grasping, and this contributes to existential suffering. This sort of self-attachment motivates, and/or, works in tandem with the belief in a “further fact” or metaphysical presence underlying the flow of mental occurrences. Personhood conventions do more to entrench self-attachment and ego-identification than they do to facilitate the removal of pain. However, a Buddhist following Siderits’s strategy might object that the misidentification of the stream as an enduring person, which contributes to fixation on the ego and its projects, causes suffering. But the practice of Buddhist detachment and “right views” prevents one from clinging to selfhood. Without such clinging, suffering does not arise. This is perfectly consistent with Siderits’s claim that personhood conventions are stratagems for removing pain and suffering.

The second and more controversial problem that Harris points out is that it is questionable whether or not pain is inherently bad.⁵⁸ One might distinguish pain from suffering, and claim that impersonal pain is not really bad. Only the grasping that comes with believing in a really enduring self—rather than recognizing that the self is a conceptual imputation—transforms pain into suffering. This line of thought relies on accepting the distinction between pain and suffering. On the one hand, pain is not ultimately negative—only the interpretation of pain as belonging to a really

⁵⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

⁵⁸ Harris, “Does Anātman,” 108.

existing and enduring person is negative, and this sort of belief transforms pain into suffering. On the other hand, suffering is illusory, since it disappears upon realizing the right view. So there is no real need to eliminate pain, and if we can achieve this remarkable realization, then suffering, as it were, simply falls away. This line of thought would be damning to Śāntideva's argument, since it relies on the normative claim that all pain/suffering is inherently bad.

However, even if this quasi-Stoic line of thought is somewhat convincing, it's hard to argue that *no* pain is intrinsically negative. Mental pain like depression, for example, is not so clearly analyzable as a relationship between some initial quantity of physical pain, and a personal interpretation that then generates angst and full-blown suffering. Depression is just depression, even if it is the result of cognitive framing of one sort or another. In other words, the pain and suffering of depression are co-temporal. Unlike the case of physical pain, it is conceptually difficult to distinguish between the suffering that comes with seeing the world through melancholy eyes, and the raw data of a more cognitively neutral sensation. Until that more neutral data is drawn into a melancholy portrait, it is inappropriate to call it "pain" at all. So we can at least assume with Śāntideva and Siderits that some mental states are intrinsically negative, regardless of whether or not they belong to persons.⁵⁹

But nevertheless, as Harris points out, bridging the *is/ought* gap still remains a problem for Śāntideva's argument. Certain mental states being inherently negative

⁵⁹ Harris, "Does Anātman," 107.

do not necessarily entail the moral conclusion that we *ought* to remove them.⁶⁰ Harris believes that Śāntideva anticipates this point, and thus appeals in 103 to ethical intuition. “Everyone agrees” that suffering needs to be removed. In other words, this basic belief is not up for debate. In response, Harris levels a cherry-picking argument. While endorsing *anātman* purportedly undermines the ethical intuition that supports egoism, it also threatens to undermine the ethical intuition that all suffering is inherently bad, and we cannot just cherry-pick which ethical intuition to take seriously.

I believe this point needs to be assessed a bit further. First, when appealing to commonsense, we can only dispense with ineluctable intuitions on a case by case basis. Harris claims that ethical intuition supports two principles: the Principle of Moderate Benevolence (PMB), and the Principle of Moderate Egoism (PME).⁶¹ PMB agrees that we ought to remove anyone’s suffering provided that it is not overly demanding, while PME claims that it is not immoral to prioritize one’s own future welfare. One can consistently maintain both principles. PME just says that it is not necessarily immoral to prioritize our own welfare, not that we *must always prioritize* our own welfare. Harris’s argument is that if the truth of *anātman* is meant to undercut the intuitions supporting PME, then it can likewise do the same to PMB. At the analytically stable level that frames the *anātman* view, PME may fall away, but the fact that suffering is bad no longer seems intuitive at this level of analysis.

⁶⁰ Harris, 108: “The opponent may object that simply pointing out the fact that a mental state is negative does not obviously entail the normative conclusion that we ought to prevent or remove it.”

⁶¹ Harris, “Does Anātman,” 109.

It's not that Śāntideva is just cherry-picking between ethical intuitions. Rather, Śāntideva is cherry-picking between the levels of analysis he draws from. PMB is most intuitive from the conventional or "unstable" level of analysis. When Śāntideva undercuts PME by moving to the more analytically basic level of analysis, there's nothing that seems to prevent *both* PME and PMB from falling away as intuitive claims.

However, Harris does not seem to have adequately entertained the possibility that the intuition that impersonal suffering ought to be removed is more resilient than either PMB or PME at the analytically basic level of analysis. Remember, PMB and PME are "moderate" and mutually consistent principles. However, the impersonal suffering thesis is a demanding principle that claims that all suffering, no matter whose, ought to be removed. Could this make any sense at the impersonal or analytically basic level of analysis? Harris claims that he is not clear "that we have any intuitions about impersonal suffering."⁶² But if we accept that Śāntideva employs "skillful means" through embracing Abhidharma metaphysics, there is nothing to stop us from interpreting him to embrace other Buddhist metaphysical principles that would strengthen his argument and bolster its rhetorical force. The metaphysical view that comes to mind for me is the view that all mental dharmas are inherently self-reflexive (*sva-prakāśa*), and in this sense, *self-aware*. What this means is that any mental occurrence is both aware of an object, and aware of its own awareness of the object. So, if there really were quantities of suffering "just hanging there," without a real subject who bears them as

⁶² Ibid., 109.

properties, then we can see how each suffering moment would to some extent be aware of its own suffering. The self-reflexivity view is, among other things, a metaphysical device that helps make sense of the phenomenal feel of “mineness,” which then, along with other theoretical principles not pertinent to the discussion here, better explains the psychological connectedness of various mental occurrences. In short, there is a *sense* or trace of ownership, but that does not mean that we have to believe in a really existing and enduring subject who owns that suffering. More importantly, we can imagine point-instances of suffering that take on a first-person feel. In other words, there is some form of self-awareness that accompanies instances of suffering. Perhaps, contrary to how Williams and Harris have stated things, endurance and psychological connectedness are not the most important factors that motivate compassion and concern for instances of suffering. Self-awareness seems to be the most basic fact about suffering that makes it a moral ill. In fact, suffering (as opposed to damage or corruption) seems unintelligible when we do not include self-awareness as a basic component of the phenomenon. The self-reflexivity principle makes sense of self-awareness without appealing to any real or conventional ownership. While PMB and PME may fall away as intuitive concepts at the impersonal level of analysis, the nastiness of instances of self-aware suffering seems resilient to whatever level of analysis we operate from. Harris is correct that there’s a sort of cherry-picking going on here, but I do not think that we lose all intuition about our view of suffering when we operate from the impersonal level, so long as we are committed to other metaphysical principles that would allow us to believe that self-aware suffering can arise as a point-instance in a flow of

ephemeral tropes. Now, this may seem to play into the hands of the dilemma, because Harris or Williams might argue that by stressing ownership, continuity, psychological connectedness, and other such conventional notions, we may embrace, at very least, PME if not full-fledged egoism. But the only “ownership” and connectedness employed here is one where we can make sense of the reflexive awareness of each momentary flash of suffering, and that means that as long as there is the experience/awareness of suffering, we have room to compassionately care about any point-instance of suffering. While this might not be intuitive, it provides a theoretical and sophisticated bit of machinery that can support our already entrenched intuition that suffering is a nasty thing no matter who endures it. However, the same cannot be said for the egoistic intuition. If there is no enduring entity that ultimately reaps the benefits and endures the pain of a set of current actions, then it seems less important to be fixated on *who* exactly endures the suffering. That does not mean that we do not care about suffering whatsoever, we simply care more about the overall quantity of suffering and good in the world, which is a view that aligns nicely with consequentialism and utilitarianism. Bear in mind that this assumes, as Harris allows, that it makes sense to say that suffering is inherently bad. To say that it is impersonally bad is just to say that we do not need person-involving concepts to justify our concern for suffering. We can simply think in terms of quantities of a type of mental occurrence that, being inherently self-aware, perpetuates a larger quantity of inherently negative experiences. Harris’s problem is that “Śāntideva has shifted the burden of proof to his opponent by pointing out that there is a common acceptance that suffering ought to be removed.

The opponent, however, may respond that once *anātman* has been accepted, it is irrational to accept any intuitions that arise in dependence on the belief in enduring persons” (110). Presumably, then, the belief that suffering is inherently negative is one such intuition that depends on some investment, however attenuated, in the endurance of persons. I’m taking exception with that claim. Instead, I’m focusing on the *awareness* and *self-awareness* of suffering, no matter how attenuated, as a motivating reason to prevent suffering.

While I think that Śāntideva's argument may be able to withstand the cherry-picking critique, I think that read as a Madhyamaka text, it does not supply the sort of systematic ethical clarity that Goodman imagines it does. By chapter 9 of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva endorses the radical teaching of Madhyamaka irrealism. Remember, this view eschews any notion of “place” or “base” (see *figure 1*). And yet, he claims that we need to embrace a conventional view of self to make sense of altruism and Mahāyāna compassion (see chapter 1). This seems to indicate that when we graduate past the conventional view of things into the impersonal view, things like altruism and ethics disappear. So, in some sense, Williams and Harris are correct that the ultimate level of ontological analysis, at least from the Madhyamaka perspective, does not come embedded with any normative implications. Śāntideva, himself, seems to agree by emphasizing that the altruistic motivations of the Bodhisattva require a conventional view of things to make sense of agent-driven concepts like karma, retribution, and kindness and compassion. If my response to Harris above is at all satisfying, then it relies on a great deal of metaphysical machinery, including a “base” of individuation (see *figure 1*) that the

Mādhyamika would not ultimately endorse. Without ownership (“place”) and without any metaphysical individuation (“base”), it’s not clear what guiding principles we should appeal to when considering the treatment of others, and the value of their suffering. This may not be as much a problem for figures like Hume and Parfit, since some notion of “base” is still in play. However, the same cannot be said for Śāntideva. Śāntideva needs a conventional set of transactional notions to make sense of ethical requirements, and that is precisely why he recommends that we embrace the “delusion” of conventional reality for the sake of being guided by altruistic principles (see chapter 1). But this does not clarify what sort of principle would motivate him to take the fabrications of conventional reality seriously to promote universal salvation. Any principle that would do that sort of work would only make sense in conventional reality. As a purely transcendent and amoral philosophy, this would not be a problem; but the same cannot be said for an ethically-oriented philosophy that has any normative teeth.

Finally, although I appealed to self-awareness rather than endurance to make sense of the normative force of suffering, and to make sense of why we might be motivated to care that anyone is suffering, endurance and persistence are still key concepts that make sense of agency construed more broadly. From reasoning, to language acquisition and linguistic communication, to anticipation and responsibility, we need some account of ownership and persistence. The Mādhyamika might be able to appeal to convention to make sense of *how* we come to operate in a domain of transactional reality, but the state of “perfect wisdom” he

ultimately recommends does little to make sense of why we *ought* to care one way or the other about the suffering that we find in that domain.

2.6 Toward Ownership and Other-centricity

I have devoted considerable attention in this chapter to the Mahāyāna philosopher, Śāntideva, because his Madhyamaka text provides a novel approach to an ethical theory of altruism. We can call this, “emptiness ethics.” While we can certainly find consequentialist-utilitarian streaks in Śāntideva’s text, aspects of his approach are unique and not so readily accommodated by modern and contemporary Euro-American ethics. The analytic and decision-procedural schools require a rather robust notion of agency and practical identity to justify their emphasis on universal principles, practical rationality, freedom, responsibility, and punishment. While Śāntideva’s concerns may be read in a way that is consonant with some of those aims, he does not provide enough resources (or the usual sorts of resources we find in Euro-American ethics) that would support such an endeavor. His uniqueness lies in trying to make “emptiness” (of ownership and individuation) do the work that contemporary principles-based ethics does through theories of real agency and practical identity. On the other hand, while the non-principles based schools—like the situational and care-ethical schools—emphasize relationality and interdependence, the self is not so effaced in these schools, because that would undercut the very partial concerns that prioritize intimacy, family, and friendship. Nor can it be so effaced that it threatens to undercut one’s capacity to respect and take the other on his or her terms. And yet, Śāntideva tries to build other-regarding concern and ethical responsibility out of a radical effacement of the self and its

practical identity, effacement so radical that partialism toward lovers, family, friends or neighbors is rejected⁶³—thus, preventing Śāntideva's ethics from conversing productively with care-ethics. Śāntideva explicitly aims for an impersonal, impartial, and agent-neutral ethics. So, on the principles-based side, he neglects a robust enough account of agency to credibly make sense of responsibility and ethical action, and on the non-principles side, he effaces the self so radically that it's not clear what (or *who*) can be self-possessed enough to invest in its immediate relationships of care and its situatedness in a nexus of caring relationships.

Śāntideva, and more recent No-Selfers like Parfit, deny the belief in a Cartesian soul or substance, in order to better accommodate and respond to the needs of the other. Cartesian dualism threatens to produce an egoistic self-enclosure—both a metaphysical and an *ethical* solipsism—that is only bridged by reducing other-regarding considerations to an extension of egocentric, self-regarding considerations. This sort of metaphysics generates the problem of making sense of altruism and other-centric considerations from an inescapably egocentric vantage-point. The selflessness thesis in Śāntideva aims to undercut the sort of metaphysics that generate inescapable egoism. Mādhyamika Buddhism does this by denying the reality of either ownership of cognition and volition, or a base of individuation. While Derek Parfit orients his ethics in a similarly non-Cartesian

⁶³ See 8:1-90 in Crosby and Skilton. These sections lay out the emotional preparatory work for transcending commonly reactive states tied to our investments in public opinion, family and friendship, and the craving that comes with lusting and the objectifying the lover's body. As Śāntideva writes, "Distraction does not occur if body and mind are kept sequestered" (8:2), and "Free from acquaintance, free from conflict, he is quite alone in his body" (8:36), and finally, "...One should recoil from sensual desires and cultivate delight in solitude, in tranquil woodlands empty of contention and strife" (8:85).

direction, his reductionist project still remains grounded in an individuating base—namely, the *body*—which helps orient the ethical act by providing us with enough of a distinction between self and other to make sense of the terms involved in an ethical relationship. In the next chapter, I will further explore the sort of “emptiness ethics” we find in Madhyamaka philosophy, and examine whether or not this sort of research project has some more promising insights and moves available to it for addressing the critique I’ve provided so far.

I have argued that ethically altruistic action requires the concept of a self, which owns its cognitive, affective, and volitional states. I make this claim on two accounts. First, I have argued that we need a clear self/other distinction in order to both generate other-orientedness, and intelligibly *place* our acts of compassion and generosity in a space not fully describable in egocentric terms. Without the Ownership view of the self, the self/other distinction is compromised, and the other for whom we become responsible loses his or her independence. Instead, the other becomes a complicated extension of the ego. Second, I’ve tried to show that the No-Self strategy destabilizes our sense of genuine agency, including the agentive will to act against the basic egoistic inclination of the natural, self-possessed person. We need a self that owns its mental states to make sense of both agency, and the capacity to recognize the validity of another’s needs independently of immediate self-interest and desire. In short, the No-Self view, while sounding friendly to unselfish action, fails to provide us with genuine other-orientation and genuine agency. Therefore, other-orientation, which is the ground of altruistic action, requires an Ownership view of the self.

Are there other Non-Ownership views that not only make sense of altruistic action, but also show how the Ownership view comes up short? I will tackle this question in the next chapter, by providing a hybrid No-Self view. This will be my attempt at preserving ethical obligation, and the lived experience of caring for another, without appealing to a real self or an Ownership view.

CHAPTER 3. BEING OTHER THAN MYSELF: DEFENDING AN ETHICS OF SELFLESSNESS

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I develop “emptiness ethics” in greater detail. I examine whether or not Madhyamaka Buddhism, fused with contemporary No-Self views, can provide a transformative and ethically compelling orientation that is more practically attractive than the Self view. In this sense, the nature of the project is metaethical. However, in another sense, the project is phenomenological, because I focus here on a kind of lived experience, where unsettling alterity and otherness show up as ethical responsibility (to be explained in detail below). I examine ways in which this experience of responsibility can be importantly supported by No-Self views.

Section 3.2 provides the technical nuts and bolts for my argument. The key lies in treating egocentric, first-person concerns as special cases of other-centric, third person concerns. For example, when I care about the character, values, and well-being of the good old man I hope to become, I’m actually concerned with another person. When I recognize this, I see that other-centric responsibility resonates at the most basic level of my self-centered experience. I am suggesting that this sort of paradoxical realization can be ethically transformative. The No-Self view, as I develop it throughout the chapter, may allow us to make such a claim. To help make sense of this, I examine Parfit’s distinction in *Reasons and Persons* between the “moderate claim” and the “extreme claim.” The moderate claim states that upon adopting the No-Self view, we may have moral reasons for caring about

our future surrogate-selves. The old man I hope to become is not a stage in my life—he’s a surrogate. But this does undermine my obligation to make sacrifices for his future. The idea here is that we can forge practically relevant connections with our surrogate-selves without establishing metaphysical criteria for personal identity. The extreme claim states that without such criteria, we have no reason to anticipate, project, or care about the future. This is a *reductio* on the No-Self view. While I believe the No-Self view has resources to defuse this worry, I argue that the moderate claim breaks down in light of the *anticipatory first-person structure* of our lived experience: knowing that the old man who replaces me (in that gradual and continuous way which we call “myself growing older”) will suffer painful prostate cancer is different than knowing that my dear friend will suffer third-degree burns. In this sense, I suppose, I tentatively defend the extreme claim. Parfit judiciously entertained the anticipation problem, but I think it is a strong objection. Again, the extreme claim states that without metaphysically substantive perdurance of the self,¹ an individual does not have good reasons to care about the future of a surrogate-self (or, at least not *prudential* reasons, which involve projecting into one’s *own* future). In other words, forward-looking agency requires that we project into a future in which we exist (or we exist with specific temporal parts), and that existing in this future is the primary reason we have for caring about it when considering actions to take now. The moderate claim states that we can care about

¹ The same point might be made with an *endurantist* view, but this latter view—that the self is wholly present in each moment of its existence (as opposed to being “spread” temporally with distinct “temporal parts” over something like a four-dimensional space-time)—might add further complexities to the argument. For my purposes, I needn’t get into the fine distinctions between endurance and perdurance.

our surrogate, but non-metaphysically identical future-selves without believing in substantive criteria for personal identity. The anticipation problem counters the moderate claim by stating that a basic aspect of caring about the future is not accounted for in the moderate claim, which eschews belief in real persistence over time: the fact is, I anticipate future pain and pleasure in a first-person way that I simply do not and cannot do with respect to someone else's pleasures and pains. With these problems in mind, I believe that there may be ways of reframing things that do justice to both claims, and I show how this may support the No-Self view's practical and ethical worth.

In section 3.3, I develop this defense further by providing a practical gloss on Thomas Metzinger's work.² Metzinger, who started off by writing a major work titled, *On Being No One*—a work arguing that nobody ever had a self—concedes in his later works that the so-called self is an “ego-tunnel” or “personal self-model” (PSM). According to Metzinger, the self is a simulation built out of the brain's higher-order capacity to represent and orient its representational activities. For Metzinger, consciousness is an evolved capacity to represent reality, and the first-person experience is a higher-order representation of those representational capacities. With Metzinger's version of the No-Self view, we might be able to split the difference between the moderate and the extreme claims. In short, Metzinger's work might support the view that, although we may not have the usual reasons to care about our futures, this can be liberating when it comes to anxiety and the dread or

² Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003). Also see, Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

anticipation of death. Moreover, we can appeal to evolutionarily-adaptive conventions to secure many of our intuitions about agency and self-regarding considerations—something Selfists believe No-Self models cannot do. That I am free, and have a will that causes things to happen in the world may be a simulated illusion—but it’s one that works. Therefore, the extreme claim is over-reactive, and the moderate claim, on its surface, is flippantly optimistic.

However, I go on to argue that glossing the ego-tunnel in this practical (enactive?) way produces a new problem. Developing a theory of action in terms of simulation and transparent third-person processes faces a dilemma. Either the concept of an ego-tunnel keeps many of our commonsense views about agency intact, or it does not. If it does, then the Self/No-Self issue is practically speaking irrelevant. If it does not, then the Selfist can more credibly argue that No-Selfers carry the onus of proof, because their view up-ends manifest facts about our practical lives. But here’s where I think fusing Madhyamaka and contemporary No-Self views can be morally and practically instructive. Metzinger’s fictionalism concerning the self can then, perhaps, lean on the device of “two truths” (ultimate and conventional) with which the Mādhyamika does the tight-rope walking between realism and eliminativism about the agent-self.

To show this, I appropriate aspects of Levinas’s metaphysical ethics, specifically, his view of otherness.³ My appropriation can nuance an ethically rich fusion of Madhyamaka and contemporary No-Self views. I argue that sincerely

³ Although Levinas’s work on the subject is extensive, I appropriate claims made in his seminal piece: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969).

embodying this version of the No-Self view can reorient our egocentric instincts. This reorientation nurtures an expansive concern for the general field of suffering. And rather than caring less about my future, as some Selfists believe the No-Self view forces us to do, I can see my future-directed concern as a special case of altruistic care and responsibility for the other.

In section 3.4, I examine in further detail whether or not the Self/No-Self view makes any practical difference. Even if the extreme claim is correct, nothing about my persisting into the future necessitates that I should care about my future, especially if the person I will become has an entirely different set of memories, and a different practical identity. Selfers might claim that I should care about my future, because it is a future stage of *my* life. This is what Raymond Martin has called the “me-consideration.”⁴ He has argued that it is not justified, and therefore the Self and No-Self views may equally fail to ground forward-looking concerns. I disagree. I think the “me-consideration” is stronger than Martin thinks, with the caveat that we need to appreciate the body as an individuating base for selfhood. In order to prove this, I offer my own tentative estimation of what I think a Self might be, and what I think a Self can do. However, I end the chapter with a tension (if not a dilemma). I show how *both* the Self and No-Self views provide us with good reasons to care about our futures. The latter provides us with a revisionary account of self-regard that can blossom into full-blown altruism. The former, for reasons I will detail below, can successfully ground its egocentric, forward-looking concerns. But then

⁴ Raymond Martin, “Would it Matter All That Much if There Were No Selves?” in *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 115-134.

the question becomes whether or not the Self view can not only provide an equally compelling account of altruism, but one that has advantages over the No-Self view. I reserve a response to this—a response that lies at the heart of this entire work—for the final chapter.

3.2.1 Anticipating My Future: How to Treat Myself as Other

What would it be like to reverse the golden rule? Instead of “Treat others as you would yourself,” what if we teach our children: “Treat yourself as you treat others.”⁵ Obviously, we would need to clarify what “other” means. Emmanuel Levinas’s “other”⁶ is someone who, unlike an ordinary object—like a statue, for

⁵ I’m grateful to Dr. Arindam Chakrabarti who in a personal conversation offered this playfully important gloss on Parfit and Śāntideva.

⁶ Lingis translates the “personal Other, the you” as “Other” with a capital “O.” This translates the French, “*autrui*” (24). He translates “other” (without the capital) for the French, “*autre*.” This is important, because Levinas problematizes the usual sense of otherness (without the capital) as a delimiting concept. Since it is invoked in making sense of myself—the self-same “I”—it is defined in relation to the “I,” and thus not so “strange” and “other” that it would disrupt my capacity to reduce it to a system of intelligible concepts. But for Levinas, the metaphysical “Other” is wholly transcendent, and eludes reduction—it is an “Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: by virtue of the common frontier the other, within the system, would yet be the same” (39). I am capitalizing on the metaphysical weight and transcendence—or *strangeness*—of this Other who shows up as a real stranger. However, I’m not necessarily committed to Levinas’s development of this concept—I’m interested in the lived experience of the inscrutable that can be a stranger, but can then be familiarized or in some sense identified with, that is, the past and future me (or continuant or surrogate) who I am not identical with, and who, in that sense, is a stranger to me, but who I learn to recognize a continuity with. Thus, I will not make a fuss about capitalizing or not capitalizing “other” in what will follow. However, for a deep reading of Levinas on his own terms, this would be a travesty, because for Levinas, “The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I.’ I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [l’Etranger], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [le chez soi]” (39). This speaks to the idea of building a relationship with the Other in a non-totalizing way—that is, in a way that does not

example—generates a call to which we must respond. The other has a face, which brings the “I” *face to face* with it. This “must” of response to the other is not a logical or principled demand, but presumably a lived experience of primordial responsibility—the experience of our subjectivity coming face to face with someone who resists reducibility to our familiar concepts. The other and I cannot even form a generic “we” together. In the other’s radical singularity, I am forced to respond. Others are not just some collectivity of individuals of a specific race, gender, height, or other objectifying property: their faces are singular and elevated and beaming with inscrutable life. As William Large writes, “The other is not just another self, either a friend or an enemy, whom I can label and describe and thus domesticate...but that which unsettles the very core of my being...the other is not just everything I am not, but *more* than me.”⁷ I will not pursue a detailed exegesis of Levinas’s work here. I’m simply appropriating the idea that at the core of our being, we experience unsettling difference and alterity, and we feel both related to and yet separated from this unsettling other. The other, as I’m thinking of it, is the first-person experience that I can sense but never possess, an addressed first person to whom my self comes second: the uniqueness of your life-force coming face to face with mine, and the responsibility that comes with recognizing that you are a unique opening on to the world.

reduce the Other to one’s own terms, but instead, allows otherness to be its own unique singularity. This post-modern account of otherness, especially its political and social ramifications, goes well beyond my present purposes.

⁷ William Large, *Levinas’ Totality and Infinity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing), 27.

With respect to No-Self views, particularly Madhyamaka Buddhism and the more recent work of the philosopher of mind, Thomas Metzinger, I'd like to propose that a basic experience of becoming other to our own selves might lend an ethical nuance to the No-Self view not yet explored in this essay. Becoming other to oneself might reveal a responsibility that exists at the most basic level of subjective experience. According to Levinas, we become other to ourselves, and through an act of appropriation, solidify our sense of selfhood—of “mine-ness”—in the midst of constant alterity and heterogeneity:

The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the *primordial work of identification* [my italics].⁸

I want to examine an experience of our own alterity and difference with respect to our past selves and our future selves, and show how it produces a basic sense of ethical responsibility, which is supported rather than undermined by the No-Self view. Accordingly, my exploration of otherness in the context of analytic and Buddhist texts will only cursorily resemble Levinas's idea of otherness. I'm chiefly interested in developing an idea of otherness that plays an important ethical role in Buddhist and contemporary No-Self views.

So let's begin by reversing the golden rule. We do so because we come to realize that the self is more or less always other to itself—an other for whom we care, on whose past we draw, and of whose future we are circumspect. When the self is not a persisting and substantial metaphysical entity to which the dynamic continuum of mental life is tethered, the person projecting forward into her so-

⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36.

called future learns to see her circumspection as concern for an intimate other somehow bound to her. For contemporary analytic philosophers like Derek Parfit, this boundedness is a function of causal and psychological continuities, and not some sort of really persisting entity or phenomenologically lived experience to describe. But I want to say that a deeply experienced sense of otherness in the projected face of the person who we were, and the person who we will become, might reveal our typically self-regarding concern as a special case of other-regarding concern. I will show one way in which this reversal might be morally instructive, and also how it grows out of a basic experience that No-Self reductionists like Parfit, and No-Self irrealists like the Mādhyamika Buddhist, capitalize upon. The point here is to show how No-Self camps may not only debunk realism about the self, but also provide morally instructive reasons to do so. This stands in complete contrast to what I've developed so far, namely, the view that we need to think in terms of persisting selves in order to live coherent social and ethical lives. But as I've already stated in the previous chapters, Indian Buddhism begins with practice, not theoretical metaphysics. The practical underpinnings of the No-Self view requires lengthy examination since it is believed to liberate the ego-centered person, and motivate a deeply other-centric orientation, and without eradicating ego-centricity there is no hope of eradicating even one's own suffering let alone others'. For the over-arching practical goal of "eradication of suffering—no matter whose," No-Self metaphysics, as it were, has to be commissioned. In order to

explore this possibility I will, for the sake of argument, grant reductionism about the self.⁹

3.2.2 The Continuant Other: Good Reasons to Care About My Surrogate (Non)-Self

I embody the belief that me, the man writing this chapter, will not strictly speaking persist into the future in some deep metaphysical sense. Granted, I may relate more intimately with the idea of me in 20 years than I do with my neighbor Sam in 20 years. Analytic philosophers might argue that I do so, because there exists individuating psychological and physical relationships between me-now and my future-continuant. Still, when we accept that “I” does not pick out anything that strictly persists into the future, then we may view KPM in 20 years as another person—a little less other than my neighbor Sam, but still other than me. KPM-20 is not a future stage of me—he’s my surrogate, my replacement, or, my heir. I may feel a deep bond with the concept of him, because I imagine he will resemble me in important ways. Perhaps, he will look a lot like me, but then again, if I am unhappy with my current visage, and am trying to get a face-lift, I imagine that he will *not* look a lot like me. Still, he will share a lot of my memories, ticks, and beliefs and habits: the stuff that picks me out in more or less unique ways. If I do not believe that any distinct, further fact relates me to this surrogate, then I do not in any literal

⁹ “Reductionism” here refers to the claim that the concept of the self might be construed in non-personal terms. While this aligns with Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*, we must remember that Parfit retracts that claim. However, he does not believe that it makes much practical difference. He compares it to replacing the concept of a river, for example, with the concept of a continuous flowing of water in a certain pattern. See Derek Parfit, “Experiences, Subjects, and Conceptual Schemes,” *Philosophical Topics* 26, 1999: 217-270, at 228. Cf. Richard Sorabji, *The Self*, chapter 15.

sense get to *have* that future toward which I project: KPM-20 may be the result of a continuity that depends upon certain aspects of me-now, but he is not a stage over which I can claim ownership. When I take measures to secure *his* interests, say, by devoting myself to Pilates in order to allow *him* to have a back that doesn't ache, and a hip that doesn't so easily give out, I'm in essence working for the future of another person. Accepting this requires in a nuanced way that I develop below, that I treat a first-person sense of self-regarding and egocentric concern as a third-person account of other-regarding concern—the sort of concern we might express for our neighbors, children, or family and friends. This is one way I might experience myself as other.

As I read Parfit, he entertains this possibility when defending what he calls the “moderate claim” over the “extreme claim.”¹⁰ According to the extreme claim, when we accept reductionism about the self, we lose any special reasons to have future-oriented and egocentric concerns. In Early-Modern European philosophy, Bishop Butler advanced this line of argument. He believed that without a persisting self that owns its mental states, nobody would have any reason to care about his or her own future for the simple reason that they would not actually *have* a future to care about. This is supposed to be a *reductio* on the No-Self view, because the view cannot make sense of a basic feature of forward-looking agency. When I'm making a sandwich, I'm driven by a goal that is forward-looking. In a very mundane way, I'm projecting toward a future good in which KPM in 10 minutes gets to enjoy a full belly. However, the No-Self view might spins things differently. In this picture, my

¹⁰ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 307-320.

deep concern for KPM-10 or KPM-20's future may be more or less on par with caring about neighbor Sam's future. But the problem Bishop Butler and others have pointed out is that I might not care so much about neighbor Sam's future, since so much of it does not directly concern me. And likewise, I don't have any special reason to care about KPM-20's future if it's just as psychologically and temporally distant as neighbor Sam's future. If I do happen to care, that may be commendable, and a function of various psychological proclivities. But rational prudence does not demand this of me. Parfit denies this extreme claim and instead defends the moderate claim. His "Relation R," which replaces the notion of personal identity over time with stream-like psychophysical connectedness and continuity, may be good enough for future-oriented self-regard:

Extremists are wrong to assume that only the deep further fact gives us a reason for special concern. Think of our special concern for our own children, or for anyone we love. Given the nature of our relation to our children...we can plausibly claim that we have reasons to be specially concerned about what will happen to these people. And the relations that justify this special concern are not the deep separate fact of personal identity. If these relations give us reason for special concern, we can claim the same about Relation R. *We can claim that this relation gives each of us a reason to be specially concerned about his own future (italics mine).*¹¹

As I read him, Parfit's point is that reason *does* chime in with respect to future-oriented concern. Whatever reasons we have for caring about those who are close to us may apply to reasons we have for caring about our future surrogates. Personal identity and deep further facts are not necessary for having a reason to care about someone. KPM-20 is not like the neighbor I've never spoken to across the street; he's more like a close friend, or the neighbor I've had a beer with. As a

¹¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 311.

reductionist about the self, I recognize that whatever “I” picks out now, it importantly contributes to whatever “KPM-20” will pick out, and it usually does so in a way that it can’t when considering Donald Trump in 20 years. Somehow, this very personal psychological connection to KPM-20 draws me closer to his plight. Being temporally distant, I am not necessarily as close to KPM-20 as I am to the partner I share my bed with right now. But just as my spouse being my spouse draws me closer to her plight than, say, Donald Trump being Donald Trump does to his, KPM-20 stands in a special relation to me-now. If all goes well, KPM-20 will not be Donald Trump, and he will not be my neighbor Sam. In fact, he won’t be anyone who is so remotely related to me. He might not even be a “he” at all. Instead, he might feel like a distant relative, or my own offspring, whose future deeply concerns me.

Let me reflect a bit further on what would have to be true if this seems convincing. The reason I care about the future welfare of my son is that I am related to him in important ways. I’ve been there to watch his victories and defeats. I’ve supported him through the growing pains of his trying early teen years. I share laughs and tears and stories and meals with him. The list goes on. In short, I’m pretty darned close to him, because so much of our practical and emotional lives overlap and impact each other. But one might argue that I do not need rigorously grounded criteria for personal identity to justify caring for him. We care about our loved-one’s future and we care about ourselves without any appeal to metaphysics. Even if my loved-one is just a stream of continuants, or, strung-together surrogates, there’s no reason the continuant process that describes my history cannot care

about the continuant process that describes his. We can remain intimately connected without establishing metaphysical criteria for personal identity. Grant that there is no real self or deeper owner of my experiences. Grant that the concept of personal identity is really just a confused way of describing various psychological and physical connections and continuities over time. Still, there's nothing especially important about relating to myself in a persisting and first-person way to ensure that I care about KPM-20. In other words, I can learn *to treat myself the way I treat others*, just as our reversal of the old maxim claims. If this has any practical purchase, then I must be able to see myself as my own other, and revise the reasons I have for caring about this future-me. I do not just care about KPM-20 because, "He's me!" I care about him, because he is deserving of my care.

Now, in his typically judicious manner, Parfit does not insist that the moderate claim is necessarily correct. There are reasons to endorse the extreme claim, but there are equally reasons not to endorse it. Here's a reason why we might endorse the extreme claim. When I'm told that I will experience a crippling back injury in 20 days, the anticipation of that pain seems qualitatively different than being told that my wife, my neighbor, or my dear friend will experience crippling pain in 20 days. It seems to me that the first-person feel of pain in 20 days distinguishes my concern for KPM over my concern for my wife. My own future pain is anticipated "from the inside," while my loved one's future pain is viewed "from the outside." But how can we make sense of this distinction if people do not persist into their own future? *Anticipating* our own future pain does not seem to be on par with concern for our loved one's future—it's a different sort of phenomenon

altogether. But being a steadfast reductionist, I may argue that anticipation of one's own future pain is not really justified. Maybe anticipation is simply a residual prejudice or confused state we can learn to revise. Just as motivations based on psychological and geographical distance are not necessarily arguments against moral reasons to, say, donate money to UNICEF, similarly, my psychological proclivity to anticipate future events and feelings might be a simple prejudice that sober reflection cures. I might have psychological hang-ups about my surrogate, that is, I may have a lingering sense that it will be *me* who experiences future pain, but that does not mean I should let such appearances guide my actions now. Put another way, the reductionist might claim that if and when there is a reason to care for his future surrogate, it doesn't require an identity relation. Moreover, anticipation might just be a residual, less philosophically mature way of caring about this future person's plight. So it all comes down to how we analyze the phenomenon and ontology of anticipation. As judicious as this may sound, I believe that the anticipation objection is precisely the sort of objection that makes all the difference. But perhaps there are more sophisticated ways of making sense of forward-looking egocentric concern from a No-Self perspective. What I'll explore next is a view I've constructed out of contemporary philosophy of mind and Madhyamaka Buddhism. This view splits the difference between the moderate and extreme claims, and justifies conventional concern for our own future without investing in some further fact. It may be a compelling view, but I think it has some serious shortcomings that I will discuss below.

3.3.1 Ego-Tunnels and Madhyamaka: The Ethics and Consolation of Simulated (Non)-Selves

Thomas Metzinger's "personal self-model" (PSM) may be just the sort of No-Self view that revises the simple distinction between a so-called moderate versus extreme claim. The PSM, or what Metzinger also calls, "the ego-tunnel" is an organizing component in a functional neural network. Consciousness, according to Metzinger, is "a very special phenomenon, because it is part of the world and contains it at the same time."¹² Nature, as it were, carves inwardness and representation into its own fabric. Now, Metzinger operates at the interdisciplinary cutting edge of empirical hard sciences and the humanities, where the logical structure of consciousness, particularly the phenomenological feel of "mine-ness," or, the first-person experience (rationally reconstructed by analytic philosophy, and described through lived experience in phenomenology) must answer to neuroscience, biology, and empirical data. For Metzinger, consciousness is an evolved component of advanced nervous systems that represent the basic stuff of reality (basically, various wavelengths of energy) in adaptively advantageous ways. Thus, nature carves out an internal space, or, representational tunnel within itself. The ego emerges at a much more advanced evolutionary stage in which representational activity can, in a nested and looping way, represent that very activity. This appears as a self—or single point of origin—for which such activity represents a unique and recursively self-aware vantage point onto reality. However, this feel of "mine-ness" is purely simulation, or, the PSM: "The process of attending

¹² Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel*, 15.

to our thoughts and emotions, to our perceptions and bodily sensations, is itself integrated into the self-model.”¹³ This means that an evolved form of third-person processes—coordinated neuronal firings, etc.—represent those very processes transparently. In other words, the representations, rather than the neuronal correlates of consciousness (NCC) underlying such representations, are the only things visible at this higher-order level of representation. The ego-tunnel does not represent the organic and physical processes involved in representation. The ego-tunnel appears as an agent for whom various decisions about its coordinated activities must be made. Strictly speaking, there is no one there who makes decisions or witnesses the unfolding of reality. Conscious reality carves out an inner-domain of nested and transparent representational phenomena. If “I” refers to anything, it refers to this organizational component in the dynamic network of neuronal activity.

Adopting this theory, we might believe that egocentric and future-directed concern is not justified in the usual sense, because there is strictly speaking *no one there* whose needs, hopes, and fears we should worry too much about. This is how the PSM model might appropriate the extreme claim. Perhaps, practically speaking, this would be liberating. When it comes to the fear of death, or the anxiety of a mind obsessively concerned with its own future, knowing there’s no one there to really have or lose control over the future might be psychologically palliative. The PSM approach, supported as it is by empirical data and interdisciplinary research, might also help illuminate in contemporary terms what seems obscure or incoherent in a

¹³ Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel*, 16.

surface reading of Madhyamaka philosophy. For example, PSM might clarify

Nāgārjuna’s opening dedication to the Buddha in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

I salute the Fully Enlightened One [the Buddha]...who taught the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming or the going [of any dharma, for the purpose of nirvāṇa characterized by] the auspicious cessation of hypostatization.¹⁴

We can read Madhyamaka philosophy as deflationary and epistemically humble (see chapter 2). The Mādhyamika highlights our evolved tendency to reify and posit theoretical entities—entities used to navigate our natural and social reality. In the contemporary scene, we would say that Madhyamaka deconstructs the unstable reifications that imbue our folk-psychological belief in substantial entities such as souls, persons, universals, permanent substrata of change, etc. The hard sciences have produced coherent and empirically supported models that destabilize naïve realism. Advances in statistics, neuroscience, biology, and physics have shown us that substantialist-discourse is a product of our collective tendency to hypostasize and simplify dynamic, non-linear, and metaphysically open-ended processes. Basically, when we learn to think in terms of nested systems and probabilities—like global weather patterns—rather than linear algorithms and causally determined closed systems, we come to realize that the language of “coming or going” or “cessation or non-cessation” does not have the same deeply entrenched purchase it once had. Madhyamaka philosophy is unique in that it weds

¹⁴ Translation in Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way*, 2013:

anīrodham anutpādam anuchhedam aśāśvatam|
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam|
yaḥ pratīyasamutpādam prapañcōpaśamaṃ śīvam|
deśayāmāsa sambuddhas taṃ vande vadatāṃ varam||

various Buddhist assumptions and practical commitments to its irrealist and conventionalist discourse. Granted, it casts its net wider than some would like when it claims that *nothing whatsoever* has any intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), but it also coheres more succinctly with some of the more cogent but radical claims drawn out of evolutionary biology, and quantum and chaos theories. It appears that our nervous systems are always busy *inventing* independent-seeming realities outside and inside ourselves. As social creatures with responsive nervous systems, we may be described as creatures that coordinate consensual patterns of activity around the way things show up relative to our nervous systems. Moreover, with advances in the study of mirror-neurons, we are beginning to develop a physical picture of how intersubjectivity can arise within a nexus of self-interpreting nervous systems—nervous systems that couple with (rather than perfectly mirror) an external environment in selectively advantageous ways. Looking at things this way, we become less committed to the naïve belief that we can describe an observer-independent reality. Instead, we view ourselves as *participants* in the unfolding of appearances. Likewise, I suggest that the model of a self who suffers, or disappears or survives after its death holds less importance over our deliberations when we think in terms of processes, systems, and simulations rather than substances, billiard-ball causality, and real metaphysical selves. So, in a way, PSM and Nāgārjuna take seriously the Selfist's belief that without substantialist metaphysics, we do not have (the usual) reasons to care about our futures. In this sense, they take Selfism and the extreme claim seriously, but then go on to show how revising future-directed concerns can actually be liberating and morally instructive rather than a

nihilistic *reductio* on the No-Self view. Now, when it comes to everyday practical considerations, they can defuse the Selfist's extreme claim by winning back ethics and self-regarding and other-regarding concerns through convention (the "two truths" gambit).¹⁵ In one sense, we do not have a "special" reason to care for a self

¹⁵ I need to be careful about my very general gloss of Nāgārjuna here. In the MMK, specifically the *Aryasatya-Parīkṣā* ("Analysis of the Noble Truths"), Nāgārjuna is addressing a Buddhist audience worried that the Madhyamaka emptiness doctrine (*śūnyatā*) undermines the ethical orientation and purpose of the Buddhist path. The worry is that emptiness of all intrinsic natures and natural kinds undermines the four noble truths, of which the prescribed eight-fold path plays a vital ethical role for Buddhists. Nāgārjuna argues that, first, one must bear in mind the Buddha's doctrine of the two truths (*dvau satyau*): the conventional or "concealing" truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) versus the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). In his *Prasannapadā*, the Mādhyamika, Candrakīrti gives three glosses on "conventional." His third gloss steers away from the idea that the conventional truth conceals an ultimate state of observer-independent facts. Instead, Candrakīrti points out that conventional truth is socially constructed and is built out of the semantic and cognitive habits of ordinary people (*loka*). Recognizing this fact just is the "ultimate truth." Oftentimes, Indian commentators favor the last etymological gloss they provide for a contested term—so this seems to be his preferred gloss. For more on this, see Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, 272. Now, we may interpret Madhyamaka as claiming that the ultimate truth is that no ultimate foundations can be found by analysis. Thus, recognizing that we are inherently social and interpretive beings can liberate us from stubbornly dogmatic views. Yet it is only through these self-same conventions that we can develop something like "the noble path" in the first place. So, recognizing our participant role in the construction of reality does not necessarily undermine all our cherished ethical intuitions.

Second, Nāgārjuna argues that for *X* to have an intrinsic nature is for *X* to be changeless and bound to the permanent expression of its essential nature. Thus, *X* is not amenable to bearing dynamic dependency relations with other entities. Nāgārjuna's point is that the path to *nirvāṇa* is dynamic and processual. However, in the *Gatāgata-Parīkṣā* ("Analysis of the Moved and Not-Moved") chapter of the MMK, Nāgārjuna famously argues that motion (or process and change) does not make sense when we think in terms of real substances with permanent natures. Thus, the successful practice of the Buddhist path, which is a dynamic process, is supported by the emptiness doctrine, because the doctrine claims that things hang together in constructed dependency relations that would arguably not make sense if we believed in permanent and intrinsic natures. My point here is that Nāgārjuna can eschew the belief in real selves and persisting and substantial entities without undermining Buddhist practice and Buddhist ethics. Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is the cornerstone of Madhyamaka philosophy, and thought by

that was never really there in the first place. On the other hand, the simulated self serves evolutionary and pragmatic purposes, and a circumspective attitude toward future surrogates is somewhat inevitable given the nature of the simulation. As social creatures that must plan for a future, or determine who is responsible for an action by holding someone accountable to her commitments and promises, we still need a more detailed practical picture of how the PSM and No-Self models can make sense of normative phenomena, or offer us any consolations about our futures (if there are any to be had). Perhaps with a more detailed sketch, and with on-going conversation between the hard sciences and humanities, a shift in theoretical paradigms can more directly impact a shift in our practical outlooks.

For example, say that “I” picks out a process called “Kevin.” This process either arises in a real base of individuation—say, a body that allows us to distinctly locate it through space and time—or, as Madhyamaka philosophy seems to argue, arises as a conventional construct. Madhyamaka uses the very logic of substantialism and naïve-realism to deconstruct the essentialist paradigm. Through a deconstructive, purely critical endeavor, the Mādhyamika Buddhist learns to stop

the Mādhyamika to be the Buddha’s essential teaching. According to Nāgārjuna, dependent origination—or the efficacy of constructed dependency relations—only makes sense if we believe that all things are empty of intrinsic natures. So the ethically-charged nature of the Buddhist path, which consists in recognizing the truths of suffering, arising, cessation, and the eight-fold path, is supported rather than undermined by eschewing real natural kinds and persisting metaphysical entities:

*yaḥ pratīyasamutpāda paśyatīdaṃ sa paśyati|
duḥkhaṃ samudayaṃ caiva nirodhaṃ mārgam eva ca|*

He who sees dependent origination [understood as *śūnyatā*] sees this:
Suffering, arising, cessation of suffering, and the very path itself.

thinking in terms of real natural kinds, real metaphysically distinct bases of individuation, and substances with real intrinsic natures. Instead, the Mādhyamika learns to embrace ontological commitments with a degree of irony—that is, he learns to see the boundedness and individuation of various medium-sized objects as a product of interpretive possibilities arising out of the conceptual frameworks that organize our mental lives. There is no observer-independent, ontological reality to uncover. And we do not embody such a view only in mystical, hallucinatory, or LSD-inspired experiences. Our everyday experience—the so-called manifest image—can still see things in a relatively ordinary way even accepting the fact that our metaphysical conclusions are open-ended functions of changing interpretive possibilities. For example, embodying Madhyamaka philosophy comes with a deflationary or minimalist commitment to thinking in terms of dependency relations rather than strict causal relationships. This is part of why the Buddha chose to speak in terms of interdependent relationality, or, “dependent origination” (*pratītyasamutpāda*) rather than billiard-ball, cement-of-the-universe causal forces. For example, I refuse to leave the rally, a police officer sprays a fine mist in my eyes, and now I experience tear-jerking pain. The complexity of overlapping relationships and interpretive schemas involved in that simple causal story would undermine any final, billiard-ball account of the incident. But for my purposes, the story is fine as a series of events depending on other events. This sort of account gets me what I need out of the story: if not for *this* happening, then *that* wouldn’t have happened, etc. Or say I lead a life of crime robbing drug stores for their narcotics. I’m arrested, and at my trial there is no one else I can convincingly offer up for punishment. Claiming

that I'm a Buddhist who does not believe in persisting selves or natural kinds does not get me off the hook. I neither claim deep metaphysical identity with the man who robbed the drug stores, nor do I believe it was anyone else. But if anyone needs to be deterred, reformed, or punished, it's not going to be my neighbor Sam—it's going to be me, the guy who got caught red-handed. Ultimately, if I accept the PSM theory, then no *one thing* really did any of this. A process, organized by years of evolution and random adaptive fit, organized itself along an asymptotic point of selfhood, a simulated point never really reached, and never really identified for the simple reason that the self does not strictly speaking exist. The process names various intimately related events that lead to KPM—a hypostatization—becoming a self-aware drugstore cowboy. "I" refers to a process with representational thought that can, in a nested and recursive way, represent the fact that it represents things. This is a process that can reflect, think, feel, anticipate, and hope for things, but a process not really tethered to any one persisting point.

With respect to practical considerations, we might ask how endorsing this view impacts our thoughts on death, in both egocentric and other-centric terms. We might explain the ego-tunnel's fear of death as more than a fear of the unknown, or the yearning for things to always "be like something" in a first-person sort of way. When I dread or fear my death, the ego-tunnel or PSM that constitutes my sense of self reaches a zero-point that makes no sense: it is overwhelmed by the existential anxiety of meaninglessness—understood as the inability to represent the face of oblivion. If we take the PSM theory seriously, then third-person processes remain transparent to a simulated "I," which is the reason that this "I" experiences itself as a

single entity and not just a dynamic, physical process. This process does not incorporate the idea of its complete annihilation in any sort of coherent way. Granted, elements of existence are experienced as (properties' or states') coming and going, but the absolute ceasing of any coming and going are not computable to a process that is living and constantly regenerating and representing itself—to a process that is always *processing* and not simply ceasing. (Incidentally, even under Eternalism, the Self cannot just cease to exist). If I can embody this theory in practice, then perhaps I can learn to neither fear nor not-fear what eludes experiential processing and representation: I'm neither flippant nor am I overwhelmed by the prospect of a death that I usually (and paradoxically) take ownership of when I'm a naïve realist about the self. There is simply no static or persisting entity that can own its death. There is no self who will suffer annihilation, but only an intense change in an always-dynamic process. Perhaps achieving this sort of equanimity is precisely the sort of liberating *nirvāṇa* Nāgārjuna refers to in his dedicatory verse above. Remnants of the extreme claim remain here, because there is no special reason I have for worrying too much about the future, simply because there is no one thing picked out by "I." However, there may be other reasons for concern that are simply generated by the biologically and culturally situated nature of the simulated "I" experience, and this is how the PSM view appropriates the moderate claim: we can have concern for a simulated future, because it is often advantageous to do so. Thus, we can stave off nihilism even in the face of a growing theoretical framework that views the self as a kind of fiction or simulation.

While this may console us in the face of our own deaths, I'm not convinced that it offers much when it comes to dreading the death of others. Even if I will not be there to fret over my death, and even if there's no one entity deprived of the value of future goods, this does not console me when I experience the passing away of a loved one. In the Pāli sutras, Buddha's pupils, and even his closest and most advanced disciple, Kaśyapa pour tears over the imminent death of their great teacher. Like Socrates, Buddha scolds them for such unenlightened behavior.¹⁶

¹⁶ Zhuangzi (476-221 BCE)—a classical Daoist, process-philosopher from the Warring States period in China—seems to have gone to the other extreme, drumming happily when his wife died. Perhaps the Buddha recommended a middle way between inconsolable and interminable grieving, and nonchalant celebrating of the death of a dear one. See Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 113.

Chuang Tzu's [Zhuangzi's] wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and few old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, and winter. [Sic]

"Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped."

After all, really embodying the Buddha's teachings should give the pupils reasons to celebrate rather than lament his death. However, the Buddha's pupils recognize that they must now endure a world without the Buddha's direct influence. They must learn to live without his friendship and his compassionate gaze. Likewise, I must endure the death of those who matter most to me. Living without those who bring meaning to my life would be painful and worthy of my sorrow. If endorsing a No-Self view somehow assuages my concern for a loved one's death, and thus to some extent mitigates my reasons for dreading death, then it must follow that a third-person theory about the first-person experience, say, a PSM theory or whatever, can revise my intimate relationships with others, and transform the meaning invested in how they enrich my life. But how does that exactly follow? Even if I accept that my beloved mother is nothing but a simulation of an individual self, nothing in my practical relationship with her is changed other than, perhaps, the consolation that comes with believing her soul will live on after her body's death. She provides me with unconditional love and encouragement, and her passing will mark the devastating end of a dearly intimate relationship, a final severing from the woman and friend who nurtured me in her womb and in her home.

Moreover, even when it's myself rather than my loved one that I'm concerned with, other practical problems arise (to say nothing about the conceptual issue of whether my own death is even imaginable by me; worrying about my own death—which Wittgenstein teaches us will not be an event in *MY* life—seems harder to make sense of than worrying about my ageing from which, at least, my death will be a total respite). Am I not justified in caring about what sort of old man I will become,

or what sort of retirement I may or may not enjoy, or what sort of globally warmed and environmentally degraded planet I must endure? Process or no-process, convention or no-convention, even the simulated “I” still has to contend with these issues as part of the content and repertoire of its thoughts and goal-oriented behavior. I am suggesting here that thinking about practical deliberation and agency as process and simulation either confuses how I should feel, or does nothing to assuage the existential woes that come with living a mortal life. However, thinking in terms of a self who has a real history, a self who can live up to and take ownership over her decisions and indecisions, might better motivate me to try to “get it right” in the face of my short time on this planet. That I suffer is a real problem for me, and that I must helplessly endure the pain on suffering faces, or cope with the loss of a loved one is likewise a dreaded feature of my existence. I am not consoled by the cold, surgical conclusions of a well-developed theory.

Furthermore, when I think of myself as an agent who must make decisions, I project myself into a future that I care about. Even if I were suicidal, I would be driven to produce a future that matters to me—albeit a future that ends all future possibilities for me. Agents always anticipate possibilities against a background of beliefs and embodied capacities. This means that agents have a history by which they assess the present moment while projecting into an unknown future. The PSM model does not adequately clarify how I should relate to myself as an agent. Perhaps PSM does not disturb many of our intuitions about agency and forward-looking deliberations, because it postulates a simulated “I” who does the work that a persisting “I” is supposed to do. But then, PSM has no practical or ethical upshot

when it comes to future-oriented concern, both egocentric and other-centric. Ethically and practically speaking, you could flip a coin to decide whether or not to endorse the Self or the No-Self view, which means that neither view makes any real practical difference. So if we're going to find practical and ethical worth in these theories, then both the Self and No-Self views must show us with greater detail how the metaphysics (or metaphysical revisions) really matter. For a philosopher of mind like Metzinger, this might not be such an important issue. Granted, certain transhumanist ethical considerations may arise regarding A.I. and the resurrection of egos in new bodies or super-computers. But some of our more basic concerns about being *ethical agents* are not really addressed by this model. However, being able to think of oneself as other in the more radical way I suggested might provide a novel way of justifying altruism and other-regarding considerations. I'll develop this further below as I explore in more detail whether or not the Self or No-Self issue makes any practical difference.

3.3.2 Madhyamaka, Ego-Tunnels, and Altruism: Seeing the World as a Spectrum of Graded Concerns for the Other

I should remind you that I am appropriating, in a very cursory way, Levinas's gloss on "metaphysics" and "otherness," because I believe it may actually provide the No-Self model with greater ethical and practical purchase. For Levinas, metaphysics is a conversation with what is other, that is, with the "infinite" understood as that which resists reduction to the concept, and is experienced as

“more than” or “other than” oneself.¹⁷ Again, without providing commentary on Levinas, I would only connect this kind of unsettling experience to the inability to directly experience the inner life of another person. Above, I discussed the role of mirror-neurons in their capacity to provide a physical basis for intersubjectivity. But even mirror-neurons cannot close the gap between what is manifestly present to me in a first-person way, and what may be manifestly present to others. The science has so far shown that my neurons can mirror certain functional states in the brain of another who is suffering. This is postulated to be part of the physical basis underlying empathy. However, the neurons do not mirror those firings in the suffering subject associated with the first-person experience of pain, and this just means that I do not literally feel your pain. However, I can empathize with your pain as my brain mirrors the firings associated with the general functional state of pain. My brain matches these to relevant patterns of behavior that have pathways in my motor cortex. So in the case of Levinas’s understanding of the impenetrable or “transcendent” other, we can think this in terms of an ego-tunnel or first-person experience that is never directly graspable from our own vantage point. Again, this is a simplification of both the neuroscience and Levinas’s work, but the point here is that “metaphysics,” understood as a lived encounter with the inscrutable other,

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*: “The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an “I,” as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself” (39). Also, “The metaphysical desire has another intention [other than ordinary desire]; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired [other] does not fulfill it, but deepens it” (34). And further on, “Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other” (49).

might show how the No-Self model provides a powerful revision of practical agency and ethical other-centricity. Let me explain this in more detail.

As Parfit argued, the moderate claim is justified. Even if there is strictly speaking no one there to laugh, cry, suffer, or die (as the PSM model claims) we still care about people around us, and we care most for those who are closest to us. This is a manifest aspect of our lived experience. Similarly, we can learn to care for our surrogates to whom we bear Relation R. We can take pains and sacrifice certain pleasures now to help ensure a better life for our surrogates, and we can do so without being overly concerned that our sense of identity with the surrogate is simply a matter of evolved conventions. If we accept this, then we can more or less have morality, prudence, responsibility, and many of the morally rich categories that come with having metaphysically persisting selves, and we can have this all on the reductionist's terms. But unless Parfit's picture provides us with revised ethical concerns and commitments—which he has argued it does¹⁸—then we're caught in a problematic conundrum: the Self and No-Self views matter very little in the practical and ethical domains. However, I argue that by developing a notion of "otherness," and fusing it with Madhyamaka Buddhism, the No-Self view can have a morally relevant upshot. In fact, the No-Self view may offer a unique revision of our usual distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations. In chapters 1 and 2, I argued that such revision might perniciously destabilize the self/other distinction, which, I argued, is necessary for empathy and other-regarding motivations to hit their target. But perhaps I missed some important nuances that

¹⁸ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 321-347.

allow a little play in that distinction to serve greater practical ends. The “otherness” *cum* irrealist Madhyamaka view may provide us with a unique view of altruism as a spectrum of graded concerns that, upon embracing the No-Self view, open up subtler and yet more far-reaching opportunities for altruism, and for the sort of emotional maturity required when acting from altruistic motivations. This is precisely the sort of useful revision that I discounted in chapters 1 and 2. So let’s see how it might work here.

When I see the world in terms of constant “othering,” I no longer remain so deeply entrenched in the solipsism of the self—entrenched in that sense of private mine-ness that always (falsely?) appears the same in the midst of my always fluctuating mental life. When I become other to myself, in the way I’ve suggested we might become by embracing the No-Self view, *primordial otherness—not just between me and you but between me and me*—is highlighted. And it is not just highlighted as a general structure. The self is viewed as both other (remember my story about KPM-20) and yet someone to whom I am called on to respond. I experience a psychological as well as temporal distance between me-now and my future self, because this future surrogate is in some way inscrutable and unknowable. When I was 5, I wanted to be a boxer and a writer (maybe I was in touch with my inner Hemingway), but I couldn’t have foreseen in any intellectual or visceral way, the man I have become. And yet, when I project 20 years down the line to still another man I will become, even in his alterity and difference, I feel responsible for and to him. I come face to face with the “transcendent” (in the

Levinasian sense I discussed above), but in the face of this otherness, I experience responsibility as a general feature of my experience.

Let me flesh this out. Consider projecting 20 years into the future. I have a vivid sense of connection to this person I will become, and I simultaneously feel distant to this future agent, as though he were someone else altogether. I want to claim that this is not just a matter of temporal distance, there's an ontology involved. So much about him will be different from me now, that in a substantive way, he will be a different sort of person, someone I cannot directly identify with. This can also be captured more succinctly by considering the backward gaze. There is so much difference in the experiences—not to mention the physicality, the peculiar style of embodied living, and the various concerns and values—of my former life as a young boy and teenager from my life now, that I can sometimes feel like it was *someone else's* life. In other words, this past that I call my own is in many ways transcendent to who I am now, and to what it is in my capacity to feel, think, and do. It's "transcendent" in the sense that it exists powerfully outside of me, and yet I feel more or less connected to it. I'm often surprised to hear interpretations from others about events in my past—interpretations of what I was supposedly doing or thinking or feeling—and I'm amazed by the disparity in narrative lenses, and the extent to which someone can convince me that I ought to view who I was and what I did in such and such a way, a way that I was not privy to before opening the discussion with this other person. We can provide such radically different narratives, because we're all seeing these (identical?) events through unique vantage-points that require imagination, creative synthesis, and narrative filtering.

It doesn't help me to claim that I can trump my mother's, my father's, my teachers', and my friends' and neighbors' view about myself because it was "my life," and "I know who I was and what I cared about and what I went through" in a way that no one else can. Perhaps in a certain sense that is true, but most of the time, I can be surprised by the unique narrative options that I had no idea were available for viewing and making sense of my past. What I'm suggesting is that this experience puts a wedge between me-now, and my past as something I can viscerally "own" right now. When sitting here in pain, because I've cut my hand slicing an apple, I have an immediate sense of ownership over the physical and mental states in play in a way that I do not when I project backward on sufficiently distant experiences. The distance, I'm suggesting, is not just temporal or a matter of recollection, but also personal: sometimes I have to work hard to take ownership of my past actions in spite of being able to remember those experiences. I believe that something similar is in play when I project forward into the future. There is a transcendent alterity that shows up, which provides the ontological basis for my capacity to completely dissociate from my past and my future despite my being able to take ownership of those experiences through a process of narrative construction.

Now, one can respond that an obvious asymmetry between "owning" my past and projecting toward my future is in play here. I can own something I've done, but it's hard to imagine owning a mere possibility, a future occurrence not yet said or done. This is particularly problematic when we consider a *Minority Report* scenario. In Philip K. Dick's story, people are punished in advance for what they *will* do. This, of course, requires a deterministic account of things, but the point is that we are

hard-pressed to blame someone for his or her possible and not yet manifested deeds—that is why the story is dystopian. So perhaps my appeal to the alterity of the past does not help clarify what’s involved in projecting toward the future. There seems to be an openness or freedom with respect to the future—however illusory that freedom may be—that allows me to have an important say in what I will do. This option does not exist with respect to the past. So let me instead spin this in a slightly different direction. The point on the table is that I experience alterity with respect to myself in the face of my past and my future, and I experience this as both another person—a person I do not directly control—and yet someone intimately connected to me (if not simply, myself) for whom I take responsibility. In both cases, narrative interpretation and filtering are at work in constructing my past and projecting toward the possibilities in my future. My biases, prejudices, and perspectival uniqueness and shortcomings construct the being whose past I believe I own, and the being whose future I *can* own (in the modal sense of a possibility that I can actualize). What I’m saying is that the palpable and commonsense way in which I own the immediate rush of pain when slicing my finger in the present is not the way in which I come to make sense of my past and project into my future. This is why I would call this narrative framing, “appropriation” rather than mere ownership. Although both terms are intimately related in the sense of laying claim to property, there is a kind of distance to the past self and future self that does not allow me to see that “property” as fully my own.

Once we accept the existence of this lived experience of alterity, the extreme of which shows up as depersonalization, we can distinguish between the lack of

taking responsibility (in depersonalization), and the almost dissonant sense in which I accept that “that was me, and that is what I intended” and “that will be me carrying out my current intentions,” and yet, “that ‘me’ is not me in terms of metaphysical personal identity.” The appropriative act is an act of experiencing responsibility and responsiveness. And we can take this one step further when we consider the “anticipation problem” I addressed earlier in this essay.

When I’m told that in a *Minority Report* sort of way a Kevin-surrogate, that is, someone who will have occurrent quasi-memories of having been me-now, will be an active shooter that causes terrible suffering and death to innocent victims, and I’m told that my wife, Elizabeth will be a terrible active shooter, there’s a sense in which I feel closer and more responsible for the Kevin surrogate (or, what’s the same, a Kevin continuant) than I can for the future Elizabeth. I anticipate things about that event that are simply not possible for me to anticipate in considering Elizabeth’s future. However, the spin I’ve put on things is this. From a philosophically matured perspective, I recognize that it’s a matter of degree and interpretive limitations that allows me to own my past and feel responsible for my future. I recognize, like Parfit asked us to do, that personal identity is not really in play at all. However, I do not believe that this, alone, can practically exonerate me from the deeds that I’ve perpetrated or will perpetrate (or that I will “quasi-perpetrate”). I’m strung between a sense of alterity and otherness, while at the same time imbued by a sense of responsibility (in cases in which I do not disconnect entirely or experience depersonalization). Thus, I come to recognize that I am responsible for and to an other, and what I need to be able to do is make sense of

how levels of intimate connections to otherness take hold in degrees of relatedness and appropriative identification rather than through metaphysically substantive personal identity relations. I experience responsibility for someone's injury when I unintentionally hit him in the face with a door he's trying to walk through (let's say that unbeknownst to me, a stranger is walking closely behind me, and I'm angry at my spouse, and I slam the door violently behind me as I walk through). The most obvious reason I feel responsible is because in some sense I caused this to happen, and yet I feel a certain lack of responsibility because it was not my intention to harm anyone in that instance (I did not even know someone was walking behind me). Similarly, there are many ways in which I feel like I've caused the deeds of the past, and will cause certain intended and unintended outcomes in the future, and yet there are so many aspects of my past experiences and experiences yet to be that are outside of my control, and to some extent, contribute to the sense of alterity with which I regard my past and future selves. I feel responsibility as an *agent*—a causal force or process—but not necessarily as a subject personally-identical to my past self and my future self. So at the heart of experiencing myself as an agent (rather than just a subject personally-identical to various manifestations of my existence over time) is a sense of responsibility for my contribution to the way the world shows up. I can feel this in relation to the future, because I project the force of my agency effecting future outcomes. When I see the otherness of the field of outcomes that surround me, and yet I maintain a sense of agency, I feel responsibility in the face of otherness and in the face of the other that is both "I" and "not-I." This is fundamentally different from having a sense that these are *my* thoughts and feelings

and itches. In the latter case, I am an “opening” or a “place” in which various properties and occurrences hang together. In the former case, I am a force that effects outcomes, and I am responsive, and thus *responsible for* contributing to how something that is much larger than myself shows up.

I can maintain both the sense of responsibility I feel toward my surrogate, and the sense of otherness that thinking in terms of surrogates presents. And I’m suggesting that this is an experience we have with the idea of both our future selves and our past selves. When I look back at my childhood in Connecticut, and try to experience the concerns that little boy had, or remember what it felt like to hold on for dear life to his mother’s hand in the midst of a ravishing blizzard, I encounter a paradoxical identity and difference—I’m not that little boy, and yet I couldn’t be here writing this now without him.¹⁹ The identity I imagine I have with him is not based on any palpable taste of what that little boy’s inner world was like. At the time, he might have been petrified by the largeness and unpredictability of nature. But now, reflecting on that memory, I feel melancholy and nostalgia—something I’m sure the child had not yet matured to even anticipate let alone experience. I honestly can’t *feel* his thoughts or experience his imagination. I project an identity, as the Buddhist suggests, through convention and various dependency relations, but I ultimately experience him as inscrutably other. I cannot fully disclose the reality of

¹⁹ Arindam Chakrabarti develops the concept of “radical repentance,” which similarly plays on this paradoxical experience of identity and difference with respect to one’s past self. I recognize some action done in the past to be so heinous that the current I cannot imagine ever doing it. I am aghast thinking, “Who is that person who could do that!?” And to that extent, the doer is someone alien and yet, this radically other person, the current repenter, feels responsible for him, because he feels some sort of continuity with this “despicable past-self” (Chakrabarti, personal conversation).

his subjectivity. And yet, I feel responsible to him, and responsible for him. Likewise, I feel responsible to and for KPM-20. So what I'm suggesting is that the No-Self view, when sincerely and deeply embodied, might be morally instructive, because when I learn to more clearly treat myself as other, and yet maintain my binding responsiveness to this other, I cultivate an other-centric perspective that potentially reaches a high normative pitch. What I mean is that I begin to see how responsibility toward others is basic to every aspect of my experience, even at the most personal and "private" level of the first-person perspective, projecting forward into its own future, and gazing backward into its own past. I begin to recognize that confusions, contingent psychological proclivities, and metaphysical prejudice often impede my sense of responsibility toward the independent needs of others. I'm suggesting that this confusion and prejudice is a function of remaining tethered to naïve realism and the self/other distinction, and thus tethered to the sort of ethical dilemmas that arise from operating out of those conceptual schemes. When I see KPM-20 as *both* other *and* self, and really embody the simultaneous closeness and distance of this other, then I learn to see that it is not the rigid self/other distinction that is paramount in having ethical reasons for action, but rather a question of what sorts of ties make me more or less responsive to an always-pervading otherness. As Śāntideva and the entire Buddhist tradition before him claimed, suffering, which is always self-aware and always experienced as a negative valence, may provide reasons for promoting certain behaviors and disavowing other behaviors. The other's suffering—a suffering I cannot fully grasp, but still remain responsive to—is

always important, because even my own suffering is another's suffering in the nuanced sense I've been trying to describe here.

Sidgwick, who adopted the extreme claim, worried that abandoning the rigid self/other distinction would lead to moral nihilism, and render our prudential concerns unintelligible.²⁰ He also believed that maintaining the rigid self/other distinction left us with a practical dilemma: a conflict between rational egoism and utilitarian altruism, two rational motives he believed a philosophically-matured "commonsense" justified. I'm suggesting that the No-Self view may bolster rather than threaten Sidgwick's utilitarian vision. Suffering and pleasure become key issues to consider, and we come to see that responsibility for another is a basic ingredient of all experience viewed from the philosophically-matured perspective. Once we've seen that otherness imbues all our concerns and responsibilities, once we've seen this even in our projected relationship to our own past and future, the fundamental concern becomes how much suffering exists, rather than *who* the suffering belongs to. This does not mean that we can simply abandon our firm concern for our nearest and dearest, but it does mean that from the philosophically-matured perspective, we understand that their suffering is ethically (or principally) on par with anyone else's suffering. We do not confuse psychological facts, and the impassioned concern we have for our nearest and dearest, with normative facts. If we could truly embody this version of the No-Self view, then perhaps the instinct to care almost exclusively

²⁰ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 419: "Grant that the Ego is merely a system of coherent phenomena, that the permanent identical 'I' is not a fact but a fiction, as Hume and his followers maintain; why, then, should one part of the series of feelings into which the Ego is resolved be concerned with another part of the same series, any more than with any other series?"

for our own welfare would mature into a more far-reaching concern for the general field of suffering, which is a product of natural processes always othering themselves. Rather than caring less about my future, I might instead see my concern as a special case of altruistic care and responsibility for the other. This possibility arises out of our lived experience of feeling responsible to a projection of ourselves as both the same (“*me* in 20 years”) and other (“*me* who is *not-me* and not knowable in 20 years”). With emotional maturity, we recognize that we’re never actually tending to some special private point—*the self*—but more strictly speaking, we’re attending to something that eludes identity and sameness, and yet encompasses them both. We’re always attending to the other, that projected person who, in each moment, we can never fully determine.

3.4 Does the Existence of a Self Make Any Practical Difference?

I will now examine an oblique attack against the belief in a real self. This brings us back to the issue of whether or not there is any practical stake in the Self/No-Self question. Whether a self really exists or just needs to be rigged up conventionally to go on with our social and emotional business may turn out to be a non-issue, from the practical, ethical point of view. Specifically, this addresses a critique against what Raymond Martin calls the “*me-consideration*” (see the introduction above). As I’ve said, thinkers like Butler and Sidgwick have argued that the No-Self view cannot make sense of forward-looking agency and egocentric concerns. But if this is a reason to believe in a persisting self, then presumably the Self/Ownership view adequately makes sense of our prudential and forward-looking concerns. The “*me-consideration*” is the claim that we care about our own

futures, because we persist into those futures. However, as Martin points out, the Selfist owes us a story of why me-now should be egoistically concerned with me-later. Why exactly do I care about either a future stage of myself (under the Ownership view) or a surrogate of myself (under the No-Self view)? The me-consideration is an intuitive response. I should egoistically care about me-later, because any good or ill-fortune that befalls me-later impacts me overall. It is me who will reap the outcomes of events spanning all the stages of my life. Future-me is a stage of my becoming, and thus I can anticipate the aches and exaltations that await me. In short, the Selfist who appeals to the me-consideration is temporally neutral with respect to prudential concerns, that is, he has an eye on achieving a balanced distribution of good over the whole of his life. He believes that the further fact underlying his persistence is enough to justify future-oriented concern.

Now, Martin argues that reductionism about the self is not a big deal practically speaking. With the notion of a continuer-self, or, surrogate there is good reason to care about our future surrogates.²¹ I will explore this in more detail, because if Martin is correct, then the Self and No-Self models prove to be neutral with respect to practical rationality. I've shown you why I think this is wrong from the side of the No-Self model. There are ethical and agentic implications involved in treating oneself as other. With respect to forward-looking agency, my defense of

²¹ Martin compares "continuer-consideration" and "continuer-interest" to Parfit's "quasi-memories" in *Reasons and Persons*. See Martin, 124. Martin concludes: "When, as reductionists, we give up our belief in the reality of the self, we don't give up our belief in the existence of a brain, a body, and a series of interrelated physical and psychological events. Nor do we abandon continuer-interest. What we used to think of as our future selves we still regard, albeit perhaps less robustly, as our future continuers and we may value them as such" (128).

the No-Self view appealed to a certain type of lived experience rather than a rational reconstruction. I appealed more to phenomena than analytic structure. But what about the Self model? Does persisting into the future give me special reasons to care about that future? I want to show why thinking in terms of embodied selves who own their physical and mental states *does make a practical difference*. If I'm right about that, then reductionism about the self, *pace* Martin, is a big deal, because believing in a persisting self makes a practical difference.

To put my cards on the table before proceeding, the sort of self I believe makes a difference is an underlying, synthesizing aspect of embodied consciousness. The self operates at the sub-personal and personal levels; it is unique to the body in which it is realized, and is not just a product of memories, dispositions, values, and practical identity. I will develop this point in more detail below. But before doing so, I'd like to illustrate some of the practical and ethical considerations that are at stake in believing either that one's embodied self is unique—and not the sort of thing that can be simply transferred to another body—or, instead, believing that the self is a (hollow?) ego-tunnel that can be uploaded to super-computers or resurrected through transplants.

In the recent film, *Self/Less*, starring Ben Kingsley and Ryan Reynolds, a real estate tycoon, Damian (played by Kingsley) takes advantage of a new technology that allows him to transplant his ego into another body. The procedure is in its Beta stage, as remnants of the host brain's former ego linger in the neural network. Damian thinks these experiences are hallucinations. In actuality, the "hallucinations" are fragments of the memories, feelings, dispositions, and capacities of the former

ego struggling to remain intact and reintegrate its identity. The plotting transhumanist scientist, who sold Damian on the procedure, gives him a chemical concoction to slowly erase these haunting remnants. He tells Damian that the “hallucinations” are controllable side effects of the procedure. Damian is also told that the body used for the transplant has been genetically engineered. But actually, a poor soldier (Ryan Reynolds) willing to die for cash to save his daughter from a life-threatening medical condition has sold his body to the scientist. Damian uncovers this dark secret, and saddled with guilt, seeks out the soldier’s wife, and develops a fatherly bond with her now healthy daughter. Damian’s ethical dilemma grows abundantly clear to him. He can stop taking his medications in order to bring back the soldier, or he can rob the little girl of her father, and rob the woman of her beloved husband. If Damian were to stop taking his meds, then within a few weeks, his ego would dissipate into oblivion, and the soldier’s memories would return.

If we accept this story at face value, then clearly the only thing that makes a person a person, and a self a self, is an ego-tunnel supervening over a working brain. When Damian is haunted by the soldier’s flashbacks, we might be inclined to believe that no clear criteria of personal identity can establish whether or not it’s Damian or the soldier experiencing the turmoil. We’ve entered a Parfitian gray area, because the self, understood as an ego-tunnel, is no longer individuated by a single stream of consciousness. Our metaphysical interpretation of this film has important ethical upshots.

Say we believe the self underlies a synthesizing component in the structure of consciousness, a component that operates at both the sub-personal and personal

levels. We also believe the self is embodied, and unique to the particular embodiment in which it is realized. The existence of this self would have serious ethical ramifications. For example, if John's wife, Luna suffered from Alzheimer's to the point where she had no memory of being John's wife, John would be keeping his wedding vow by remaining devoted to Luna in her amnesiac state. He should see her as the same person he married. Only now, she suffers from Alzheimer-induced amnesia. He should not believe that she has died or been replaced by a surrogate. On the other hand, if Alzheimer's-Luna were just a surrogate, John might decide that he owed the surrogate nothing—she is not the one he vowed to care for in sickness and health. Luna died when her ego-tunnel faded away into oblivion. But if there were a unique self that underlies but is not reducible to its ego, then the soldier's wife in *Self/Less* should believe that her husband is the victim of thought implantation. Damian has not actually stolen the soldier's body. During the transplant, Damian dies, and the soldier suffers from memory and belief implants. His stream of consciousness has been severely disrupted, as he suffers from a sort of split-personality in which he mostly believes he is Damian. If there were some further fact (and not necessarily an immaterial soul) that underlies a person's identity and persistence in time, then the soldier has not been replaced, the soldier has been *infiltrated*, and his ego is now highly unstable.

On the other hand, if we believe there are only open-ended ego-tunnels, then at some point in the film, we're not dealing with Damian, nor are we dealing with the soldier. When Damian takes the ethical high-road and stops taking his medications, then we've witnessed a *resurrection* of the soldier. These distinct views of the self

have implications for the commitments we make, and for the feelings we believe we ought to have toward loved-ones who have been severely altered by brain injuries and diseases. If my wife were entirely constituted by an ego-tunnel, then staying by the side of her amnesiac-Alzheimer's surrogate would not fulfill a vow. I am no longer a loyal husband. Instead, I am involved in an act of charity, giving selflessly to a needy stranger. Loyalty and charity are both ethically commendable, but these are distinct ethical actions with distinct motivations. So Self versus No-Self would make a significant practical difference, because endorsing one or the other view might impact the sorts of motivations and reasons we have for doing things.

Keeping this illustration in mind, I want to directly assess Martin's thesis that the Self/No-Self issue does not make a practical and ethical difference. His main contention is that the me-consideration does not really provide an answer to why I should care about my future self. The me-consideration might pair with the extreme claim. The Selfist might argue that if I don't persist into my future, then I have no direct reason to care about the future surrogate who will replace me. Again, I might care about KPM-20, but I might just as easily not care. Raymond Martin believes that the extreme claim is ungrounded, and that if it applies to the No-Self model, then it likewise applies to the Self model. This is a strategy worth taking seriously, because it not only obliquely defends the No-Self view, but also puts it on equal footing with the Ownership view when it comes to making sense of forward-looking agency. So if we have some convincing empirical and metaphysical reasons to take the No-Self view seriously—which we do—then a failure to adequately make sense of an essential component of agency should not count against it, since the same problem

exists for the Ownership view. It could be that whatever will provide us with an adequate theory of action is more sophisticated than either the Reductionist or Ownership view. In order to defend his thesis, Martin tentatively grants that some further fact establishes the sameness of the self across time, and that this self will reap the future outcomes of its actions. Martin argues that the persistence of a self does not necessarily justify egocentric, future-directed concern by me-now for me-later.

Here's one reason this might be true. Suppose one's psychology does not persist. Let the felt narrative of being-someone be diachronically interrupted and disjoint. Future stages of a self whose psychology is radically distinct from the present are too foreign, too remote, and too psychologically disconnected from the present to provide the self with reasons to have special concern for her future stages. We don't need sci-fi thought-experiments regarding teleportation, or fission and fusion, to make this point. We can instead project into a future in which one's views, dispositions, life-style choices, and memories and self-interpretations are radically different from one's current ego.

Martin asks us to grant, for the sake of argument, the existence of a persisting self. Imagine that the self persists as some further fact behind all the quantitative, qualitative, and psychological changes that make up a conscious human life. These changes can be more or less continuous, allowing for radical ruptures between current values and personal history, and later values and memories. In fact, we can imagine a case in which psychological facts about a particular self, say, its aims, its values, its existential projects, and all of the personal memories that shape its

personal history change so radically that some future stage of it will have no psychological relation to (that is, recognition of) its current stage. The “who” constituted by the content of personal identity (the memories, aims, and projects of a person) basically becomes someone else. Would it be so obvious that the current self should be egoistically concerned for the welfare of such a future self?

Me-now would find a lot less color in a world without the poetry of Bob Dylan, and without the comedy of Tina Fey and Alec Baldwin in *30 Rock*. But perhaps future-me would not be able to get past Dylan’s nasal voice and amateurish harmonica and guitar playing. Perhaps future-me would resent a comedy that features a hapless and overtly liberal female lead in a position of power. I can’t even be sure that this radically altered future-me wouldn’t vote for Donald Trump to be President of the United States, and wouldn’t support building a wall between the United States and Mexico. Supposing all this were true of future-me, I probably wouldn’t be especially concerned with this very different creature (a nationalist, misogynist, and racist me, in a very important sense, wouldn’t be me at all). But the Selfist who believes in a further fact is committed to the view that this person would still be me, albeit a terrible version of me. Martin’s conclusion is that persistence of self is not enough to justify egoistic concern for my own future. Therefore, the Selfist who endorses the Ownership view is no better off than the No-Selfist who does not endorse the Ownership view. Both camps need to adequately justify self-regarding, future-directed considerations.

The basic problem I have with Martin’s argument is that it does not adequately explore the complex ways in which temporality, the distinction between

synchronic and diachronic unity, and the question of the metaphysical base of individuation (we visited in chapter 2) impact what it makes sense to care about. Specifically, he fails to distinguish between those things we remain especially concerned with *despite* personal identity and psychological continuity, and those existential and narrative items of the ego-tunnel whose discontinuity complicates the matter of who it makes sense to care about. Let me illustrate the point.

Suppose me-later will be a jingoistic racist, who opposes social security and any sort of welfare entitlements, and who thinks climate change is a hoax and that nature's only purpose is to serve the needs of human populations. Me-later will not remember the progressive me who has leanings toward deep-ecology and who grew up the son of an Iranian immigrant. Me-later will remember nothing about me-now and the narrative I've drawn out of my past: my early days as a skater and surfer and angry punk-rocker, my penchant for writing poetry, my love for composing songs and reading philosophy, my deep concern for the well-being of the natural environment and the alarming rate of species die-offs. Maybe I won't care so much about this future-me who is utterly disconnected from my current history. We might even wonder if former-me—the anarchistic punk-rocker—would want to have anything to do with the slightly bourgeois, soft, and academic-me writing this essay right now. But suppose I find out that me-later will be punished by an experimental virtual-pain machine that tortures its subject through neuro-stimulation. This might be a *Clockwork Orange*-esque punishment exacted on future-me by a utilitarian government for committing some horribly racist hate crime (remember, this is the intolerant, Donald Trump version of me). I also find out that as part of the

punishment for the hate crime, once every year for 5 years after the sentencing, me-later will experience the most vivid and horrific nightmares for 48 hours, and live on the verge of suicide until the nightmares suddenly stop—again, a conditioning technique created by a very sadistic big-brother. I think it's quite obvious that I would egoistically care about the plight of me-later, because these are generally terrible experiences. After all, we're assuming it's the same me, in the sense that some further fact makes me-later a future stage of me-now. I might not *practically* care too much for the Trump-supporting future-me. It would be hard to know how to feel about someone who shares none of my memories, hopes, or dispositions. But I would certainly dread the torture and mind-curdling nightmares that await me. I'm not begging the question here, because I'm claiming that general aspects of experience, like the amount of pleasure, pain, fear, or love and fulfillment one experiences matter to us so long as we know that some tangible continuity between our first-person experiences will exist. In some sense, albeit not as a progressive son of an immigrant, I'll be there to feel the pain. But the key is that my "being-there" is not just a matter of my existential projects, personal memories, and practical identity. Something supports that identity, and this is the embodied self, which is the base of individuation persisting through psychological and dispositional changes that differentiates me from any other individual existing in the universe. As long as my nervous system is in good working order, pain will never cease to be an issue for me, no matter how much of an asshole or amnesiac I become. I do not need to know that I will remain a progressive liberal who adores Bob Dylan, and that I will organize my life around the constraints of being a good father and a half-way decent

philosopher in order to dread the prospects of an amnesiac future filled with horrific torture and fear. So in short, even if my psychology does not persist as it does now, I have good reason to care about aspects of my future that involve my general physical and psychological welfare. This of course rests on the possibility of the self persisting through radical change. Bear in mind that this does not commit me to belief in a Cartesian, immaterial soul. In fact, it requires that the body play an essential role in the history and prospects of the self. The simple point here is that in order for an embodied self to have a coherent experience it must be unified both synchronically and diachronically. However, certain disruptions to narrative diachronic unity might confuse us at the level of existential analysis. We may not know how to feel about ourselves when projecting into a future in which our personal history is forgotten, and our projects and aims are radically altered. We may not know which commitments made now remain intact, and which may be overturned given radical ruptures in life projects and deep values. But synchronic unity, which allows for an individual to identify *this* red object as causing *this* sensation of pain, is enough to justify fear and dread in me-now for a future I will viscerally feel. While the narrative may change, it will still “be like something” for *me* to be a Trump supporter who remembers nothing of his progressivist past or his loving and multi-cultural family. This rests on the assumption that it will be *me*—the synchronically unified and embodied self—who experiences the future pain, even though aspects of diachronic unity that account, among other things, for personal identity may have been severely disrupted.

Another possibility is that my psychology does not persist due to a coma. Do I have reason to care about this future-me? Simply put, yes. As long as the disposition to have a first-person experience exists, then I can care about that shell of a man, and whatever his ego may experience in the state of a coma. I'm not making an ethical claim here about when it is appropriate to unplug a patient on life support. I'm simply claiming that if we believe the self persists into its future, then it has reasons to care about that future based on what sort of *general* and *visceral* first-person experiences that self will have, and not necessarily what sort of practical identity that self will articulate through his commitments.

Now, let me clarify this further with respect to the discussion in chapter 2 of the distinction between “place”/locus (*ādhāra*—ownership of mental states) and “base” (*āśraya*—the foundation of individuation and metaphysical dependence). The self might be related to its mental states in an *adjectival* sense, the way a dent is related to a surface.²² For a self to be adjectival upon some *X*, it must be essentially of or in *X*,²³ and could not exist without *X*. So, for example, the mental states of a subject might be metaphysically dependent on a body.²⁴ The body would be its base of individuation upon which it metaphysically depends. Notice the distinction here between a subject *owning* some set of mental states—meaning they are not experienced as external assailments, and they are available for endorsement or

²² Ganeri, *The Self*, 36: Ganeri borrows this from Sidney Shoemaker, *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10. The idea here is that a mental life is adjectival upon some subject of experience, the way, say, “a bending” may be adjectival upon some branch that is bent. This is contrasted with viewing the mental life as a collective property, say, supervening upon, or emergent from, a collection, no single part of which constitutes the mind.

²³ *Ibid*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

disavowal—and the ontological state of affairs making it the case that there is a plurality of individuals.²⁵ If the self is metaphysically dependent upon a body—its base of individuation—and psychological continuity is more directly bound up with a sense of ownership, then egoistic concern for me-later is justified even if me-now cannot imagine owning (in the sense of endorsing or anticipating) most of the beliefs and dispositions of me-later. This is because ownership can be a matter of propensities to endorsement, while individuation (metaphysical-ontological dependence) can be the product of an embodied “capacity for normative emotional response.”²⁶ I may not be able to anticipate what it’s like for the future-me to be very greedy with money—something the more successful, business-entrepreneurial me might be—but I can still anticipate the palpable pain of future-me hyperventilating and panicking upon watching the stock-market crash. As long as there is continuity between the stages of my body, and my body maintains its capacity for emotionally charged, normative responses, which are felt in a first-person way, namely, my mind-body complex experiences things as desirable or undesirable, or right or wrong, I have some reason to care about a future me who is psychologically disconnected from me-now. Let me explain this further by providing more of the phenomenological assumptions driving my thought.

We may favor a non-cognitivist and phenomenological gloss on what it means to act in a goal-directed way. This sort of gloss would prioritize something

²⁵ Ibid, 37.

²⁶ Ibid, 39: “My own view is that ownership is ‘rooted’ in the deep psyche of the individual and in their propensities to endorsement, and individuation is determined by the essentially embodied character of a capacity for normative emotional response.”

like a Heideggerian approach to “being-in” over the cognitivist/beliefs-desires account of intentionality. According to the non-cognitivist account, we are first “being-in-the-world” in the sense of being absorbed in a socialization process amidst transparent background practices.²⁷ We are not essentially minds with beliefs and desires, but rather, “agents” (in Heidegger’s sense of *Dasein*) who are absorbed in coping strategies. When we skillfully cope with the meaningful context in which we find ourselves, and align our patterns of behavior with what it makes sense to do, we are not necessarily taking a theoretical attitude, which assesses its own belief and desire structures. Prior to theoretical and calculative thought, we experience the world more originally as possibilities for action amid affordances that emerge from interactions between the embodied self and its physical and social environment. The infant muddling through her environment on all fours begins to develop a sense of what she can and cannot do, and she begins to anticipate possibilities for, say, grabbing stuff, or supporting her body based on affordances from her environment. For example, the edge of an oak table affords itself as a means to stand up. Narratives and dispositions toward endorsements emerge out of an embodied self that viscerally experiences what it can and cannot do before it overtly calculates things through various decision procedures. I skillfully skip over a puddle with little to no calculation, as I am averse to getting my pant legs wet. It’s an immediate, non-algorithmic, and yet goal-driven response. Without calculation, I anticipate my reach and bodily momentum and force, and I have a sense of the

²⁷ See Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time Division I* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991). As Dreyfus has argued, he does not believe that minds do not exist. Rather, his non-cognitivist gloss on Heidegger has ontological priority over the cognitivist beliefs-desires account of agency.

boundedness of this puddle against the boundedness of my body. I proceed to navigate through the crowded street to my train, anticipating my body's movement along a dynamic grid of other moving bodies that I can get around, keep pace with, or press against. This capacity to navigate through environmental and social signs is driven by a sense of temporality imbuing sensations, anticipations, feelings, and moods and emotions. Getting to the grocery store, which is a block away, is unthinkable for me, because the distance is "insurmountable" when I'm in the mood of dark despair and crippling depression. But in some other mood, say, of bittersweet joy in walking a dear old friend who I'm not sure I'll see again to the subway next to the store, I experience the store as tragically close. This more primary relationship to my environment, colored as it is by temporality and various affective attunements, informs how I build self-narratives *without being reducible to the narrative itself*. In essence, the self is not *essentially* a "thinking thing."

Moreover, radical psychological discontinuity over time does not necessarily amount to a complete lapse in diachronic unity for the body that supports this capacity to care, circumspect, endorse beliefs, and view itself as responsible to various normative constraints. So it makes perfect sense to claim that I might disavow the beliefs and narrative of some future incarnation of me, that is, I might not be able to comprehend what it would be like to own this future existence, but I can still anticipate his aches, pains, joys and fears in a visceral and first-person way. Therefore, Martin's conclusion that psychological discontinuity puts the Self/Ownership view on equal footing with the No-Self/No-Ownership view is not convincing. The Self/Ownership view that I'm tentatively putting forward can

accommodate lapses or complete ruptures in personal identity, because it also maintains the belief that a body and nervous system support the capacity to develop a sense of ownership. First-person experiences blossom out of the individuating base of the body, and remain circumspective toward environmental affordances regardless of consciously endorsed patterns of behavior, and regardless of the personal history that informs personal identity.

3.5 Madhyamaka as Borderless and Constructed Care for the (Non)-Self

I will conclude by directing the analysis specifically to Madhyamaka No-Selfism. Let me do this by first contrasting that view with the other No-Self options I have developed so far. The No-Self view, *pace* the Mādhyamika, might appeal to some sort of continuity in the base of individuation. Like the Selfist, the No-Selfer can appeal to the continuity of a body and a nervous system (or to a stream of consciousness). But No-Selfers cannot connect the first-person sense of mine-ness that I am experiencing now with just any person's sense of mine-ness. They must make sense of me anticipating things, and they must clarify why I overwhelmingly believe it will "be like something" for me to have those experiences. It's not enough to say there will be someone who also says "I" at T_2 . Even now, there are plenty of others who refer to themselves as "I," and who describe what it's like to be experiencing things. I do not identify with or anticipate their experiences based on their avowal of a first-person perspective. I must have some sense that I can own parts of that experience in order to identify with it and anticipate it. A lot needs to be said about how (and if) this can be done without appealing to a persisting self, but this will be visited more thoroughly in my final chapter. We have the continuer

or surrogate option, in which a continuer of me-now becomes my future surrogate. And even from the Selfist side, we might endorse punctualism, which is the view that “I’s” pick out something real, but these “I’s” only last episodically, and are strung together like pearls on a necklace. Finally, the PSM theory believes that “I” picks out nothing. So I’m not sure what story about future-directed concern is available to this theory, unless it appeals to various continuity relationships like Parfit and other No-Selfers who believe that the self is importantly tied to an individuating body.

However, I’d like to focus here on the Madhyamaka No-Self view. From this perspective, nothing, not even the body, has an intrinsic nature that persists. The challenge here is to determine how any sort of concern for future-me is justified when eschewing belief in any sort of place (ownership) or base (metaphysical individuation). There is no base on which to hang anticipation for a particularly nasty or pleasant first-person experience in the future. The Mādhyamika will appeal to conventional designation for making sense of the connectedness between experiences, but if nothing other than convention relates these experiences, we lose the very visceral and anticipatory sense of future first-person experiences. Moreover, under this model, radical ruptures in psychological continuity and personal history more easily lead to the conclusion that one is not justified in being especially concerned for a future surrogate. So the Mādhyamika owes us a theory about how we justify the manifest experience of caring about our own futures. Candrakīrti provides a theory of how we have a sense of ownership for *this* experience through appropriation of various thoughts and feelings, etc. (see chapter

2). Yet, without appeal to some sort of unity or body, or some other sort of individuating base, he does not offer a very clear picture of how we develop and justify future-oriented concerns. But on my tentative view, it is the continuity between stages of the body and its embedded-ness in a physical environment, replete with navigable signs and anticipatory intentionality toward social and physical possibilities, that allows my first-person sense of what it's like to have this body concern itself with future first-person experiences. Whether I remember my past experiences and commitments, or remember my current values and projects, that is, whether my personal identity is radically disrupted, I can imagine a future in which it will "be like something" for me—a sentient and sapient dynamism of flesh, circumspective action, and thought—to suffer as some other type of personal owner of experiences. I will be some other type of owner, say, a Trump-supporting type of owner, but thanks to the continuity of synthesizing first-person experiences piggy-backing on bodily continuity, I will be an owner nevertheless. This is because the content of those experiences does not necessarily have to involve continuity between narratives and deep commitments. They simply must "be like something," say, pain or joy, or elation and giddiness for me to care about them. And they can be like something to me, because I am a sentient body that can own its experiences through various narrative lenses.

Still, there is a card left for the Mādhyamika to play. Grant that we have independent reasons to adopt Madhyamaka's more global metaphysical irrealism. And grant that adopting these insights are impactful on relevant aspects of practical deliberation. Any concern for that future-me (which would be "me" strictly out of

conventional designation) might be viewed as other-centric and altruistic (perhaps initially in an obscured way) since it is strictly speaking *someone else* that I'm concerned with and feel responsible toward. Like Parfit suggests²⁸ we may have moral reasons for concerning ourselves with future surrogates. I would argue that this is the most attractive and revisionary aspect of glossing Madhyamaka-Mahāyāna arguments for radically self-effacing altruism. I cannot really justify *egocentric concern* for this future "other" that is my surrogate, but nevertheless, I manifestly care for this other who is in one sense me and in another sense not me. Thus, I can revise this future-directed consideration to be an obscured form of other-centricity. I can then build upon this to justify broader altruistic concern for all sentient beings. Put more simply, if there are any general reasons for caring about others, then I can find reasons to care about this future version of me. But reversing the formula might also be morally instructive. Given my manifest concern for this distant and future version of me, I can also cultivate more robust concern for distanced others who are nevertheless closer to me now than this future version of me. In other words, if I have reasons to care for this future version of me whose relationship to me is thin, then I have reasons to care for others now that are only thinly related to me. This is arguably one way of glossing Śāntideva's argument against the egoist. This person claims that he is justified in privileging his own suffering, because he does not experience another's suffering in a first-person way. He capitalizes on the me-consideration:

If I give them no protection because their suffering does not afflict me, why do I protect my body against future suffering when it does not afflict me? The

²⁸ *Reasons and Persons*, 311-312.

notion ‘it is the same me even then’ is a false construction, since it is one person who dies, quite another who is born. (BCA, 8:96-97).

In its historical-textual context, this verse speaks to the Buddhist (and in a different respect, Hindu Selfist) belief in reincarnation after bodily death.²⁹ The Buddhist does some things and avoids other things for the sake of this future being’s welfare. While the Mādhyamika’s view about *nirvāṇa*, which is the Buddhist *summum bonum*, is complex to say the least, Śāntideva is clearly directing his point to practitioners who put a lot of stock in future merits and demerits. These practitioners follow ethically relevant patterns of behavior for the sake of achieving *nirvāṇa*. Without any sort of lasting immaterial soul, and without physical or psychological continuity, this reincarnated being (if it can be called that) is certainly “other.” And yet, one manifestly cares about this future person. We can explain this phenomenologically as an experiential given, as part of our lived experience. Or, we might claim that concern naturally arises out of recognizing how the future surrogate is dependent upon one’s current existence (or, to speak in non-ownership terms, is dependent upon the currently dynamic and episodic, and yet somehow conventionally bounded flow of psychophysical events). In either event, Śāntideva does not claim that the concern is illogical. Rather, he exploits the fact that we normally have such forward-looking concern, but then argues that this concern is

²⁹ I cannot discuss the complex matter of individual Buddhist treatments of the mostly pan-Indian belief in reincarnation. It will suffice to say that while the future person is not identical to the current person by virtue of some lasting, immaterial soul, there is an important dependence relationship between one’s actions and a future avatar that will somehow embody the results of those actions after one has perished. Some Indo-Tibetan schools claim that a temporary and dynamic “soul-like” energy does in fact leave one body and inform the development of a future body, but again, these complex issues go well beyond the current discussion.

incorrectly assessed as self-regarding and egocentric. Śāntideva uses this against the egoist to show that any reason we have to care about our future surrogate applies to other persons now. In other words, we have just as much reason to care for current others as we do to care for distant surrogates, since the future entity is strictly speaking other than oneself. Lapses in time, and separateness of bodies, arguably, do not make any meaningful difference in the concern we ought to have for future suffering. Therefore, Śāntideva endorses temporal and agent neutrality when it comes to reasons for action (although he certainly did not speak in terms of “reasons for action”). So pragmatic considerations notwithstanding, Śāntideva endorses a radically altruistic ethics.

I think his argument is more generally applicable whether or not we tether it to reincarnation. As I’ve read Parfit, we may revise the normal justification we have for egocentric future-directed concern through larger moral considerations for our future surrogates. Śāntideva, centuries earlier, motivated a kind of exalted altruism out of this key insight. He did so by blurring the distinction between self and other, while maintaining the commonsense view that our future selves provide us with reasons to care about them. When we maintain this aspect of the commonsense view, but shed the belief that this future self is something more than a surrogate, then instead of experiencing a nihilistic breakdown in caring, we cultivate a transformative and relevantly practical stance on how far out our concern should extend. Indeed, Śāntideva believes it should extend indefinitely: *we should care about all suffering equally*. This has to be a normative point, because, empirically speaking, we care more about those who are closest to us.

Śāntideva's point is also applicable to the radical changes that span the gap in a single lifetime. For if we take the Mādhyamika seriously, there is no real metaphysical unity between me at 10 years old and me at 30 (or, perhaps even me at 30 and 1 minute, and me at 30 and 1.001 minutes). This is one good reason why future suffering (in perhaps the most minute slice of time from the present) does not afflict me. We might be tempted to read this as the trivially true statement that future suffering does not afflict me *now*. But the non-trivial point I think Śāntideva is trying to make is that I do things now to protect a body whose future suffering is *not mine at all*. I learn to treat myself as I treat others—as *other*. This underlies the altruistic conclusion:

I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being (*BCA*, 8:94).

Since I feel responsible to the surrogate-other, who is only conventionally me, there is no reason not to extend this courtesy to *all sentient otherness*. Granted, this is not a deductive conclusion drawn out of the verses above. However, when we consider the idea that we are always, in some sense, concerned with what is other, given our acceptance that no real metaphysical unity exists between *this* episode of appropriative self-identity and some *future* episode of appropriative self-identity (see chapter 2), we can learn to recognize that what makes this other “myself” is a higher-order act of appropriation. If we can learn to expand that sense of ownership to include other sentient fields that are less directly associated with ourselves now, we can at least negatively recognize that no metaphysical barriers prevent us from being altruistically concerned with all suffering. Hence, Śāntideva's point:

Through habituation there is the understanding of ‘I’ regarding the drops of sperm and blood of two other people, even though there is in fact no such thing. Why can I not also accept another’s body as my self in the same way, since the otherness of my own body has been settled and is not hard to accept? (*BCA*, 8:111-112).

If there is no metaphysical unity between my body now and my body in the future, and the sense of self is explained by appropriation (again, see chapter 2), then all “coalescence” of appropriative activity is a play of distinct sentient episodes directed by a concern whose intentional object is strictly speaking, *other*. When Śāntideva enjoins us to see this, he believes that it is ethically impactful, because we can learn to draw this relationship between self and other to such an expansive level that all suffering (if any suffering) becomes important and ethically relevant. So if we experience ethical concern foundationally as responsibility to the good (however we define it—even if only as a regulative idea), then we are responsible toward all episodes of suffering that obstruct the good. Moreover, the conventionally constructed self/other distinction, alone, does not provide a good reason to privilege any one episode of suffering over another, because even conventionally, I can cultivate an experience of myself as an other to whom I am responsible.

While I have now come full circle to a No-Self model that supports a uniquely altruistic vision, I have dispelled Martin’s argument that the Self/No-Self question is irrelevant to practical matters. If the self is an embodied self that persists in time, then there may be very good reasons for it to care about future stages of itself. In short, the me-consideration is justified when we get clear about the base of individuation that supports unity and persistence, and when we ground certain anticipatory concerns in the physical and emotional capacities of that base.

However, I've also shown that the No-Self Buddhist, either the Mādhyamika who rejects the belief in continuities and a base of individuation, or the Buddhist who believes that the ownerless stream is a base of individuation, can develop a uniquely altruistic perspective that is decidedly impactful on practical reasons for action. So that leaves us with a puzzle.

Does the me-consideration provide more robust reasons for action than the No-Self view? What grounds for other-centricity exist on the Self model? Do they provide any sort of advantage over the No-Self view? Could the No-Selfers be conflating *the self* and *the ego* or are the Selfers drawing a spurious distinction between them? I argue in the next chapter that there are theoretical epistemological advantages to the self/ego distinction, and that Selfers are therefore on firm footing. Still, the No-Selfer might believe that compassion and altruism are intimately connected to the No-Self view. But the Buddhist version of that view also construes the self as something that impedes, rather than supports, other-centricity. If No-Selfers can clearly show how the Self view produces egoists rather than altruists, then their unique model of altruism stands on surer footing.

CHAPTER 4. EXALTED ALTRUISM AND MEREOLOGICAL HOLISM

4.1 Introduction

In what follows, I provide two broad accounts of selfhood: two general models that account for our sense of ownership and immersion in a first-person experience. Addressing the problem of how altruism is justified, I argue that both accounts provide us with reasons to pursue and perform altruistic deeds. One account provides ontologically minimal scaffolding, while the other provides an ontologically thicker account of how altruistic reasons can be robustly motivational in nature. The first account advances “the normative self,” a general model under which a variety of normative accounts of selfhood may fall. The second account advances what I’ll simply call, “the metaphysical view.”

The normative self owns its mental and physical states because of individuating a narrative history, which is strung upon an embodied, normative-emotional framework through avowals and disavowals. Such individuation has been referred to in the literature as “participation,” or, the forging of a “participant self.”¹ The normative view offers an ontologically minimalist account of our capacity to recognize rational reasons for taking up another’s cause at our own expense. However, in section 4.2, I will argue that the normative account does not adequately

¹ Ganeri, *The Self*, 32 (see fn. 41). Ganeri borrows this from Laura Waddell Ekstrom “Keynote Preferences and Autonomy,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Review* Vol. 59, 1999: 1057-63, also: Ekstrom, “Alienation, Autonomy, and the Self,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 29, 2005: 45-67. As quoted from Ekstrom by Ganeri, a participant self is “a self constituted by ‘a collection of preferences and acceptances...along with the capacity or faculty for forming and reforming that [collection],’ where a preference is a desire formed by a process of critical evaluation, and acceptance marks the ‘endorsement of a proposition formed by critical reflection with the aim of assenting to what is true’ (2005: 55).”

explain our capacity to connect directly with others in an experience of emotional wholeness, an experience that I believe is essential for both motivating altruistic deeds and for making sense of the epistemology of intersubjective, motivationally-emotive states. Of course, I owe an explanation of what I mean by “wholeness,” and I will develop that account through what I’m calling, “mereological holism.”

To this point, the metaphysical view offers an ontologically deeper account of an underlying sense of identification with others, which justifies concern for the well-being of others to the extent that concern for *any* suffering is justified. The idea here is that if I feel compelled to care and be motivated by my own suffering, it can make sense for me to care and be motivated by another’s suffering so long as that suffering can in some non-trivial sense be shared. While a similar conclusion is reached in the normative account, the metaphysical account supports its view based on aspectual metaphysics, or, mereological holism (to be explained in what is to come). To develop this point further, I will draw on the metaphysics of the Pratyabhijñā philosophy (the “Recognition School”) of the c. 10th century Kashmiri philosopher, Abhinavagupta. Without necessarily endorsing his theological commitments, I believe that his metaphysics are instructive for the contemporary view that reality is multivalent, and thus describable in both pluralistic and monistic terms, with each description providing an equally true count of objects that can be viewed as both a collection of individuals, as well as aspects of a single, but composite whole. So, for example, we can count the car in terms of many parts, and we can say that only the hood is dented. But we can also count the car as a single whole, and simply say that *the car* has been damaged, and the latter description is

not simply reducible to the former. This, I believe, provides a way of making sense of intersubjectivity—and shared motivations—while preserving the integrity of difference and pluralism.

For Abhinavagupta, realization of an underlying universal Self paradoxically both actualizes and overcomes (perhaps in the Hegelian sense of *aufhebung!*) the real presence of otherness, particularly, the otherness of other selves. He argues further that when we recognize our wholeness as a universal Self encompassing all individuals, we do not gain new information (that is, he does not offer this as an empirical claim), but rather, we clarify for ourselves what was already there to begin with—something akin to (but not identical with) unpacking an analytically derived claim from a concept clarified with greater depth. This is not to be confused with a Fregean sense/reference distinction, where the whole and the individual have distinct senses, but identical reference. According to Abhinavagupta, and his predecessor, Utpaladeva, clarifying for ourselves the nature of selfhood—understood as a self-reflexive unity of consciousness—discloses a background unity; we can re-cognize an original unity that lingers as an obscured, but background presupposition. We do not immediately recognize this original unity, because, according to Abhinavagupta, we are ontically “distracted/deluded” (*moha*) by the play of individuation and particularity, which Abhinavagupta describes as the universal self playfully “forgetting” itself (like an actor or child fully absorbed in a role).² For Pratyabhijñā philosophers, the self allows itself to get absorbed in its role

² See Utpaladeva’s *Vivṛti*, verse I, 1, 5 (commentary on his auto-commentary to the *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*: the seminal work that deemed this school, *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy), quoted by Abhinavagupta in his commentary, cited from Isabelle Ratié,

as limited and individuated beings. I will argue that even if we are uncomfortable speaking of a universal Self, mereological holism provides tools for making sense of metaphysical pluralism (individuals emerging as aspects, and not properties of the whole) while also acknowledging the real existence of composite, whole entities. The relationship between me and you, self and other, then becomes something like *bhedābheda*, or, “identity-in-distinction.” In other words, I will develop a metaphysics of identity-in-difference that, in tandem with Abhinavagupta’s metaphysics, might provide a fresh view on what it means to share an emotional world and be motivated by the needs and feelings of others.

At first glance, Abhinavagupta’s Advaita-Śaivite metaphysics (monistic metaphysics of the Śiva devotees) seems not only out of place in a discussion of the contemporary moral psychological issue of how to motivate other-regarding actions, but also paradoxical if not outright contradictory. It attempts to acknowledge the real existence of different individuals, while also transcending that individuation toward a single, universal Self. It is surely not a form of solipsism, and yet, it concretely gravitates towards a selfing of the other. If we are uncomfortable with the theological overtones of this view, we can, instead, think of the universe in terms of a real whole, or better, a dynamic system undergoing transition-states.

“Otherness in the Pratyabhijñā Philosophy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2007) 35: 313-370, at 367 fn. 106. Abhinava quotes: “But otherness has as its essence nothing but an incomplete opinion of oneself (*abhimāna*) that is produced by distraction (*moha*) due to the self-concealing power (*māyā*) [of the Universal Self].” All references to Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta will be draw from Ratié’s translation and her source manuscripts.

Individuals articulate “aspects” of the whole rather than distinct properties.³ In the view I’ll develop, the universe is multivalent.⁴ With respect to individual selves, we can claim that as an aspect, individuated psychophysical streams are distinct and singular, but as another aspect, they are never insulated from one another in their “interests” or “emotions,” and each of them remains simply an expression of a composite whole. This means that we can describe individuals in distinct but equally true ways (which is what I mean by “mereological holism”). As one aspect, the person I witness on the news leaving pipe-bombs in New York City is “other,” and the whole does not bear his sins. Under another aspect, the whole *suffers and therefore is* that very predicament of aggression. I believe that something like this can be articulated out of Abhinavagupta’s view. I draw from his metaphysics to show how the metaphysical view contributes to a phenomenology in which an individual identifies with the suffering of others, and experiences the other’s need as overwhelmingly motivational. I believe that the normative view does very little to make sense of this emotively-charged experience. The minimalism of the normative view might justify altruistic considerations, in the sense of abstract principles, but it does not adequately explain *how* we sometimes transcend egoistic considerations, and how we sometimes forfeit our own advantage for the sake of another’s welfare. According to my metaphysically thicker model, the experience of transcending egoistic considerations may reach an exalted crescendo when psychological altruism affords the moral agent a glimpse of the truth that “I can act for the sake of

³ Donald L.M. Baxter, “Altruism, Grief, and Identity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (March 2005), 371-383.

⁴ I borrow this directly from Baxter, *Altruism, Grief, and Identity*.

all because I am all.” This, in turn, speaks to a capacity to experience an extraordinary cognitive and conative richness, something akin to the spirit of the jovial gift-giver, who is unhampered by an underlying sense of scarcity and anxiety. This sort of experience defuses the natural inclination to prioritize self-regarding concerns. Out of the experience of exalted fullness, we can overwrite egocentricity. The outcome amounts to what I call, “exalted altruism.” This refers to a state in which our deliberations can take on an exceedingly other-centric tone, one that may be viewed as supererogatory from the everyday state of transactional reality. In this sense, the exalted altruist experiences “selflessness” of the everyday ego by deeply identifying with something that transcends her own personal needs and her own embodied history.

In making this point, I am also appropriating aspects of Śāntideva's Ownerless view without endorsing the full-fledged No-Self view. At the level of shared feelings, we can sometimes say that the feeling does not belong to a single unit; there is simply grief and suffering that requires attention. On the surface, this may seem to challenge what I've been endorsing throughout the entirety of this essay, namely, the Ownership view. In section 4.3, I will briefly explain how this tension arises, and how I wish to defuse it. In sections 4.4 and 4.5, I will articulate my final argument in broad strokes, and then proceed to defend it in the final segments of the chapter. Finally, in section 4.6, I will introduce the solution that the c. 7th century Buddhist idealist, Dharmakīrti offers with respect to the problem of intersubjectivity, or, other minds. I will do so to further develop my metaphysical view, which I build out of Abhinavagupta's critique of Dharmakīrti and the account

of mereological holism that I provide in 4.7. While the metaphysics are, for me, mostly exploratory, I believe they are attractive from an *ethical standpoint*, insofar as they provide a motivationally compelling account of how we come to grieve and experience joy with others, and, consequently, how we sometimes share each other's feelings, which includes the motivation to act on behalf of something that transcends our individual, narrative identities. My view supports the common sentiment that when someone grieves, suffers, or passes away, we can sometimes feel that a part of us has grieved, suffered, or passed away. I believe this metaphysics provides an attractive way of filling a motivational gap left open by the strictly normative account. In 4.8, I will conclude by connecting mereological holism to Abhinavagupta's solution to the problem of intersubjectivity, and I will argue that this is an ethically attractive account of how we can directly share our world, and thus be motivated by something much larger than egocentrically present concerns.

4.2 The Normative Self

In chapters 1 and 2, I argued that viewing the self as the unifying owner of embodied mental states provides an ethically (and naturalistically) attractive view. The view allows us to speak of "ownership" without positing a metaphysical entity, and without endorsing substance dualism. Ownership can refer to the practical fact that we exercise the capacity to endorse our mental states.⁵ While we can construe this in terms of higher-order deliberation, and avowals or disavowals, over first-order mental states, we can also view endorsement under the concept of *authority*.⁶

⁵ See Ganeri, *The Self*, 323.

⁶ See Ganeri, *The Self*, 324, where Ganeri borrows from Bortolotti and Broome, "A Role for Ownership and Authorship in the Analysis of Thought Insertion," in

We exercise a capacity to accept and/or acknowledge that a mental state is our own, and in cases of thought-insertion, this is made abundantly clear.⁷ When we exercise this capacity, we come to more directly author our own lives.⁸

But this authority is not necessarily the free-wheeling libertarian authority that a Cartesian entity exercises; for one of the first insights new meditators experience is the capacity to witness the compulsive and scattered unfolding of the contents of their mind as an uncontrollable parade of feelings, emotions, plans, and fantasies. Not only do we seem to experience perceptual passivity in simply coming face to face and body to body with objects in the world, but we also experience introspective passivity in bearing thoughts we might quite consciously wish away to no avail. For example, I'm having an important meeting with someone I deeply respect, and I sense faint sexual feelings emerging throughout the conversation. More importantly, though, I sense that they are, in fact, *my* thoughts—I'm not going to childishly shoulder the responsibility on someone else. While I am assailed by such feelings, I also see them as belonging to me. I may paradoxically feel like I am the owner and author, but also the passive victim of such thoughts. But a deeper sense of authority emerges from the fact that, when things are going right, I can ultimately *disavow* such thoughts. This makes sense of me claiming, "Those are not

Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences 8 (2008): 205-224, at 211. Ganeri cites Bortolotti and Broome's concept of ownership in terms of a physical base, spatiality, introspective access, self-ascription, agency, and authority.

⁷ Ibid, 324.

⁸ Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, Massachusetts), 170: "To this extent the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, constitutes himself. The pertinent desire is no longer in any way external to him. It is not a desire that he "has" merely as a subject in whose history it happens to occur, as a person may "have" an involuntary spasm that happens to occur in the history of his body."

the kind of thoughts *befitting* to this situation.”⁹ The important point here is that I can exert authority over, and in this sense, *author* a thought by determining the weight it has in the constellation of my deliberations and actions. For example, in spite of my initial aggravation and desire, I consciously elect not to shout at or threaten the infuriating driver who has blocked me in my parking spot. All of this is obviously cloaked in normative terms. For example, what’s befitting of me is that I sufficiently see my lover as a partner in desire and sexual joy; but what’s befitting in our board-meeting is that I see her as my colleague and superior (say, when she is the director or chair). In this way, we respond to normative constraints in determining which mental states we come to own through our avowals and disavowals, and this capacity is bound up with our prior commitments.

Ownership as endorsement is also bound up with embodiment, because normative demands both emerge from commitments presupposed in speech-acts—declarations, promises, and assertions—and from emotively-charged attitudes that are realized in our bodies.¹⁰ The self, then, becomes a normatively constrained, but dynamic framework of attitudes, emotions, and beliefs. This shapes what it makes rational sense to do with our bodies and our embodied thoughts. The self is also co-realized with other selves in a public space, which is shaped by commitment-laden speech-acts and the normatively rich social roles that we adopt. This is the sense in

⁹ Ganeri, *The Self*, 323, also cf. fn. 6. Through the lens of the Nyāya philosopher Vātsyāyana, Ganeri writes: “We are all too easily persuaded that motivations, desires, and ideas are ours when in reality they have nothing to do with us, a mistake of taking to be myself what is not myself.”

¹⁰ Ganeri, *The Self*, 325-326: Emotionally-charged endorsements and motivationally relevant shifts in attitude imply embodiment, because beliefs and attitudes would not have force without us actually *inhabiting* rather than merely *observing* emotional perturbations.

which a self is immersed in a first-person stance, and “takes a stand” on its identity in the various spheres of its social world. Borrowing from Laura Waddell Ekstrom, Ganeri calls this a “participant self,” who occupies and authors a first-person, embodied stance.¹¹

This concept of selfhood is grounded in a physical, embodied structure, and to this extent, it makes sense to examine the neuronal correlates of consciousness (NCC). But the self also enjoys introspection and a sense of first-person “mineness” within that framework of participation and ownership. The participant self is a dynamic and complex entity that is unified in what it participates in owning of itself. This allows the self considerable flexibility in coming to identify with others through shared commitments in a “co-arising” and dynamic social order.

Now, one might ask, “What gives anyone *ultimate* authority over my natural right to do as I please?” He may further clarify, “By ‘natural,’ I mean my material capacity to reject any external authority (despite the consequences that may follow).” A crude Contractarian, in the classical Hobbesian sense, develops a picture of independent, rational agents coming together out of self-interest in some sort of original and explicit agreement.

¹¹ Ibid, 327: “Ownership...is now understood in terms of participation and endorsement, and so as implying the *occupation* of the a first-person stance and not merely the *witnessing* of a set of attitudes and emotions within oneself; and individuation (the question of ‘base’) is understood in terms of a common ownership relation obtaining between clusters of commitments, resolutions, and intentions, circumscribed by normative emotional response and implying agency and sentience and so embodiment.” This has been adapted from Ekstrom, “Keynote Preferences and Autonomy,” *Philosophical and Phenomenological Review*, 1999, 59: 1057-63. Ekstrom argues that the self is a “collection of preferences and acceptances...along with the capacity or faculty for forming and reforming that [collection].”

However, the participant, or, normative self co-emerges in a social space. Explicit agreements are not deliberated over with respect to background constraints. Instead, we have something like a dance of mostly unconscious and coordinated receptivity and interaction. For example, my capacity to determine the conditions that satisfy the use of a word in a particular context presupposes conventions that arise with and are sustained by other language-users. If I were to work as a projectionist in a retro, art-house movie theater, I could comfortably tell my assistant, "The film is running," without provoking him to go on a wild goose-hunt for a film that he believes "ran off." You, reading this passage right now, also understand that I am not referring to an assistant chasing after a plump, wild goose. This coordinated activity of sharing language and responding to appropriate meanings in given contexts is mostly reached without explicit agreements. Add the premise that my capacity to introspectively and publicly develop a sense of my individual identity is shaped by embodied and linguistically-constituted thoughts. This allows me to derive the conclusion that my sense of self is quite literally dependent upon others. In fact, as I pointed out in Scheffler (chapter 1), large portions of the action-guiding values that constitute our "self-interest" include the well-being and success of others in our life. We're often unable to determine where our own success and another's success part ways. The profit-sharing employee and the CEO can intelligibly claim, "Blue Steel Co. is flourishing," while including their individual and collective success in the equation. We see this on a more intimate level in tight-knit families. The child's success is partly constitutive of the parents' success. And even if a parent does not acknowledge "success by association," the

public might not view things as such. One might say, “Wow, you must be proud of her!” And while the “must” here is basically predictive, it can still retain some of its normative tone: “Whether you think so, you have something to be proud of; so enough with the misplaced humility: *be proud!*” From what I have argued, we can say that the socially immersed, normative self is required to take the needs of others seriously—in some instances, at its own expense—because the context demands it (in the same way that contexts provide implicit imperatives to use particular words with particular shades of meaning). The demand is not something mysterious. The demand may emerge in the very instant that I claim, “I am suffering, and you ought to lend me a hand!” If I consistently apply this imperative across appropriate contexts, then I recognize that it makes sense for you to make the same demand of me.¹² Therefore, I have a reason to help you, even if I do not always desire to do so. This means that I can quite rationally act on that sense of obligation without having to prove that it serves me in some material way. In short, I can rationally be an altruist.

Now, this model is consistent with a Bundle-view of self, *if* that view leaves room for the notion of an embodied agent who has a say in ordering clusters of preferences, etc. that constitute her practical identity. However, the Mādhyamika claim that ownership and individuation are ultimately “empty” (*śūnyatā*) and erroneous concepts sharply distinguishes it from the normative view. From the normative perspective, there is a “resting place” (*āśraya*) for the self (see chapter 2); in other words, there is a real, albeit ontologically minimal, subject. The base of

¹² See John Searle, *Rationality in Action*, (Press, 2005), chapter 5.

individuation for a self emerges from a body capable of emotively-charged attitudes that are attuned to a normative framework. Whether a permanent, metaphysical entity underlies that framework may thus seem immaterial.

As I've pointed out, viewing selfhood in terms of ownership and participation adds another dimension to the stock arguments against ethical egoism. So long as our capacity to enjoy an independent life is premised on our ability and desire to align our intentions and actions with others, which is evident in the intention to communicate through the normative framework of language, we cannot believe that we are *inherently* privileged or subject to standards that transcend a general framework applicable to other selves. More importantly, the general framework we emerge from and implicitly commit to through communication does not always direct us to act in our own best interest. Assuming so betrays a depleted sense of what it means to be an inherently social self.

4.3 Selves as “Ownerless” Owners: Revisiting Sidgwick’s Ethical Dilemma

In the previous chapters, particularly chapter 1, I addressed Sidgwick’s now classic thesis that egoistic and altruistic considerations represent fundamentally independent domains of concerns. In ethics, particularly applied ethics, we might struggle to justify which domain of concern has authority. For example, is it reasonable for me to sacrifice a percentage of my income, which could be spent supporting, say, my research and those things that bring joy and meaning to my life and my family, to support school-lunch vouchers for poor children in my state? Should I sacrifice my valuable office hours doing fulfilling and lucrative work to assist a student who has poor study habits and thus “needs my help” (after all, I’m

not in the business of teaching my adult college students how to organize their time and discipline their urges to procrastinate)? Of course, compassion, good-will, and various normative constraints (say, as a professor who must shoulder certain expected social responsibilities) provide me with reasons to contribute in a way that does not always directly benefit me in my personal life. And compassionately helping a student uncover his own incompetency and develop his talent is certainly one aspect of being an exemplary teacher (and not just a researcher). But the question is whether these reasons have some sort of authority over reasons of prudence and desire. For Sidgwick, the problem remained intractable, because ultimately our numerical distinction from one another gives us reasons that are sometimes mutually inconsistent, but enjoy equal authority. From the perspective of the individual, I am prudent, and concerned with long-term pleasure and fulfillment. From the perspective of the whole, I am concerned with the flourishing of the whole to which I contribute. But when I am numerically distinct from you, I retain the individual perspective. It seems utterly reasonable to promote what would serve me best. For example, it's not so cruel to spend my Sunday watching football rather than answering my phone and consoling my chronically depressed friend, who always tends to reach out to me on my cherished day of relaxation. On the other hand, I am connected to a larger society and social network, and that requires that I promote the overall good. How do we judge which reasons hold greater authority?

A radical move is to deny what fuels this interminable stand-off; we might elect to deny the ultimate existence of numerical distinction. The Buddhists, particularly Śāntideva, present arguments that defuse the relevance of such a

distinction. For Śāntideva, the Ownerlessness thesis—understood in terms of the Mādhyamika No-Self view—seems to entail that altruistic reasons have greater authority. I explained in chapters 2 and 3 why I think his argument ultimately fails. I can sum this up by saying that the No-Self view goes too far, because it destabilizes the authority of *any* reasons whatsoever. However, I believe that Śāntideva was on the right track in trying to disarm egoism at its core, namely, at the belief in ultimately individuated and owned constellations of psychophysical events that pit “my fair share” of goods against “your fair share.” This may seem contradictory to everything that I’ve tried to establish so far in this essay, because I have argued that we need some sense of ownership to make sense of our conventional and ethically salient reality. I’ve also claimed that the ultimate normativity of collective living (and language-use) provides us with a background of obligations and concerns that circumvent the problem of totally disparate domains of considerations remaining interminably at odds.

But in this final chapter, I want to further clarify and nuance what the Ownership view can mean. Conventionally, we need this view to make sense of our transactional reality—this much, any Buddhist would grant. However, the Buddhist might be right that achieving a sense of ownerlessness can motivate a transformative ethics. But I think construing this in terms of either “no self” or “without self” is not so conceptually fruitful. “The self” can also be viewed more substantially as an underlying synthesizer of otherwise disparate experiences. The self, as I’ve argued, allows us to make sense of communication, language comprehension, and arguably, *memory* in a way that epicycles of No-Self (or even

Without-Self) views do not. More importantly, it allows us to more easily make sense of our ethical transactions reaching their intended targets, and it supports our sense that compassionate concern for another is not defused over a possibly unbounded flow of ephemeral and radically individual person-events. From one level of description—say, a very narrow reading of Leibniz’s Identity of Indiscernables—when John is concerned for Sarah at 20 and Sarah at 35, he’s concerned with different people (given the distinctness of properties between *A* and *B*). But the depth of concern he may have for Sarah at 35 may incorporate her real past. Sarah contracts lymphoma at 35, and John views this as an even starker turn of events given that she recovered from a nearly fatal aneurism at 20, which led to a bicycle accident that crippled her for several years. If the Lockean determines Sarah’s personal identity by memory alone, then John’s sadness in the face of Sarah’s long-endured pain would be misplaced if Sarah radically dissociates from or completely forgets her past. But John experiences sympathy for *Sarah*, and the meaning and quality of that sympathy encompasses the stretch of Sarah’s life. He may be glad that she does not remember some of these tragedies, but his sympathy is for the whole person, and not just for her memories, or for distinct and ephemeral individuals over which he has imputed an illusive unity. Sarah is the self-same individual who, in Hegelian terms, is whole over a dynamic mediation of becoming: she is not any particular piece of changing content, and yet she is “substance” in the sense of maintaining her unity (self-sameness) amidst determinate difference.

Now, one may argue that Sarah’s life has integrity as a narrative, so the current state of “Sarah-ness” is pregnant with the outcomes and memories of past

events (related in the right way). One may further argue that “no self” doesn’t necessarily mean that she lacks unity and wholeness in her life. There may be a *sense* of synchronic unity that integrates the moments of her life (even when diachronic unity has been eroded), but it is not metaphysically deep. She has a sense of wholeness, but it is nevertheless “without self,” which means that there is no further underlying fact about what integrates her into a whole and rounded individual. In response, I believe there is an advantage to viewing the self as that very wholeness, that is, in viewing Sarah as a real continuant. The general advantage is that “wholeness” is a unifying term (in a way that I believe “without self” is not), and it can accommodate diversity and relational dynamics, both in terms of individual lives, and in terms of group dynamics, without abandoning either the thread that connects an individual to the moments of her life, or connects an individual to the social spectrum of differences that conditions her individual contribution to that whole. While we may want to eschew the view that individuals are radically autonomous and static rational agents, and in this sense, claim that we are “without self,” the notion of wholeness allows us to imagine a synthesis of differences that begets shared values (when thinking in terms of diverse groups), and it allows us to view the individual as a dynamic but integrated being capable of real *change* as opposed to being only a conceptually constructed vehicle that organizes for us what is really just a replacement of experiences and property-tropes across independent events. Moreover, an advantage lies in being able to accommodate radical asymmetry between Sarah’s “internal” narrative and our “external” narrative of her life; there is a real set of facts about what happened to

Sarah despite differences of opinion and memory. On a practical level, this will impact how we treat Sarah, and it will help us better determine the sorts of remunerations we believe she may deserve. In the case of radical dissociation (or a breakdown in diachronic unity), this may even justify paternalistic measures to treat Sarah, and help her recover what she has lost.

Now, with respect to the nature of personal identity, we may reach a conceptual impasse, and perhaps our only recourse lies in more or less grounded decisions (rather than arguments). Either we help her “recover” her past by collectively imputing a metaphysically empty narrative that we can train her to accept, or she can recover memories and associations with different events that have occurred over the historical unfolding of her real life. I believe the latter has the distinct advantage of requiring less counter-intuitive conceptual labor than what would be required to live as though diachronic unity were a conceptual fabrication. In other words, diachronic identity is the default for complex creatures like us. I also believe that we do not have a clear enough sense of what is involved in “conceptual imputation” to assume that our helping Sarah recover her past is some sort of collective work of the imagination (where “imagination” is understood in terms of *falsification*). Finally, I believe that when Sarah dissociates from the tragic events of her life, and John is nevertheless deeply impacted by those events, he is not mourning a different Sarah than the Sarah who is blissfully unaware of her tragic past. Despite their different narratives, there is simply the tragedy of Sarah’s life that one might uncover upon a larger view of the facts, which means that Sarah can get it wrong about herself.

Now, if we accept, as I do, that it makes more conceptual sense to think in terms of real individuals and real continuant selves, an epistemic problem looms. We have immediate awareness of our own conscious states, but only indirect awareness of other conscious states. I find you grieving, and I am compassionately compelled to reach out and help you. Say that I do so at the expense of my own well-being. There is a general conceptual presupposition underlying this common transaction. I am referring to the fact that I am attuned to *your* grief, and I am motivated by something that transcends my private experience of grief. One may agree that my concerns can be directed at you and your well-being. But, one may further argue, I am ultimately just chasing the tail of my personal constellation of private feelings and desires. There is an epistemic question of how I come to *know* and incorporate your motivating feelings into my decisions. Even when I sense that I am motivated by your grief, I had better have access of some form or another to your feelings. Put another way, we had better be able to *share* our emotional worlds. If I endorse strict, naïve realism about ownership, then we are numerically distinct entities that own our individual psychophysical states. I've already explained why this is relevant to ethical actions, but I have not assessed the epistemology of knowing which sorts of motivating reasons drive us. I want to believe that *you* and *your* needs directly motivate my helping you (in the sense that we can intersubjectively share emotional worlds). If this were not the case, then altruism would be impossible, because I would always be one-step removed from the person whose needs I aim to serve. That does not mean that my actions cannot be *described* as altruistic. The problem is that the other I wish to serve only exists *as if* she has

feelings and needs that ought to be met. The source of my motivation to help is ultimately me, who has taken this indirectly experienced other as a perceptual object worthy of *my* consideration—any “source of normativity” that favors helping is grounded in the only values that I directly experience, *my own*. Thus, a kind of attenuated altruism is possible, but the ground of its value and motivation is fundamentally egocentric. So if a non-egocentric, motivating reason exists, I need to explain how I can know that what motivates me is not something entirely personal, private, and therefore, purely egocentrically present.

This is an iteration of the problem—at the level of motivation and reasons for action—of determining how we intersubjectively share a world of common perceptual objects, like tables, lamps, and meadows, for example. If it is only my grief that is directly present to me, then in the final analysis, I am acting on an egocentric consideration, because the good that guides my action is reflexive and ultimately self-regarding, and only indirectly other-centric. If it is your grief I aim to ameliorate, and I regard your need as intrinsically valid, then it remains to be explained how it might directly compel me in an agentive way. My point is not that we are always psychological egoists. I am making the epistemological point that to conceptually (not just empirically) rule this out, I must know that your grief has real purchase in motivating my action; I must be able to share it with you. And, in terms of value, I must recognize that the source of your value does not rest entirely in me. When it comes to non-egocentric altruistic action, the person that motivates my action needs to be the real and intrinsically valuable other. This is especially true when we admit that the hero may not want to sacrifice herself for a stranger by

stepping in front of a bullet, but she can somehow feel compelled (and even obligated) to do so. After all, the claim, “I didn’t want to be a hero, but it felt like the right thing to do...so I did it” is neither empirically unfounded nor logically contradictory. So how do we explain this?

A simple solution is that we do not have any sort of direct access to each other’s feelings and motivations, but we can infer them. Inferring the existence of other subjectivities does not provide us with direct access to each other’s feelings. We might explain emotional connectedness through physical mechanisms that in some billiard-ball causal fashion transmit information. From some such model we make progress in the area of, say, mirror-neurons, and these may explain the underlying physical mechanisms that support our capacity to empathize with each other, and in some analogical sense, experience each other’s grief. But in a way, we’re left with only a black box. How can these neurons experience, or partly constitute, grief that is both their own and not their own? An account that provides us with some sort of direct connection to each other can both satisfy our ethical need to explain altruistic action—and purge, once and for all, any traces of psychological egoism—while at the same time providing us with an epistemically satisfying account of how we come to know other minds (and thus other states of grief, pain, and sorrow that might motivate us to sacrifice our own well-being for another’s advantage). It’s just such an account that I wish to develop here, and in order to do so, I’m going to develop my account of selfhood in a way that I hope avoids the usual impasse between Bundle-theories and realism about the self. On the one hand, I wish to preserve the integrity of individual continuant selves, which

means that I will not offer a nuanced version of a Bundle-theory that views selves as property tropes related in the right ways. On the other hand, I will also relinquish the belief that our psychophysical states are, strictly speaking, always *individually* owned under all accurate descriptions of reality.

Let me initially motivate this through an analogy with theoretical physics. Think in terms of the distinct principles that distinguish systems and quantum field theory from linear, mechanistic models. For example, two protons accelerated in a particle accelerator each have measurable motions, and measurable velocities and energy states. They collide and then part ways. Observationally, we find that they still exist, but in their collision, new particles have appeared with measurable masses and electrical charges. Describing this with Newtonian mechanics and within the purview of Einstein's " $E = mc^2$ " requires something like the claim that the incident particle motion of the two protons creates new objects. This means that some of the properties of the two colliding protons change into objects. Object/property ontology distinguishes the world of objects from properties, and no element of either transforms into the other. This would be like claiming that the height of the Eiffel tower can somehow transform into another Eiffel tower, or claiming that colliding planets can emerge from their collisions and beget a host of newly created planets (rather than merely broken off fragments of the former planets).¹³ Quantum field theory makes sense of this by radically departing from the mechanistic interpretation, while more deeply problematizing the notion of

¹³ I borrow this example, and general description of the physics involved here from Bernard d'Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15.

“creation.” Observationally speaking, we simply do not have a clear formula that quantifies the concept of creation. So, we can instead speak in terms of transition-states of a dynamic system.¹⁴ Thus, instead of thinking in terms of metaphysically distinct absolutes (basically, atomistic and mechanistic thinking), we might think in terms of the transition-states of a single system, whereby the creation of a new particle (or individual) is just the transition of one state of a certain “something” into another state. Similarly, I’m recommending that we revise our view of distinct individuals with their private experiences, and examine something like transition-states of a non-linear single system, from which emerge shareable and interconnected emotional phenomena. The caveat is that we can describe this in terms of individuals that nevertheless bear the marks of quantum “non-locality” (that is, they are inherently connected, and in this way “share” information without appeal to mechanistic packets of information being traded at speeds that would have to move faster than the speed of light). This is the substantive difference between speaking in terms of “wholes” and speaking in terms of “emptiness” or “no-self.”

When we’re viewed as numerically and metaphysically distinct entities, the gap between self and other is always looming. In one description of things, each of

¹⁴ Ibid., 16: “...let us begin by observing that the notion of creation is not a scientific one: We do not know how to capture it, and even less quantify it. It is therefore appropriate to try and reduce it to something we can master. Now we do master the notions of a system state and changes thereof. We know how to calculate transition rates from one state to another. And the brilliant idea...just came from this. It consisted in considering that the existence of a particle is a state of a certain “Something,” that the existence of two particles is another state of this same “Something,” and so on. Then, the creation of a particle is nothing else than a transition from one state of this “Something” to another, and therefore we may hope to be able to treat it quantitatively.”

us directly experiences our own private mental occurrences; we only indirectly share a world of common perceptual objects. This leaves us in a certain ethical conundrum with respect to determining the authority of egoistic and altruistic reasons. It also generates an epistemological-metaphysical conundrum with respect to our capacity to understand and identify with each other's grief while simultaneously recognizing the distinction between self and other.

The normative account might provide me with reasons to take your needs seriously by allowing me to see my needs as importantly bound up with your needs. Still, when it comes to reasons for altruistic actions, and compelling, emotively-charged motivations that support such behavior, an issue of identification and knowledge is left to be resolved. Mechanistically speaking, we might resolve this by analogy or inference. But if this proves tenuous, we can explore a metaphysics that is robust enough to provide a real identity between self and other, while preserving the commonsense distinction between individuals. The benefit here is that I can both respect your individuality, and yet truly share states of joy, grief, and pain with you. When I identify with you—or, more accurately, with your motivating suffering—any authority your needs might have in motivating me to act would be as reasonable as tending to my own suffering. But the trick here is not that my self-regarding considerations are really just other-regarding considerations (I explored this option in chapter 3). Rather, under one aspect, I'm able to identify with the whole, and thus be motivated to promote the well-being of the whole, and yet under another aspect, I can see myself as a historical and embodied individual who is distinct from that whole. I can see that at the individual level I might be at a

disadvantage in promoting your well-being, but at the same time, I can recognize your well-being as part of my well-being, and vice versa. I do not just reduce the whole of suffering to my own embodied, historical and egocentric existence. I'm able to see a genuine other whom I feel obligated to care for, while at the same time recognizing that the reasons and motivations I have to care for myself (at the individual, egoistic level of embodied existence) may operate at the larger level of the whole: it is not "my" self I am attending to at this larger level, but *the shared experience of selfhood*. In this sense, my empathy and compassionate motivations—and your grief and suffering—can both be "ownerless" with respect to our historical and embodied existence, but also owned within the worldview of an underlying whole, or, dynamic system whereby various transition-states manifest as both particular and non-local.

The key point I'm making here is that *the normative account leaves open a gap in explaining motivation, and in explaining how we can share conative, motivational states*. I may be able to provide authoritative reasons for altruism through the normative account, but this relies on a very suspicious claim. For example, John Searle provides a compelling account of why we may have desire-independent reasons to promote another's well-being.¹⁵ The outcome boils down to this. I believe that you have a reason to help me (if you can do so). My child is drowning, my arms are broken and in casts from a bicycle accident I sustained, and I solicit your help to brave the crashing waves and save him. Given the commitments that come with speech-acts, I can only sensibly call this a "reason to help me" if it

¹⁵ Searle, *Rationality in Action*, chapter 5.

applies with universal scope (given various contextual constraints). But, as Searle points out,¹⁶ our capacity to be reasonable only makes sense if we are free to be irrational. So, we still need to make sense of an emotive force that compels you to risk your neck for my son. If you choose to ignore my need, then calling your selfishness irrational would not score me many points. You might reply: “Hey, what you call a ‘general reason’ is yet to be proven—isn’t that what’s precisely at stake—I have an authoritative reason to avoid the risk of drowning; you have a subjective reason to want me to help you; looks like we’re facing a tragedy here, and for that, I’m deeply sorry, but no dice! There’s nothing to adjudicate these competing reasons.” The problem is that you still see things as “me” and “my neck” versus the world. I’m not saying you’re wrong in doing so, but I’m asking how it is that you can transcend that basic concern, and share my dismay to such a degree that you go after my son. I’m of the mind that it’s not just *duty* that drives you, or some packet of information from my experience that mechanistically triggers something totally private in you. I want to employ a more metaphysically robust account of how an emotively-charged recognition might motivate you to risk your life for me.

Now, before directly proceeding with my argument, I need to address the central claims I wish to defend. Admittedly, my strategy is precarious because I toggle between an ontologically minimal account of selfhood and an ontologically robust view. But I will do just that.

¹⁶ Ibid., chapter 5.

4.4 Two Chief Claims to Defend

First Claim

There are two larger claims I wish to defend here. First, *altruism enacts a type of freedom*. This freedom is of a special sort: altruism shows us that the self is porous, and co-defined in relation to others. In this sense, its content is interdependent and not categorically individuated. And yet, the self is free to individuate itself—that is, autonomous—through the commission of both mundane and extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice. The self is capable of “gifting” itself to take up the cause of another as its own. This is akin to what the literature has called, “The Paradox of Altruism,”¹⁷ where the fierce independence and individuality that informs the psychology and praxis of a strongly altruistic person exists in tension with a deep sense of interdependence and emotional identification. Compassion, which I view, in distinction from sympathy, as inherently motivational, allows us to co-participate in an emotive state, and this can transcend the partition between self and other. This transcendence articulates a freedom otherwise unavailable to the empirically limited ego-self. On the other hand, transcendence also articulates a capacity that seems unavailable to certain versions of the No-Self view. The No-Selfer who endorses the view that the first-person stance resists a purely physicalist description has trouble explaining how a bundle or cluster of psychophysical events can account for anything outside that cluster, including, other psychophysical clusters. To genuinely experience the other as someone real and worthy of concern,

¹⁷ Robert Paul Churchill and Erin Street, “Is There a Paradox of Altruism?” in *The Ethics of Altruism*, editor Jonathan Seglow (Southgate, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), 89-106.

as someone whose cause one can feel obligated to take up at one's own expense, is to be free from the limitations that come with viewing the self solely in terms of first-person immersion and "mineness." This is one sense in which genuine altruism articulates the porousness and relationality of the self.

The idea of the "relational self" is supported by experiments in developmental psychology that seem to show that a sense of selfhood beyond that of a mere body reacting to stimuli emerges simultaneously with awareness of other selves, and this is evidenced by the infant's capacity for achieving shared attention and coordination of action and intention with her caretaker even before developing a robust command of language.¹⁸ Research has shown that most infants get busy, early-on, coordinating their attention and intentions with their caretakers, whose mental states they in some sense perceive. When we mature and develop an enriched sense of selfhood—with all its intimations of first-person privacy, introspection, and subjectivity—we might more easily believe that we are *essentially* independent individuals (or uniquely singular and individuated subjectivities), and thus be naturally inclined to believe that our own welfare and sense of the good is somehow privileged (at least with respect to what it makes practical sense to care most about from our own, individual perspectives). But given that the self is only developed in tandem with a sense of other-*personness* (and not just bare otherness), losing sight of the robust reality of other selves, or, as in the case of severe autism, not robustly sharing attention with or fully recognizing the reality of other subjectivities, means that we have a weaker or more depleted sense of self. Couple

¹⁸ See Sorabji, *The Self*, 24-30.

this with the idea that the sacrifices we endure in the altruistic act (however unheroic or mundane that act may be) require a fairly developed will, one that exercises higher-order volitions in avowing or disavowing various impulses, beliefs, and desires. These higher-order volitions, and the commitments they both presuppose and enact, allow one to justify overwriting the instinct to prioritize one's own welfare at the expense of others. When we remain egoists, entrenched in the belief that the world begins and ends with the individual, then we have not adequately exercised our deeper capacity for identification with others through motivating compassion; we inhibit the flourishing of our autonomy by not robustly enough identifying with a larger whole. Consequently, in this trenchantly egoistic state we are not robust selves, but only "self-ish."

So the self is porous in both its capacity to identify with others through compassion, and in its capacity to imagine what it's like to be in another's shoes through empathic connection. And yet, the self paradoxically individuates itself by exercising its autonomy through self-sacrifice and identification with a larger whole. The self identifies with and is dependent upon the other person, and yet it achieves autonomy and distinction in the face of transcending its own egoistic inclinations. This is a somewhat conceptually unhappy statement, but I am emphasizing that there is a productive tension between identity and difference that arises as the self and other co-emerge. The egoist has the individuation game down, but misses out on the ethically extraordinary (but perhaps developmentally ordinary) capacity to identify with another by exercising the freedom to transcend the naturally egoistic compulsion.

Why do I call this “freedom”? I do so because both the embodied state of being a self, which individuates us into personal beings with very personal histories, and the immersive sense of occupying a first-person stance naturally direct our attention to what is in the closest psychological and physical proximity: *our own ego-selves, with their occurrent needs and desires*. However, there is a tyranny at work in this proximity, because when the inward gaze falls too far into the rabbit hole of private, first-person experiences, it is both metaphysically and epistemically limited. What it can know, and consequently what it can *do* is limited; it shuts itself off from a whole range of experiences that are generated by compassionately communing with another. Over-emphasizing individuation threatens to perniciously limit the greater range of possibilities that are inherently open to one who identifies with a larger whole. So I am not using “freedom” in a completely libertarian Kantian sense. I’m also including creative and imaginative freedom in my account of what it means to identify with something larger than the private ego-self. This is the first big claim I wish to defend.

Second Claim

Second, while I applaud the general Buddhist view that the self is not a single *thing*, whose essence is thinking (*a la* Cartesianism) or any other such singularly defining property, I believe that certain Mahāyāna Buddhist accounts of selfhood do not sufficiently support their chief practical aim, namely, altruistic compassion. This is due, in large part, to certain weaknesses in their understanding of selfhood. While I believe that some of these same weaknesses exist in contemporary reductionistic theories of selfhood, and some contemporary minimalist views of selfhood,

critiquing the weaknesses in the Buddhist views will be instructive, since their points of emphasis do not necessarily overlap with contemporary debates. The various Buddhist views I've developed here have not adequately accounted for what we mean by "selves." I contend that the requirements of "having a self" (or better, *being* a self) are, from an ontologically minimalist perspective, bound up with normativity and participation. And, as we cannot have normativity without others, that is, without a public space, we can in some sense say that the self is constructed out of its normative and participant relationships. Normativity is essentially bound up with sharing a public space; thus, an adequate notion of self must include the individual in the context of its meaningful relationships to others, which in turn requires thinking of the self as *self-other*. However, rather than appealing to the relational view to derive the conclusion that the self is "empty" or "without self" (in the sense developed in the minimalist reading of Madhyamaka), we might instead view the self as something real, but also something far more extensive than the personal histories of individual egos. The self plays the role of *unifier*.

Be that as it may, selfishness is only possible against a background of shared space that is inherently imbued with normative requirements. These emergent requirements reveal the self as porous and always-already co-emergent with others. Getting a better handle on what constitutes selfhood means getting clearer about the inherent normativity and other-centric requirements involved in being a self. These "rules of engagement" are not directly desire-dependent or egocentric in nature. That is, I can only have self-regarding considerations against a background of other-regarding considerations, and these latter considerations are not ultimately

derivative of (in the sense of being less fundamental than) egocentric considerations; they co-arise with other-regarding considerations that are experienced and logically situated as being “externally” binding. This is another sense in which I claim that the self is “porous” and thus “open” to others by its very nature. So my case does not rest on moral psychology, alone, but also accommodates normativity, which is the condition for the possibility of communicating and coordinating action through language. The space created between self and other presupposes a background of mutuality and co-creation. Borrowing from my discussion of Levinasian-inspired “otherness” in chapter 3, I should add that this mutuality is inherently imbued with a sense of ethical command. That is, I am not only *with* others, but also in some sense *obligated* to respond to others as a basic feature of my encountering someone who cannot be fully reduced to a quantity or a mere object.

On the other hand, I will develop an account here that goes beyond the normative self, and I do this to make better sense of the phenomenology of mutuality and identification with the other. So in what follows, I will support the view that altruism is reasonable based on an analysis of the normative self, and I will also show how a felt (and thus motivating) altruistic obligation may be the upshot of a specific metaphysics. The heart of this dissertation lies in these two big claims.

In the next section, I will briefly take stock of the specific uses of the No-Self thesis I’ve covered throughout this dissertation. I’ll do so by more specifically addressing two Buddhist schools of philosophy that have been central to the

intellectual-dialogical history of Indian philosophy and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Vasubandhu's (c. 4th century CE) Abhidharma-Sautrāntika metaphysics, and Nāgārjuna's (c. 2nd century CE) and Śāntideva's (c. 8th century CE) Madhyamaka minimalism and deconstruction. This dissertation has not pretended to provide in-depth hermeneutics for these complex schools of Buddhist thought. I have rationally reconstructed much of what I've developed here as a preparatory work supporting further research in the ethical ramifications of contemporary theories of selfhood. Altruism and compassion are central practical concepts in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, because Mahāyāna Buddhism (at least in the texts I've covered here, particularly in Śāntideva) believes that altruistic motivations are in some sense a natural (if not logical) outcome of experientially recognizing the unreality of the self. Thus, deriving an agent-neutral and altruistic ethics from a revisionary metaphysics of selfhood is arguably a major philosophical program in Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna, and to some extent, Theravāda texts. So there is much to be gained by bringing this program into conversation with the contemporary scene by extracting its more general and controversial philosophical commitments. While one cannot entirely ignore responsible philology, I have examined these texts as a philosopher and not an expert Sanskritist, philologist, or student of religious studies.

With that in mind, I will also assess another set of controversial philosophical contentions endorsed by the Buddhist scholastic, Dharmakīrti (c. 7th century CE). Dharmakīrti endorsed a brand of idealism, or, what's been called in the classical Indian tradition, "mind only" (*citamātra*) metaphysics. While for Dharmakīrti the self is not real, he developed a philosophy of mind whereby mental occurrences are

self-reflexive and momentary, and he argued that the concept of selfhood emerges out of the self-reflexive nature of these momentary mental occurrences. For Dharmakīrti, mental occurrences are self-illuminating, that is, mental occurrences are inherently aware of their own awareness. Perceptual objects like tables, chairs, and lamps are a function of these self-reflexive and self-illuminating mental episodes externalizing themselves as “other.” Thus, Dharmakīrti collapses the ultimate distinction between subject and object. While Dharmakīrti must make sense of how these insulated and momentary occurrences relate and individuate themselves as the continuous stream of an individual self experiencing a world of external objects, he must also make sense of how an individuated stream of consciousness can come to experience other selves outside that stream. Thus, Dharmakīrti faces the task of explaining the experience of otherness in general, and the experience of other selves, in particular. The 10th century Kashmiri Śaivite, Abhinavagupta, leveled some damning critiques against Dharmakīrti’s metaphysics. I believe that the upshot of those critiques provides a fresh solution for making sense of other-centricity and altruism. I have argued that the link between Bundle and No-Self theories on the one hand, and agent-neutrality and altruism on the other, are not so logically compelling. So I’ll begin by defending the second big claim I made, my claim that the Buddhist No-Self view (*anātman*) does not have the resounding ethical implications many Buddhist thinkers believe it does. I will then go on to develop an account of otherness by using Dharmakīrti as a foil. I contend that my account provides a unique view of how we can come to know each other and come to share motivating feelings. These shared feelings can motivate altruistic

action, because they transcend ownership, and are therefore not derivative of (in the sense of being less fundamental than) the egocentric concerns of the agent who is motivated by them. Moreover, in so far as these shared feelings disclose an original, albeit not always consciously recognized unity, egocentric concerns are in this sense less fundamental because they presuppose background unity. I will elaborate on this in the final sections of this essay. For now, I will turn again to various general forms of the Buddhist No-Self view.

4.5.1 The Practical Inadequacies of the Anātman Thesis: Critique of Chapter 3

What can a Buddhist mean by claiming that there is no self? I utilized Ganeri's taxonomy in chapter 2 to sort out some of the ways in which the No-Self claim has logically functioned in the corpus of Buddhist texts. Let me now move from some general forms of this claim to more specific developments of the claim in the tradition of Buddhist philosophy.

While we may be tempted to believe that the No-Self view more generally refers to the absence of a Cartesian soul-self, and that No-Selfism is an attack against substance dualism, the view in the Buddhist context is more pointed and controversial. For example, one reading of the early Buddhist metaphysician, Vasubandhu, would have him argue that the term, "I" is not ultimately meaningful, even if it does provide some pragmatic use. For Vasubandhu and the early Ābhidharmikas (Buddhist metaphysicians), what we've erroneously taken to be a self is a complex and dynamic relationship among physical structures (*rūpa*) and a host of intentionalistic, mental phenomena. Buddhists claim that five *skandhas*, or, "heaps" of psychophysical phenomena produce the erroneous belief in a self. These

heaps consist of the following: physical matter and forms of experience (*rūpa*), affectively-charged perception (*vedanā*), normatively-relevant patterns of conceptual imputation (*samjñā*), normatively-relevant patterns of behavior underlying a sense of agency (*samskāra*), and the capacity to synthesize over diverse modalities of sensory input (*vijñāna*). This makes up a psychophysical “stream” (*saṅtāna*) of consciousness. The stream is the base/locus (*āśraya*), or, metaphysical base of individuation, while the “place” of this occurrence (*ādhāra*)—that which characterizes *ownership* of this dynamic complex—is metaphysically unreal. This is what Ganeri referred to as “No-Self View 2” (see chapter 2). So according to this view, ownership is unreal when assessing things from the ultimate, metaphysical perspective. However, “the mind” is not reducible to ultimately atomic physical structures. Mental phenomena are metaphysically distinct from physical phenomena. So this form of the No-Self view is anything but monistic and physicalist in nature. The chief point Vasubandhu raises with respect to the self is that it is an ethically pernicious error imputed over a dynamic relationship between mental and physical occurrences. Uncovering this error is both morally instructive and essential to Buddhist soteriology. Thus, while there may be many contemporary agnostics and atheists who believe in the meaningfulness of the term, “self,” without believing in the existence of a soul, Vasubandhu would argue that emphasizing the importance of the concept of self is ethically insidious, because it contributes to egocentric and selfish behavior, and it is anathema to Buddhist soteriology.

Now, I gave some strong reasons in chapter 1 why I believe ownership is essential for making sense of the human experience, both metaphysically and socio-

linguistically. But we can still ask how Vasubandhu and other No-Selfers of his ilk consider this revisionary metaphysical view to be ethically illuminating and ethically liberating. In chapter 2, I covered some ways in which a Parfitian spin on this view might provide important ethical upshots concerning the nature of responsibility and punishment. But what *normative value* can the Buddhist view provide? What sort of ethical traction can a revision of essentialism about the self provide? In terms of the question of altruism and its practical and ethical role, it becomes two questions: How does this make sense of the felt, obligatory nature of altruism? How does this justify altruism? While there may be some creative ways to account for altruism in the stream view of Buddhist No-Selfism, there has been an ongoing debate as to its normative applicability (as I illustrated in chapter 2). The ethical traction of normative-ethical requirements, especially as they pertain to any sort of altruistic mandate (if one exists), does not straightforwardly follow from the view that the experience of being a real continuant self is a conceptual fabrication. However, I'll try to motivate yet another way in which one might think that experiencing the unreality of the self leads to a normative conclusion. I will ultimately reject this strategy, but I do believe that, at least on the surface, it has some viability. I will develop this strategy by more precisely addressing the foil to this argument in the next section, namely, ethical egoism. I will examine whether ethical egoism is a moral theory (or simply a theory that undermines ethics altogether), and I will also argue that the theory is not a straw man; ethical egoism, at least on the surface, is a real contender, albeit a terribly flawed contender.

4.5.2 Numerical Distinction and the Egoist's Strategy

Egocentric considerations arguably only make sense against the background belief that the ego perdures in some form or another. This is the “extreme claim” I discussed in chapter 3, and as I said there, it is usually wedded to the “me-consideration.” For example, when I consider the interests (understood more narrowly as *needs* rather than mere urges or inclinations) of a stranger, I am obviously forward-looking in my concerns. I care about what *will* happen to that person if deprived of her basic needs. Similarly, part of the reason I care about my future suffering is that it will be me who suffers in the future. While the logical importance of continuance (also called in the metaphysical literature, “persistence”) is the common factor in both cases, there is a disanalogy between self and other here. I can be temporally-neutral with respect to my own needs, that is, I can believe that I have good reasons now to delay opportunities and gratifications to promote the needs of my future self, because I am (or will be) that future-self. While my current socialist-leaning inclinations might view the needs of a future bourgeois-me as less than motivating, recognizing that it will be me makes some practical difference in my life now. I might still delay certain gratifications to ensure that some important needs are met for my future-self (especially when it comes to the fitness and health of my body and brain-functions). When it comes to the stranger whose needs I consider, I cannot say the same thing. The person I care about now may transform so radically that I have little reason to care about or work to promote her future. In the first case, there is a metaphysical relationship between me-now and the needs of my future-self that makes a practical difference about what I

should care about, but in the second case, that continuity does not exist. Thus, I cannot in any straightforward sense claim that the egoist is inconsistent in being temporally neutral with respect to prudential reasons, but agent-relative with respect to reasons for action overall (as Derek Parfit argues in Part I of *Reasons and Persons*). Caring about an overall state of affairs, as is the case in agent-neutral ethical systems, is substantively distinct from caring about the overall state of my temporally stretched life.

One might counter that this asymmetry is not ethically relevant. Just because I will not be Sally, but (trivially speaking) I will be myself, does not warrant ethically privileging my needs over Sally's. A description of the logic and metaphysics of forward-looking agency does not necessarily entail a normative claim about who or what one ought to privilege. However, I can counter by pointing out that the strongest and most immediate reason to promote the needs of my future-self is that my life is intrinsically worthwhile, and the future will be another stage of that intrinsically worthwhile whole. If my life is intrinsically worthwhile to me now, then I simply care about my well-being as whole. When considering this in terms of time, there is no reason to favor one stage of that whole over another (I am, of course, bracketing discussions about how quality of life determines its worthiness; I am addressing the fact that we *care* that our lives have quality, and that normally our lives are simply valuable to us, which is why suicide is rarely a flippant act, but usually includes considerable conflict). But I do not have the same neutrality when it comes to others, because, to some extent, their worth and well-being is conditional in a way that my own is not. I can certainly feel shame when comparing my lifestyle

and choices now with the values and choices of my former self. Self-loathing may reach such a pathological point that I consider or attempt suicide. But this is a much more difficult prospect than damning a formerly respected friend who has become a brutal and morally depraved leader (we can imagine what the Jewish art dealer, Max Rothman must have felt when the eccentric Austrian artist he took under his wing became the monstrous Fuhrer of Germany). I can more easily disregard the well-being of a former friend who has now become a moral monster than I can disregard my own well-being (moral monster or not). In other words, I require a reason of a different order that justifies my caring about another's well-being. However in my own case, whatever adds to the case that I should care about my future, an essential presupposition is fulfilled in advance, namely, that it will be my intrinsically worthwhile future to care about. While this might not directly support the conclusion that ethical egoism is a superior normative theory, it certainly provides some support for the view that any other-regarding considerations I take seriously are less authoritative than self-regarding and prudential reasons. Thus, any action that promotes the needs of others at considerable expense to my own needs ought to raise a serious red flag. When I understand myself in terms of being a continuant self that is numerically distinct from all other selves, the worth of my own life shows up to me in a way that it does not with respect to others, and this makes a practical difference in considering who or what I ought to care about.

There are some objections to the picture I've developed here that I need to consider, and in doing so I will make the controversial claim that ethical egoism is not just a theory about ethics that denies the need for ethics; ethical egoism can be

construed as a contending ethical theory. The first objection is that one does not have an *ethical* reason to care about one's future, only a *prudential* reason. So, again, it is of little concern to ethics that we value self-maintenance and well-being in a qualitatively different way than we value the well-being of others. Now, if it were true that prudential reasons are substantively distinct from ethical reasons (in the sense that the former sorts of reasons have no bearing on what it makes ethical sense to do), then it would seem that only other-regarding and non-prudential reasons count as ethical reasons, which would mean that ethics may overlap with but need not fundamentally include prudential reasons. But then, when considering conflicts that arise due to the demandingness of ethical reasons, we would need to arbitrate between two distinct domains, and it would be difficult to determine which sorts of principles (neither prudential nor ethical) could mediate the dispute. It's better if the two sorts of reasons are more closely related. But I will elaborate on this after addressing the second objection. The second, and closely related, objection is that the claim that other-regarding considerations are somehow "derivative" of prudential reasons is absurd. What would such a "derivation" even look like? More importantly, if this were the case, then sacrificing one's life would always be an error. I do not believe that the primacy of prudential reasons would entail that self-sacrifice is *always* an error, but I do believe that ethical egoism fails to provide a convincing account of situations in which self-sacrifice serves absolutely no prudential concerns. So the spirit of this objection is spot-on and damning for ethical egoism. I will develop this further in the following section.

4.5.3 Motivating Ethical Egoism

Consider the following two statements:

(1) Over all, things will be better for *me* if I do *X*.

(2) Over all, *the world* will be better if I do *Y*.

The first is a self-regarding consideration, and the second is a consideration for the greater good. We can modify (1), and state it this way:

(1)' Over all, I will *suffer less* if I do *X*.

Qualifying this in terms of pleasure and pain (taking “suffer” in a narrow sense) allows us to call this an *egocentric-hedonistic consideration*. Likewise, we can modify (2), and state it this way:

(2)' Over all, *S* will suffer less if I do *X*, and I am not *S*.

We can call this an *other-centric consideration* that can be agent-specific (where *S* = an individual) or group-specific (where *S* = a group of individuals). Now augment this other-centric formula as follows:

(3) *S* suffers less when I do *X*, and I believe I will suffer and things will be worse for me overall if I do *X*.

This is now an *altruistic consideration*. In this case, I weigh the burden of suffering *more* for the sake of others, without pursuing any ulterior self-regarding goals.

The problem I've been examining throughout this essay has centered on whether or not either the collection of egocentric considerations (1) and (1)', or non-egocentric considerations (2) and (2)' and (3) possess some authority the other lacks. One obvious position is that neither enjoys ultimate authority; rather, context

should determine whether it makes sense to suffer some amount for the greater good or whether one should forgo considerations of the greater good to suffer less. Likewise, in the case of altruistic considerations, context may dictate whether it is reasonable to suffer for the sake of another without believing one will gain a personal advantage by doing so. While altruistic considerations are a species of other-centric considerations, problems that arise with considerations of the greater good and problems that arise with altruistic considerations may be distinct. Suppose I grab a stranger from the clutches of an angry dog, believing I will be considerably mauled in the process, and believing that I have nothing to directly gain for myself by doing so. I am in fact mauled, and in some description of the world, it would have in fact been better for everyone that the stranger be mauled rather than me. In this case, I am not sacrificing anything for the greater good, nor do I intend to sacrifice anything for the greater good. But I am acting altruistically. So on what grounds would it make sense to do such a thing? Can I only appeal to compassion, conditioning, or sentimentality? If I do not believe that in any ultimate sense I hold a privileged position in this world, then surely, I don't imagine that this stranger holds an ultimately privileged position. While it's a tragedy he should suffer, it's likewise a tragedy that I should suffer. There seems to be no rational grounds for claiming that I ought to act altruistically. I may in fact be conditioned or disposed to behave in such a way, but that does not directly count as a rational justification for my behavior, as I can be conditioned or disposed to act in any number of ways.

Why is this important for normative ethics? An ethical egoist may claim that any action one takes ought to benefit oneself in some way. If we put things in terms

of “maximization,” an ethical egoist may claim that maximizing one’s own self-interest (however we construe the latter) ought to have ultimate authority in dictating what actions one ought to take. Consider the objection that a system prioritizing prudential reasons is not an *ethical* system. It would follow that ethical egoism can’t be a contending ethical theory, because it clearly prioritizes prudential reasons above all else. We might view ethical egoism as a reactive position, particularly with respect to agent-neutral systems like utilitarianism. These systems claim that actions promoting the greater good of those relevantly affected are the right actions to take. Reacting to this, the ethical egoist might simply claim that one has a right to opt out of such sacrifices. But Kantian ethics—which would not sanction treating a person as only a means for some larger good—makes a similar claim, and Kantian ethics are surely not foundationally egocentric. So what sort of claim is the ethical egoist trying to make? I suggest that we more charitably read the egoist’s claim as a sincere, normative-ethical claim: one *ought* to favor states of affairs in which one in some way does better for oneself. The “ought” must be a moral “ought” rather than a prediction or description of what one would do (which would conflate a psychological thesis with a substantive, normative-ethical thesis).¹⁹

¹⁹ This is a central problem that Korsgaard identifies with some confused, contemporary versions of egoism. The problem is that one might conflate what is supposed to be a minimalist view of practical rationality construed as purely instrumental reason—the view that in some broad sense we are always pursuing our own good (psychological egoism)—with the substantive, normative claim that we *ought* to pursue our own good. The purely descriptive claim is distinct from the prescriptive claim, and the latter is hardly self-evident, especially considering the complexity involved in ranking our own preferences. See, Christine M. Korsgaard, “The Myth of Egoism,” in *Practical Conflicts: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Peter Baumann and Monika Betzler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 57-91.

Now, in a toss-up situation in which I can either rescue the other person at considerable losses to myself (with no foreseeable material gains for myself), or I can simply avoid the situation (and thereby gain the benefit of suffering less than doing otherwise), I seem to have a strong intuitive reason to favor the latter. Given that neither of us is ultimately privileged, and I have not, in advance, endorsed utilitarianism, I can defer to intuition (which, *ex hypothesi*, favors prudence). My life matters to me, and avoiding suffering whenever I reasonably can seems to be plain common sense. In other words, agent-relative reasons seem more basic and more intuitively palatable and motivational than agent-neutral reasons. Agent-relative reasons may be construed as follows:

(AR): For any agent *A* (*A* ought to favor an uncentered state of affairs in which *A*_____).

Agent-neutral reasons can be construed as follows:

(AN): For any agent *A* (*A* ought to favor the uncentered state of affairs *W*).

The first sort of reason includes *A* while the second is dictated by some state of affairs that does not reflexively include *A*. Utilitarianism operates by agent-neutral reasons. One way of defending altruistic actions is by appealing to an agent-neutral utilitarian calculation in which one ought to do *X*, because it would serve the greater good, and by doing *X*, one incurs considerable losses (with no long-term material advantage gained for the agent by incurring such losses). So utilitarianism, to some extent, requires the cultivation of an altruistic disposition. This virtuous disposition would allow one to make the necessary personal sacrifices sometimes needed for securing the greater good.

In response, an ethical egoist might provide some intuitive arguments that do justice to our overwhelming concern for our individual well-being. First, our lives matter to us in a viscerally personal way. Our own suffering matters to us in a viscerally personal way, and we do not usually deliberate too deeply over whether or not to avoid our own suffering; on the contrary, we require more convincing to knowingly suffer for some cause or long-term goal. However, when it comes to considering another's suffering, that sort of immediacy is often lacking. My suffering even a minor laceration by an angry dog is viscerally immediate in a way that the mauling of a hundred thousand others will never be for me, and that is mostly because I recognize and experience my own suffering directly, but when it comes to another's suffering, that is not the case. The egoist might claim that knowledge of another's suffering is derivative (in the sense of being indirect) rather than foundational (in the sense of being immediate). One can never directly experience another's suffering, but at best, one can only imagine such suffering (however vividly one might do so). In this way, empathy is instructive to the extent that it allows one to envision what it might be like to suffer from another's point of view. So egoism honors the derivative nature of understanding another's pain. Therefore, motivational and epistemic asymmetry exists between one's own and another's suffering, and egoism honors that asymmetry. Second, we do not want our preferred ethical system to be overly demanding ("ought" implies reasonable accommodation of our more stubbornly ingrained dispositions and ways of being). So, motivationally speaking, egoism reasonably accommodates our commonsense desire to avoid our own suffering and avoid ethical systems that are unpalatably

demanding. Finally, there may be *irreducibly* egocentric-hedonistic considerations that can never harmonize with considerations for the greater good. In such cases, one favors a state of affairs in which one suffers less, and favoring such a state of affairs does not bring about a maximally better state of affairs (that is, it does not serve the greater good). This means that there are powerfully motivated self-regarding considerations that reveal a stubborn and unbridgeable divide between egocentric-hedonistic and non-egocentric considerations. Say that I suffer from amnesia from a terrible accident, and in the hospital, I come to know that KPM rather than John Doe will suffer a terribly painful life-altering surgery. I reason that I must either be KPM or JD. I will naturally prefer that I am JD. I usually do not need a further reason for favoring a state of affairs in which I suffer less, but I do require some further convincing to favor a state of affairs in which I suffer more (for an individual or for the greater good). Ethical egoism honors these basic asymmetries; it's a practical system that tethers ethical sanctions and commissions to the intuition that each of us matters to ourselves in a motivationally intense and basic way, and sacrificing our individual well-being for another must in some way provide us with an emotional, social, or value-driven pay-off that substantively includes our own flourishing (or good or whatever). Ethical egoism may even provide a utilitarian-leaning argument. The ethical egoist might claim that self-abnegation is a more harmful social disposition to cultivate (with less optimal pay-offs for the greater social good). She may argue that self-respect, in the form of prioritization of the betterment of the self within the strictures of a functioning social framework, requires mostly prioritizing self-regarding considerations. So, this is not a

philosophy of blind selfishness, but rather a philosophy of self-development, with positive “trickle-down” ramifications for the social whole. Our libertarian friends remind us that we gain more from the innovative spirit of self-possessed citizens than we do from condescending welfare bureaucrats and emotionally impulsive altruists: when the meek inherit the earth, they inherit a meek earth hindered by an erosion of creative and innovative possibilities (we need only think of Mill and Nietzsche, who provided some thinking in this direction).

Now, ethical egoism should not be conflated with *psychological egoism*, the view that an agent is always motivated directly by self-interest. What it does claim is that when one is in a toss-up situation, it requires more complex deliberation to justify suffering for the sake of another than it does to justify protecting oneself from avoidable suffering. It may be the case that I’m simply wired or conditioned to engage in more other-centric and altruistic actions, and in this sense strong psychological egoism is false; I’m certainly not *always* directly motivated by self-regarding considerations. However, the ethical egoist may respond that: (1) the world would be a better place if each individual mostly prioritized their own self-interest within the strictures of a stable social order; (2) most of our common sense moral judgments are consistent with egoism (that is, we can account for many of our moral norms by appeal to self-interest pursuing social strategies for self-flourishing); (3) given the strong weight of prudential reasons for action, ethical egoism is not an overly demanding ethical theory that goes against the grain of the human condition.

Now, consider the objection that ethical egoism entails that self-sacrifice is always wrong. Say that I do myself considerable harm (and very nearly drown) to save a drowning stranger. I'm not a lifeguard or medic or first-responder, just an ordinary guy. The nuanced ethical egoist does not claim that it is *always* morally wrong to act without *directly* furthering my self-interest (so that by risking my neck for the drowning swimmer I've done something ethically bad, which would be a ridiculous claim). She might argue that altruistic deeds have some conventional nobility, and in some way further my social position and my personal interest staked in being, say, a courageous hero. After all, the ethical egoist is not a megalomaniac, and thus, an ordinary ethical egoist responds to and develops values out of her socially-attuned and socially-situated nature. Of course, if my action is strongly motivated by my personal vision of the good life, which includes being a hero who pursues dangerous deeds, then the action is not purely other-centric. But that's fine, because we can at least provide a reason for pursuing an altruistic action that would otherwise remain mysterious (or at very least, difficult to rationally justify) without ignoring the evidence that people often do take such actions. This need not be a case of psychological egoism, because the self-regarding considerations that come with my personal vision of the good life are not always in the forefront of my consciousness, nor did they need to be when I took the plunge. However, at some point in my career as an agent, values that fulfill my self-regarding concern for realizing the best life possible *for me* have conditioned my dispositions, the motivations of which are now transparent. In this case, the ethical egoist might claim that I've acted consistently with my vision of the good life, and

pursuing this daring deed makes my life qualitatively better (albeit at a considerable quantitative risk).

However, one may object that this picture conflates prudential reasons with ethical reasons. Surely the ethical egoist is not committed to believing that all prudential reasons (and ultimately self-regarding reasons) are *ethical* reasons. To avoid this embarrassing problem, the ethical egoist would have to claim that not all first-order prudential reasons are ethical reasons, but insofar as there are ethical reasons for doing things, they must in some way appeal to (or at very least provide a structure for more adequately satisfying) prudential reasons. For example, I take important time away from my family and my money-paying projects to help a student struggling in my class. Whether the student does well will not in this context make one bit of material difference to my life. My reasons for helping this person are transparent—it just seems like the right thing to do (and not just because of my normatively relevant social role as an instructor, for in this case, I believe I've delivered amply on that front). But my now transparent disposition to help is a function of social training, and a strong explanatory candidate for my taking to such training (other than by direct force or threats) is that such character-dispositions achieve some sort of personal pay-off for me in terms of the overall quality of my life. This works well with the view that ethical reasons are ultimately grounded in social conventions that in one way or another allow individuals to thrive in communities by harmonizing their more immediate self-regarding reasons with social goods that provide a relatively stable framework for satisfying such reasons. In short, ethical reasons are grounded in larger, rational reasons for action. When

we distinguish between first-order and second-order reasons, we can avoid the embarrassing conclusion that ethical reasons are only prudential reasons. The point is that ethical reasons are derivative (in the sense of being explained and justified by other sorts of reasons), and prudential reasons provide the justificatory soil out of which ethical reasons emerge.

In terms of the stated objections previously considered, the ethical egoist can say the following. First, prudential and ethical reasons are closely related, but not identical. Ethical reasons have very little traction when too far removed from prudential reasons, and if ethics is to be a rational enterprise, it must be grounded in rational self-interest, which is socially-situated and sensitive to group dynamics. Complex, second-order ethical reasons are far less mysterious when we recognize how they ideally accommodate first-order prudential reasons. When the context radically shifts, and the relationship between first-order prudential and second-order ethical reasons is radically compromised, ethics becomes overly demanding and irrational. So, while the two sorts of reason are not identical, ethical reasons make rational sense by dovetailing out of prudential reasons. This explains why care of the self takes on ethical tones, where the line between prudential self-maintenance and ethical obligation can become fuzzy if not overlapping.

Second, ethical egoism can be an ethical system to the extent that it sufficiently accommodates our intuitive moral judgments (not to steal, lie, murder, etc.). Like all candidates for a good theory, it must convincingly explain the evidence (in this case, common moral judgments and their properties). Ethical egoism claims that prioritizing self-interest provides a credible principle from which to justify

other-regarding considerations. When all goes well, other-regarding considerations advance long-term self-interest and quality of life for the individual.

Ultimately, I disagree with this account. However, the ethical egoist might argue that reciprocity and cooperation, and the sense of obligation to fulfill one's roles in such relationships, works on an egoistic foundation, because it suits one's prudential interest to cooperate. Acting *as if* your needs have independent (or intrinsically valid) worth ultimately serves my long-term self-interest. Ethical egoism claims that it is right that we prioritize long-term interest, and that we ought to do so. Randian thinking would even claim that the world is better for such thinking. Thus, ethical egoism should not be confused for "blind egoism," or, narcissistic megalomania, which would not count as an ethical theory at all. Moreover, the ethical egoist does not necessarily conflate her normative system with psychological egoism, but the system is certainly consistent with and buttressed by the psychological claim. If we were fundamentally motivated to prioritize self-interest above all other concerns (which Butler and others have shown us is conceptually problematic and empirically false), then ethical egoism is a better explanatory, empirical theory about what constitutes a morally good action. Therefore, ethical egoism is not an a-moral theory. However, it may be a bad theory.

Finally, in terms of self-sacrifice always being an error, the ethical egoist may claim that an individual might rationally develop character traits that value risk and danger, which are always premised on the possibility of loss, severe harm, or even death. These become transparent values that in some way improve the quality of the said individual's life. So "self-sacrifice" is extreme risk that from a third-person

perspective is describable as sacrifice, but is only the outcome of a gambler suffering the ultimate loss. But I find this to be a weak response, since we have plenty of empirical examples of parents and loved ones directly sacrificing their lives for their nearest and dearest (where the only risk involved is in whether the sacrifice actually serves its purpose of saving the child or loved one). And, more importantly, we have empirical examples of individuals directly sacrificing their lives for complete strangers (where bias for loved ones falls from the equation). But the problem is that while not all acts of apparent self-sacrifice are *always* bad, the egoist seems to be committed to at least *some* of them being bad, and it is absurd to claim that these bad cases are premised on whether the sacrifice promotes the quality of the sacrificer's life. If it is part of the sacrificer's vision of the good life, then unless the egoist can show that this vision always serves the sacrificer in some substantive way, what we have here is a genuinely other-centric concern that values the overall state of things rather than just one's own individual plight. Moreover, ethical egoism would radically part with the commonsense view that when, say, an adult occupant of an Aleppo apartment, which is under a bombing siege, rescues a stranger's child from the apartment, knowing that it will most likely cost her own life, her action is not morally praiseworthy. The staunch egoist must view this as either a morally blameworthy act, or an instance of calculated risk that went wrong. Both alternatives seem intuitively absurd. I believe that this is a damning objection to the theory. Nevertheless, if the ethical egoist simply bites the bullet on acts of self-sacrifice, we might provide a counter-argument that strikes at the core of the theory's metaphysical presuppositions.

4.5.4 A Rationally Reconstructed Buddhist Response

This is where the Buddhist might claim that the No-Self view has important ethical implications. She might claim that seeing through the illusion of a perduring ego removes the basic asymmetry that drives one to endorse the egocentric conclusion. Strictly speaking, a psychophysical stream accounts for the individuality that one believes is “owned” by one’s ego, or, “I-maker” (*ahaṅkara*). But the ego is only illusorily permanent; it is nothing but the sort of fleeting perceptions that Hume saw when he tried to introspectively verify the existence of a single and perduring self. For the Buddhists, the belief that one owns one’s mental and physical states is an error resulting from the ego’s belief that it is a permanent and fixed being underlying the career of the self. So perhaps the asymmetry dissolves with the experientially and conceptually recognized dissolution of ego-ownership. Now, if one claims that this dissolution might dissolve any reason one has *whatsoever* to care about anyone’s future (the “extreme,” moral-nihilism claim), we might employ something like Siderits’s argument (see chapter 2 for the argument Siderits has developed in reconstructing Śāntideva’s work). No one, strictly speaking, owns the stream of psychophysical events. Although ownership is an illusion, suffering, and its ethically-negative valence, is not. Thus, if a mandate exists to thwart needless pain-and-suffering events, it must operate over the whole of sentient fields of suffering, because no one can really claim ownership over a particular stream. With this argument, altruism becomes a basic mandate only (seemingly) trumped by practical and pragmatic considerations. For example, it may be most expedient in some instances to reduce the overall sum of suffering by privileging “my own”

suffering at the expense of another's. However, the general mandate operates in a utilitarian-teleological fashion, and only justifies privileging oneself toward the end of reducing the overall sum of suffering.

I addressed rebuttals and counter-rebuttals to this line of argument in chapter 2. But the most damning problem I see here is that it's not so clear that a "general mandate" to thwart suffering makes any sense when we dissolve ownership of suffering. Arguably, suffering is not the sort of thing that just hangs there, and even if it does, it's not clear how and why it's so bad when it's not connected to the very real deprivation and anguish of an individual with a very real history and future that she cares about. In other words, the sort of existential anguish Buddhists seek to liberate us from, is articulated in the complex and concrete conventional relationships of transactional human existence. When we view things from the ownerless, ultimate perspective, we lose sight of the meaning of "suffering and anguish." These terrible experiences emerge in a meaningful, social whole, and without viewing things from the perspective of our conventional identities, suffering loses its ethically-relevant valence. If Vasubandhu or Śāntideva want to argue that ownership and selfhood are not necessary to make sense of pain and suffering, they still should show how, from the ultimate perspective, any sort of deontic claims can be made about such suffering. They may argue that it's a natural facet (*svabhāva*) of suffering that "it ought to be thwarted." But for Śāntideva, the Mādhyamika, it's hard to understand what that would mean, since the premise of his Buddhist philosophy is the Nāgārjunian view that nothing whatsoever has an intrinsic nature (*niṣvabhāva*). Now, if it's convention that determines our normative-

ethical relationship to pain and suffering, then why not just claim that it's convention that produces asymmetry between self-regarding and other-regarding considerations, the very asymmetry needed in a defense of egocentric privileging? This is the "cherry-picking" problem I highlighted in chapter 2 (see Harris's argument). The fact is, both Vasubandhu and Śāntideva will have to appeal to convention to win us back ethical relationships and normativity, and unless we provide a creative spin on "otherness" (the sort I developed in chapter 3), it's hard to see how the claim that there is no self provides us with a normative-ethical justification for altruism. Moreover, the Buddhist would also have to appeal to convention to make sense of any practical (or purely rational) principles for justifying altruism.

While I'm obviously amenable to the view of otherness that I spun in chapter 3, I believe it has some serious shortcomings. If this is the case, then I've just about spun-out on forging a directly practical link between the No-Self thesis in Buddhism and any sort of normative grip that altruistic action may hold over us. I will now explain where I believe these shortcomings lie.

In chapter 3, I argued that Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, understood as deflationary minimalism, is not committed to the belief in a perduring self, nor is it committed to Bundle-theory metaphysics. Bundle-theory, in one way or another, reduces the appearance of selfhood to a real stream of metaphysically individuated psychophysical events. However, I tried to defend other possibilities for the Buddhist philosopher by spinning a sort of mash-up of contemporary No-Self theories of mind and selfhood with Abhidharma-Buddhist metaphysics. The latter

believes that the concept of self erroneously appears over the interplay of real atomic psychophysical phenomena, and I claimed that, nuanced in the right way, we might develop an ethics of otherness that builds responsibility for others out of a revision of self-regarding and forward-looking concerns. I nuanced this by appropriating basic elements from the well-developed post-modern discussion of “otherness.” The idea was that even at the core of our most personal and egocentric concerns, we experience responsibility toward an “other” that we ourselves are (in an attenuated sense). Nevertheless, both Bundle-theories and Abhidharma metaphysics have practical weaknesses. For example, even if we can individuate streams of consciousness by appeal to either a physical body, or a collection of psychophysical phenomena forged through unique dependency relations (in the case of Abhidharma metaphysics and Parfitian Bundle-theories), the responsibility we have toward various dimensions and temporal stretches of this stream remain ambiguous at best, and grossly under-determined at worst. This motivated me to bring Madhyamaka irrealism into the mix. Madhyamaka can provide a more praxis-driven gloss on the notion of “otherness,” because it eschews metaphysics altogether, while deconstructing realist and essentialist discourse. So in a sense it promotes conventionalist-pragmatic discourse that speaks directly to the field of practical relationships and convention-driven actions. Madhyamaka Buddhism adds two important possibilities to “solving” the problem of justifying altruism. First, Madhyamaka focuses on the lived experience of seeing our future and past selves as both the same and other. I made a case for how this works in Śāntideva's text. This “sameness” is not something metaphysically identical, nor is it grounded in a

physicalist commitment to enduring bodies; it is, rather, the capacity to appropriate (*upādāna*), or, more literally, “be fueled by” what is always experienced as other, and thus to feel a responsiveness, and consequently a *responsibility* toward what is other. This underlies our sense of unity (sameness) with otherness. We learn to relate to and “own” this otherness through appropriative identification. In this way, I’ve clearly stepped outside the post-modern, or, Levinasian discussion of otherness, because I’m actually trying to bridge the gap between sameness and otherness—something the extraordinary and irreducible “Other” in Levinas would never allow. However, in another sense, I’m in step with that conversation, because I’m trying to respect the inscrutability and distinctness of the other, by holding identification and distinction in a productive and yet never fully-resolved tension. What I wanted to add to this picture is that appropriative identification does not entail that when I consider this future surrogate, and believe that it is other than me now, I completely overcome the sense of separateness and distance in a blissful “oneness.” The argument of chapter 3 sees this appropriative identification—this collapsing of the gap between self and other—as one forged through an ethical commitment to caring for the other (who is our future-surrogate) as one’s own, and caring for the other as one *worthy* to be cared for. This means that distinctness and sameness must be gripped in a productive tension that is never fully resolved. So caring about oneself is instructive in caring about the other. This would do some contemporary justice to the Buddhist connection between no-selfhood and ethics.

The second facet Madhyamaka brings to the table is that not committing to any real base of individuation (see chapter 2), and endorsing deconstruction in the

practical way I developed in chapter 3, helps unravel a quite natural view that often impedes us from acting beyond our own egoistic inclinations: it deconstructs the self/other dichotomy, and shows us that no knock-down metaphysical reasons prevent us from acting altruistically, and no knock-down metaphysical reasons ultimately support the view that altruistic reasons are less fundamental than egocentric concerns. Madhyamaka can do this because it is not committed to either a physicalist base of individuation (a real and metaphysically distinct body), nor is it committed to real ownership, since it eschews the belief that any sort of intrinsically existing phenomena constitutes a metaphysically distinct stream (*saṅtāna*).²⁰ According to this view, “mineness” is a conceptual fabrication built out of appropriation, which then attempts to ground this concept in deep metaphysical structures. Thus, while no knock-down arguments prove that we must take the other into ethical consideration, the minimalist and anti-metaphysical approach of Madhyamaka helps tear down the barriers between self and other that seem to motivate the natural inclination toward egoism. To this point, I argued that no metaphysical barriers prevent us from being altruistically concerned with all suffering. Thus, Madhyamaka clears a space for far-reaching altruistic concern by undermining some of the usual appeals that motivate egoism. By embracing “otherness” in the way I nuanced it in chapter 3, we can argue that our actions are always-already responsive to what is “other.”

But there are several problems with this approach. First, this negative point is non-implicational. If I say that nothing prevents me from being unselfish, this does

²⁰ “The continuum of consciousness [*saṅtāna*], like a queue, and the combination of constituents [*samudāya*], like an army, are not real [*mṛṣā*—‘fiction’]” (*BCA*, 8:101).

not mean that anything necessarily motivates me to be altruistic. For example, I may claim that the flower does not smell bad, but this does not necessarily imply that it smells good (it may smell bland or neutral or like nothing at all to me). So the challenge is to show how not only the barriers come down, but also how a positive altruistic motivation can grip us and guide our actions in a way that reaches the power of an ethical command.

Second, I claimed that at the core of experience there is a sense of personal responsibility toward what is other, and that when we tear down the metaphysical barrier between self and other, and see all action extending out toward what is “not me” (and, “me” in an attenuated and appropriative sense) our sense of responsibility can mature and cast itself wide enough to conceptually encompass everyone. These far-reaching considerations resonate with the agent-neutral sensibility informing utilitarianism. But here’s the problem with this. While I can view myself as other in the way I described in chapter 3, this implies that either: (a) I maintain a robust personal bond with this other, or, (b) I experience depersonalization. The latter means that I lose my bond with this other, and thus it remains mysterious why I experience any responsibility. So I have overplayed my hand by conflating “responsiveness” and “responsibility,” especially when the later term carries a normative-ethical weight that the former does not. However, if I maintain a personal bond as stated in (a), I can argue that this “other” is never fully other. Or, put another way, there is a difference in the bond I have with my surrogate and those thin bonds I have with strangers and acquaintances that surround me now. So, there’s still the possibility that a metaphysical ground for ethically privileging some

relationships over others, like the one I have with my surrogate-self, remains intact. One may argue further that the best explanation for the sense of responsibility I have for my surrogate-heir lies in *identifying* with this other. If I fully identify with this future person as myself rather than as a surrogate, then I have an ordinary, self-regarding and prudential concern. Yes, things are attenuated, because I may not believe that deep metaphysical bonds connect me to this future person. However, something (conventional?) still makes this person especially relevant to me-now in a way that it does not with any other person. Granted, my relationship to this future person is also thin and abstract, but a good reason for caring about this future person is that he is, practically speaking, *me*. While I do, paradoxically, identify with and yet distance myself from this other-me, I can simply view this distance as a temporal issue. For example, an endurantist about time—someone who believes that all time is dimensionally present—may embrace a four-dimensional view of time, which is par for the course in Einstein’s Relativity. Thus, the endurantist may claim that the temporal distance between me-now and future-me does not mean that future-me is metaphysically distinct from me-now. The properties of future-me, like my receding hair-line and my growing tummy, are temporal parts of the whole of me, and future-me is only thinly related to me-now from the vantage point of the spotlight shining on this part of the block universe, the part I call, “now.” So, I have not really treated myself as metaphysically other. Future-me is only a temporally distinct but metaphysically non-distinct version of me. Therefore, I contest that the Buddhist-hybrid picture I developed in chapter 3 ultimately fails to cogently explain

how I take up another's cause as my own, and how I come to view and feel this action as an ethical requirement.

However, the one element I'd like to preserve from chapter 3 is the claim that when all things go well, responsibility towards others resonates at the core of our lived experience. I do not believe we learn to care about others from scratch. However, barring congenital psychopathy, and sociopathology developed out of early childhood trauma, we do learn how to extend our narrow frame of other-regarding concerns (say, an infant's focused concern for her caretaker) to encompass ever larger fields of fellow humans and non-human creatures. That is, we can learn to more widely generalize our inherent sense of concern and responsibility to others, particularly when we recognize that we are imbued—in adopting values and meaningful goals—by a network of interdependent others.

Thus, I want to argue the following. The No-Self views of the Buddhists I've drawn from do not adequately account for what we mean by "selves." Herein lies the ethical problem. I believe that a more appealing model of what constitutes selfhood is ineluctably bound up with normative phenomena that makes better sense of the normative grip altruistic actions can hold over us. Obviously, then, I believe that altruistic action often *does* have normative grip. But altruism can also be viewed as supererogation. Phenomenologically speaking, we can say that altruism exercises our unique capacity to feel "whole" and "full" enough to give beyond what might be socially required of us. So we can think altruism in terms of ethical duty, and we can think altruism in terms of moral psychology—compassion and identification—and,

finally, we can think altruism in terms of supererogation.²¹ Another possibility lies in thinking altruism out of metaphysics, a point I will devote a section to by assessing the role of compassion in the Mahāyāna-Vijñānavāda (or *citamātra*) school of Buddhist idealism—a school I have not treated yet in this work—specifically, the work of the Buddhist scholastic, Dharmakīrti, and the critique of his school by the Kashmiri Advaita-Śaivist, Abhinavagupta. For the latter, altruism is made possible by a monistic metaphysics and soteriology of recognition and identification with the universal self. This self is an infinitely creative energy that emanates into an individuated reality. Abhinavagupta and his lineage refer to this as, “Śiva.” Although capable of individuation, the self remains ultimately whole, and inherently imbued with will (*icchā*) and cognition that is self-manifesting (*svapṛakāśa*) and self-conscious (*svasaṃvedana*). Full recognition of the empirical self as the universal self presumably reveals the inherent “bliss” (*ānanda*) and “fullness” (*pūrṇatva*) that also characterizes the playful creativity of this dynamic and self-manifesting force. This recognition generates altruistic concern for the other. While the Śaivists believe that full self-recognition (identification with the universal self) transcends the ethical domain of “duty” (*dharma*) and “negligence of duty” (*adharmā*), the enlightened Śaivic sage still is motivated to devote his work and energy to others without any ulterior, self-regarding motivations. In other words, he engages philosophy and rational theology solely for the sake of helping others achieve recognition of their identity in the universal self. While the

²¹ These are conceptual possibilities, and in forthcoming work, I will more thoroughly distinguish the altruistic act from things like favors and acts of kindness, of which “gift-giving” may be one. The latter do not bear the ethical weight that altruism does.

enlightened, ultimate perspective may transcend many conventional ethical standards, the will remains operative (indeed, it is a fundamental aspect of the universal self). In this extraordinary state, the will is directed toward helping others, because the philosopher-sage who has secured identification with Śiva is “complete” or “full,” and thus not driven by self-regarding desires associated with an embodied and historical existence that is radically individuated. At this level, egoism is simply empty of meaning.²² But the main upshot that I am introducing is this: clarifying (or re-cognizing) this union with general selfhood provides us with a metaphysics that makes sense of how we can be compelled and compassionately motivated through *empathic* channels to behave altruistically. The idea here is that we are not metaphysically cut off from one another, and our emotional connectedness is not just a matter of thoughtful inference.

I will draw from Abhinavagupta’s metaphysical account of selfhood to develop the metaphysics of aspectual, mereological holism, which I believe can provide a promising account of the felt experience of obligation (and altruistic motivation) that comes with recognizing oneself in terms of a larger and dynamic whole. As far as metaphysics goes, there are important concepts the Śaivite introduces that fill motivational and epistemic gaps in the Buddhist and naïve realist accounts. To best develop this view, I’ll need to assess its foil (*pūrvapakṣa*), that is,

²² See Isabelle Ratié, “Remarks on Compassion and Altruism in the Pratyabhijñā Philosophy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 37, Issue 4, 2009: 349-366. In reference to Abhinava’s interpretation of Utpaladeva, she writes: “Because the essence of consciousness is a subtle dynamism of which will or desire (*icchā*) is the first manifestation, the subject who escapes the bondage of individuality does not cease to have any will; but his will is exclusively turned toward others—it cannot be selfish, given the completeness or the fullness (*pūrṇatva*) that the liberated subject has acquired by recovering a full awareness of himself” (355).

the idealism and momentariness (*kṣaṇabhāṅgavāda*) views endorsed by Dharmakīrti. By “momentariness,” I am referring to the belief that reality is cinematically made up of self-manifesting and ephemeral point-instances, or, property-tropes. These property-tropes, according to Dharmakīrti, underlie the illusion of continuity.

Again, the challenge is to show how not only the barriers between self and other come down, but also how a positive altruistic motivation can grip us and guide our actions in a way that reaches the power of a felt, ethical command. I want to address the challenge in two directions. The first, I’ve already dealt with: the normative self emerges in a relational social-space, and thereby, integrates its practical identity through its higher-order, “participant” volitions. The second and more robust solution requires a metaphysical account, where as one aspect, the self remains individuated and distinct, but under another aspect, the self shares in a more general experience of selfhood. So, in the next section, I will assess Dharmakīrti’s metaphysics and Abhinavagupta’s critical engagement with them.

4.6 Momentariness and the Problem of Other Persons in Dharmakīrti: an Advaita-Śaivite Response

How am I able to distinguish a non-sentient object from a conscious subject (*pramātr*)? I can reasonably infer that creatures exhibiting the same types of publicly observable traits as I do possess consciousness, and those with whom I can converse probably have first-person experiences and a sense of self. Stones and laptops do not look like me, nor do they behave like me. And most living things, like trees and weeds, do not exhibit agency; so they probably do not experience

anything. But what does it mean to “exhibit agency?” Perhaps “agency” refers to the self-directed action of complex language-users making various commitments and promises within a conditioned, causal order. Or, it may be enough to call someone an agent who exhibits characteristic behaviors that, like my dog’s behaviors, reveal some sense of flexible responsiveness, emotional aptitude, and sensory-motor integration. How, then, do I *perceive* someone’s agency?

As a start to answering some of these big questions, I begin with a manifest fact: stones, laptops, trees, and dogs do not *appear* to be extensions of my own mind. Even in a simulated or dream world, I view myself as one among many external objects, which means that I inherently employ a general concept of otherness (*paratva*). Otherness shows up in my experience of a distinct object, a mere “it.” But otherness also shows up in my experience of other conscious beings, which I designate with personal pronouns.

I also experience the immediate presence of perceptual objects, and by that, I mean everyday things like desks and mounting piles of paperwork. While I can attest for this immediate experience of presence in my own case, I cannot do so for you. As Wittgenstein humorously put things, I might believe that I have a beetle in my own box (or a private and conscious experience in my own head), but I can only tenuously infer that another body houses or generates private experiences. What’s worse, I cannot be sure that conscious experience *necessarily* requires a body at all, especially since my body can sometimes show up as just another object in a way that my occurrent, first-person experience cannot. While one thought may become part of the content of another thought—as in the case of deliberation and memory—

the experience of presence, itself, is not the sort of thing that is publicly observable. Nor, do I believe, is it introspectively observable; “presence” is already in play from the moment I turn my attention inward. Therefore, consciousness does not show up as a thing among other observable things. It’s not as though I can definitively claim that my wife is conscious in the morning just because her eyes open. Still, I see her eyes open, and I know that she is conscious. This seems to me a small miracle!

Unconvinced that consciousness and subjectivity emerge from something purely inert, and unconvinced that it makes sense to believe that objects exist outside the minds that cognize them, Buddhist-idealists (*Vijñānavādins*) advanced a host of arguments attacking external-world realism and materialism. Their basic argument is that any *X* and *Y* that are invariably concomitant cannot be metaphysically distinct. An object of consciousness cannot be *viewed* as an independent object outside of some sensory experience of that object: wherever there is an experience of the harvest moon, the conscious experience always accompanies the perceptual object. These Buddhists capitalize on the fact that it makes little sense to say that there can be “something out there” that we are unable to perceive under any sensory contexts or modalities, which strict independence between objects and subjects would logically, although not necessarily materially, seem to entail. Cogent or not, I do not intend to elucidate the host of idealist arguments advanced by various *citamātra*, or, “mind-only” Buddhist philosophers. Instead, I wish to focus on the shape the problem of otherness takes within the framework of Buddhist idealism. At stake for the Mahāyāna Buddhist, among other things, is the very coherence of compassion and altruism: without a coherent

account of otherness, Buddhists struggle to provide a compelling account of other-centric motivations.

The representationalist model of perception that Sautrāntika Buddhists²³ advanced left a gap for idealist arguments of the Yogācāra, Mind-Only and Vijñānavāda schools.²⁴ For the Sautrāntika, we do not directly see the objects that support our perceptions. All perception is mediated. Along with the idealists, they believe that an intentional object of consciousness is the product of that very consciousness. Thus, we are only conversant with our ideas of objects, and we must *infer* an external support (*ālambana*) for these representations. Still, Sautrāntikas remain realists about external objects. This school posits the existence of external-world objects through inference (*bāhyārthānumeyavāda*). But if this inference is shown to be weak, then we're left with only the objects of our own consciousness, a point that drives all species of idealism. The Sautrāntika philosophers argue that Vijñānavāda idealism is incoherent, because our perceptions represent multiple and qualitatively diverse objects. However, according to these same philosophers, consciousness is not multiple and qualitatively diverse, but simply a singular capacity to illuminate and represent (or take the mold of) what is diverse: the light is singular, but the objects that shine under its illumination are diverse. Thus, consciousness and the objects of consciousness cannot be equivalent since they bear distinct essential properties.

²³ This refers to the school of “sūtra followers,” or, Abhidharma-Buddhist metaphysicians.

²⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I conflate the various strands of these idealist schools.

The idealist can respond that “the awakening of residual traces” (*vāsanāprabodha*) from past lives, or, beginningless streams of consciousness, can account for the variety of perceptions. These traces are somehow “reawakened” in the flow of insulated and singular cognitions. We do not need to appeal to external objects, because the mind-stream that accounts for the image of diverse things bears residual traces of experiences, or, “seeds” (*bīja*) by which it generates an on-going experience of diversity. Poetically, we can say that consciousness dresses its experience in a perfume (*vāsanā*) of residual traces (*vāsanā*). For the Buddhist-idealist, the belief that objects are external to the mind is ultimately false, and we see this layered into the very definition of a “*vāsanā*,” by the fact that the term may also designate false perceptions and images.

Now, as realists about the external world, we can try to corner the idealist by asking what accounts for the variety of *vāsanās*. The idealist seems to regressively push the problem back: diversity, itself, is the very thing that needs to be explained. Nevertheless, for the Vijñānavādin, the stream over which we erroneously develop the belief in an enduring self is not a *psychophysical* stream. The *saṁtāna* (the streaming of isolated, but associated cognitions that we erroneously reify) is nothing but a series of momentary cognitions, or, ephemeral point-instances of consciousness. These give rise to new cognitions in a cinematic emergence of conscious moments. In contemporary metaphysics, we would call these property-tropes, or, instances of properties unbounded by an underlying or continuous

substance. Contemporary Stage-theory metaphysics²⁵ also parallels this by advancing the view that reality unfolds cinematically and episodically rather than continuously.²⁶ For Dharmakīrti and the Buddhists, this sort of metaphysics is consistent with the Buddha’s message that there is no underlying self-substance (*ātman*), and everything is, quite literally, impermanent (*anitya*). The subject (*pramātr*) is not an enduring metaphysical entity, but a conceptual error (*vikalpa*) of the imagination that arises out of these ephemeral cognitions. For Dharmakīrti, all cognitions are self-reflexively aware (*svasaṃvedana*), and this partly explains how we develop the false belief that a self endures through multiple cognitions.²⁷ Cognizing *X* also means at the same time cognizing the cognition of *X*. The immersive first-person cognition that ensues retains the seed-like trace of its ephemeral predecessor, but the *X* that it sees is not really separate from the self-generating and self-reflexive point-instance. As Ratié puts it, for the Vijñānavādin, “the objects perceived by the subject have no existence outside of the cognitive series, objectivity is nothing but a cognitive event in which consciousness presents itself as external.”²⁸ The world is a pure externalization of the mind, which is impermanent, something dying and being re-born in self-manifesting and ephemeral point-instances. So, my

²⁵ See Katherine Hawley, *How Things Persist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁶ For Stage-theorists like Hawley, this view can solve various identity problems we encounter in thought experiments like the *Ship of Theseus*.

²⁷ On *svapṛakāśa* (self-luminosity) and *svasaṃvedana* (reflexive, self-consciousness), see Dharmakīrti, *Nyāyabindu* I: 10: *sarvacittacaittānām ātmasaṃvedanam*: “All cognitions and all mental phenomena are self-conscious.” Cited in manuscript of Dharmottara’s commentary, *Nyāyabinduṭīka* (see bibliography), cited in Ratié, 321.

²⁸ Ratié, *Otherness*, 320.

seeing anything is just an ephemeral cognition that sees itself externalized as a distinct object while seeing that very seeing.

But if this is true, then the Buddhist must show how other *selves* show up to a self-illuminated and self-manifesting episode of consciousness. Even if the Buddhist bites the bullet and accepts solipsism, he fares no better in making sense of the experience, or, sense of an external subject. Dharmakīrti's endorsement of *svasaṃvedana* seems to dig him into this hole. A self-manifested cognition cannot be grasped by another cognition, because it would cease to be *self*-manifested, and become a mere object for another. However, the appearance of a subject who has self-illuminating cognitions cannot just show up as a mere object for the obvious reason that we lose the subjectivity of the subject; we reify and objectify the self-subject that was allegedly perceived. So by Dharmakīrti's metaphysics, I cannot account for your immediate presence of experience, that is, your sense of selfhood, because I cannot come into direct contact with you.²⁹

This is potentially damning to his larger project, because the ethics of compassion and altruism must preserve the integrity of other persons. But perhaps this is only a superficial problem. We might explain being motivated by another's suffering through indirect apprehension of their pain. However, admitting that something exists externally to consciousness—like other streaming minds that project a reality—defeats the very premise of Buddhist idealism, namely, that we

²⁹ Ratiér, *Otherness*, 321: "Because cognition has this self-manifesting power as its characteristic, no given cognition can be manifested or grasped by another cognition, otherwise it would cease to be a cognition and become a mere object of cognition, which means that I can never take as objects of my consciousness someone else's cognitions."

cannot ultimately distinguish between the subject who is conscious and the object that only appears to exist externally to that consciousness. Why it should be different with respect to the otherness of other subjects, even if they are reduced to mere streams of associated and isolated cognitions, is not clear. The bigger problem that arises is that not being able to distinguish other streaming minds from this streaming mind that I erroneously call “myself” undermines my capacity to distinguish minds from mere objects. At stake is my capacity to make sense of even a general notion of “otherness,” since the boundary between mind and intentional object collapses altogether.³⁰ Thus, the logic of this form of idealism threatens to undermine any normative grip that commands the Buddhist to cultivate impartial compassion for all sentient and suffering creatures. Duties notwithstanding, this brand of metaphysics also destabilizes the motivational rationality of the *felt* concern for another’s pain.

As a solution, Dharmakīrti bites the bullet on directly knowing other minds. He believes that we simply infer their existence, and so, we never directly know others.³¹ The best that we can derive is a general concept of otherness. In claiming this, Dharmakīrti puts his finger on an enduring problem. There is no instrument of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) that provides us with direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) of other

³⁰ Ratiér, *Otherness*, 321: “The Vijñānavādin fails to account for otherness because the others [who are other persons] cannot be ontologically distinguished from mere objects.”

³¹ Ratiér, *Otherness*, 324, who cites Stcherbatsky’s translation of Dharmakīrti’s *Santānāntarasiddhi* (“Proof of the Existent-Streams of Others”), sūtra 72: “General concept [of other mind] is not identical with other mind itself. If it were so, we would have cognized the form of other mind as clearly as that of our own.”

selves. The best that we have at our disposal is inference.³² The ethical problem that I see here is that your need may become a concern for my altruistic sensibility, but I cannot ultimately establish its authorship (so long as the inference proves tenuous): I cannot know *how* (and *if*) you motivate me. I cannot know how the purported experiences of your mind have any direct bearing on my motivations, nor can I know how it makes sense to feel that your well-being is intrinsically valuable. We see a similar problem in epistemological skepticism: if I cannot provide a clear and unwavering account of how I acquired my belief (in the “right way”) a wedge is left open for skepticism.³³

The argument from inference does not seem to work in Dharmakīrti’s brand of idealism, and, even worse, it leaves Dharmakīrti unable to account for otherness.³⁴ My goal is to show how the monistic-idealism of Abhinavagupta provides a cogent critique of the inference-strategy, while offering a new avenue for

³² Buddhist epistemology since Dharmakīrti (and his predecessor, Dignāga) only accepts two *pramāṇas* (knowledge-producing instruments): direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Of the latter, there are inferences made from causal associations (*kārya-hetu*), where *X* is seen to be the cause of *Y* appearing (e.g., fire being the cause of smoke arising), and *svabhāva-hetu*, where the nature of *X*, once clarified, includes *Y* (something like an analytic claim). A valid inference must have, among other things, a statement of invariable concomitance, where *X* is found to follow *Y*, and where the contraposition (*vyatirika*) also holds: $\sim X$ is found to follow from $\sim Y$. For an excellent analysis of Dharmakīrtian inference and general problems in Indian logic, see: B.K. Matilal, *The Character of Indian Logic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998): chapter 5.

³³ This, of course, lies at the heart of naturalized epistemology, which emerges as an answer to the “justified, true belief” account of knowledge that Gettier problems destabilize.

³⁴ Ratié has provided a detailed and cogent argument addressing that point through her analysis of the Sautrāntika-Buddhist “externalists,” and Abhinavagupta’s commentaries on Utpaladeva’s *Īśvarapratyabhijñānākārikā* and its auto-commentaries. See, fn. 2 above.

“reading other’s emotions.”³⁵ This new avenue fills what I believe is a basic epistemological and motivational gap in the purely normative account.

4.7.1 The Problem of Inferring Other Minds, and the Possibility of Sharing a World

Dharmakīrti’s inference works like this. He experiences the action of speech to be invariably concomitant (*vyāpta*) with a desire that causes him to say or have the thought, “I want to speak.” This concomitance is of the *kārya-hetu* variety. In other words, Dharmakīrti believes that the desire enters into the causal history of the speech-act (or propositional thought); so, whenever the desire is absent, the propositional thought that can issue in speech is also absent. This insight can now serve as a generalizable premise in an inference. Devadatta speaks. Devadatta does not suffer from Tourette syndrome. Where there’s an absence of desire (or some relevant mental state), there’s an absence of speech, and where there’s an absence of a thought that can issue in speech, there’s an absence of desire (or whatever relevant mental state). Thus, Devadatta desires to speak. Unlike a stone or a lap-top, Devadatta is a mental stream.

But how does Dharmakīrti know that Devadatta is not just another product of his own mental stream? Well, that’s easy. He never experiences the relevant mental state that directly motivates Devadatta to say, “Hey, it’s me...Devadatta, and I want to be heard!” However, when Dharmakīrti speaks, he does experience the

³⁵Arindam Chakrabarti crafts much of this strategy. However, he does not directly connect this to the weakness of a purely normative account of altruistic reasons and selfhood. See Chakrabarti, “How Do We Read Others’ Feelings? Strawson and Zhuangzi Speak to Dharmakīrti, Ratnakīrti and Abhinavagupta” in *Comparative Philosophy Without Borders* (Bloomsbury Academic Publishers, 2015), Chapter 5.

relevant mental state underwriting his own thought. Furthermore, he cannot make sense of that mental state unless it is directed toward an audience of whom he wishes to be heard. This is the final premise supporting the inference that Devadatta is another stream (*santānāntara*). Dharmakīrti hears Devadatta speak, and part of Dharmakīrti's own speech-act includes wanting to communicate and be heard by *others* when he speaks. This provides him with a concept of otherness, while Devadatta speaking provides him with a concept of other mental streams. Consequently, we develop a general concept of "otherness," without ever directly perceiving the fact that other subjects exist. This also means that we never really directly share feelings—we can infer them, but they can never directly motivate us.

However, this line of thinking is exactly where Wittgenstein's "beetle in a box" rears its head. The relationship between my own motivating mental state and a speech-form (or propositional thought) takes universal scope only when I *assume in advance* that the utterances of an allegedly distinct stream are not random occurrences. I never confuse Siri on my cellphone for a breathing, thinking, and conscious assistant. "She" is always only an "it" to me, and I never have to worry about giving it Christmas bonuses. If I have not established in advance that you have a "mental beetle" in your head, then I cannot assume that what I've introspectively discovered about myself applies to anyone but myself.

Abhinavagupta's critique of the argument is that it both undermines our ability to make sense of our experience of other selves, and it undermines our ability to make sense of otherness as a well-formed concept. The problem lies in Dharmakīrti's inference. Dharmakīrti believes he has secured a premise articulating

universal concomitance: whenever he utters something, he has some desire to utter something (barring Tourette Syndrome). Moreover, his not uttering something is explained by a desire not to utter something (even in cases where he has conflicting desires—like when he bites his tongue and chooses to withhold an utterance out of prudence). He hears Devadatta utter something. So he infers that Devadatta must have a desire as well, and this proves that Devadatta has a mind.

Dharmakīrti cannot help himself to the universal premise he provides. Just because I know in my own case that my utterances are underwritten by a desire to speak, which introspectively reveals that I am immediately aware of my own subjectivity, I cannot assume that such a relation holds between Devadatta, because I cannot publicly observe his desire without begging the question that he's the type of entity that has desires in the first place. The problem here is that determining this is precisely what was at stake in the first place. So either I know in advance that Devadatta has a mind, thus begging the question, or I cannot help myself to the inference, thereby leaving me without the kernel of knowledge I had hoped to glean. I am hopelessly unable to prove the existence of another self. The critique, then, is that Dharmakīrti's argument both undermines our ability to make sense of our experience of other selves, and it undermines our ability to make sense of otherness as a well-formed concept.

Dharmakīrti responds by appealing to the communicatory aspect of language. I do not just say things because I feel like saying things. I also want to be heard, and more importantly, this presupposes my capacity to communicate with others. My speech-act is always grounded in the background presupposition that I

am communicating to an audience who can potentially understand me. In this way, I can become the object for another's thought-stream. This allows us to revise our belief in distinct selves (through independent arguments to that effect), while also explaining how we form the view that we are (relatively) distinct individuals. Presupposing an audience to whom one wishes to communicate is a background assumption underlying language-use. Thus, Dharmakīrti does not beg the question; he simply uncovers the ultimately erroneous appearances that make sense of our experience. This is the cherished outcome of any useful revision.

But the deepest problem is that Dharmakīrti maintains both his momentariness and no-self claims along with his idealism. Subjects and objects are not ultimately distinct. There are no selves to distinguish one mental stream from another. So the only distinction available rests in the *content* of the cognitions themselves. This means that Devadatta and I have numerically and *qualitatively* distinct cognitions. Potentially, then, the appearance to me of a vast ocean is only a smear of grey paint for Devadatta. Nevermind sharing emotions—nothing determines how we share *any* perceptual objects! The best that Dharmakīrti might supply here is a sort of Occasionalism. Cognitions provide an occasion for similar, but ultimately distinct, views of reality. Somehow, we share a collective illusion that supports conventional reality.

4.7.2 Mereological Holism and Other Minds: A Metaphysical Solution to the Problem of Unity in Diversity (*Bhedābheda*)

Before diving into Abhinavagupta's solution to the problem of otherness, I would like to sketch a metaphysics that both parallels the Śaivite system, and

collapses the numerical distinction that Sidgwick viewed to be an ethically intractable problem. The problem, as Sidgwick saw it, is that real numerical distinction between persons provides one with irreducibly egocentric reasons for action. This, of course, generates the question as to what sorts of reasons have authority—either generally speaking, or in particular contexts. But I believe that we can bridge the divide between egoistic and altruistic reasons by revising our commonsense metaphysics. I might say that with the passing of a loved one, some part of me dies. Can I so easily say the same when I hear of the tragic loss of innocent lives in Aleppo? If I'm of normal temperament, and I experience sympathy, and different intensities of compassion, then of course I feel the weight of the tragedy that has unfolded in Syria. We can chalk up the difference of compassionate weight in the two scenarios to different levels of emotional attachment. However, both the loss of my loved ones and the loss of strangers hold something important in common: I can only poetically speak of "a part of me" dying with these people. When I hear of a thief suffering dismemberment in a country with particularly stringent laws, I never confuse that dire act of punishment with the loss of my own hand. So in what sense do I share his grief? In what sense does a little part of me feel tortured when my government illegally subjects some of its political prisoners to waterboarding? My goal here is to show that, from one aspect, I lose nothing when another is dismembered. However, from another aspect, we all lose a part of ourselves in that brutal event.

Counting Problems with Parts & Wholes: Aspects vs. Properties

The Buddhist philosopher will argue that talk of either psychophysical or purely mental “streams” (*saṅtāna*) is just reification. More strictly put, we should describe the situation as a “stream-*ing*.” Moreover, even if we eschew the momentariness thesis, we can claim that the various *dharmas* (elements) that make up an object or a person are, strictly speaking, independent parts operating in concert. Any sort of whole that we posit is simply a product of a pragmatically useful, but conceptual fabrication. The chariot is not a whole above and beyond the parts out of which it is constructed. We are tempted to introduce such a notion in order to explain the dynamic and fluid unity that allows us to count composite objects. But believing that a “whole-chariot” really exists above the chariot-parts proves to be explanatorily bankrupt (so the Buddhist argues). If the chariot were to collide into a tree and find itself strewn into parts all over the road, we would not claim that the chariot exists in several locations at once. All we have are parts that were once related in various ways, and their hypostasized continuity is simply a matter of functionality. When the chariot still functions, but loses one of its wheels, we can speak of the whole chariot missing a part. Buddhists provide a number of arguments to this effect. For example, if the whole were something over and above the parts-in-relation, we could ask where this whole is located. Is it located in every part? If so, then the whole would be multiple. But the whole is distinguished from its parts by being singular. How can it be both one and many at the same time? Furthermore, if we insisted that the whole exists in its parts, we would have to believe that part of the chariot exists in the reins, in the carriage, and in the wheels,

etc. In other words, the whole is distributed throughout its parts. But this means the chariot-whole can be divided into “whole-parts” that are in the various chariot-parts that make up the chariot. Some part of the whole is in the reins, and some part is in the wheels, etc.³⁶ But this introduces new parts, and the problem of whether such parts are identical with, imbued by, or distinct from some underlying whole would regressively reintroduce itself. Moreover, it would not explain what it was supposed to explain, namely, how these parts come together to constitute a whole.³⁷ Finally, this generates a counting problem. Say the chariot was composed of 15 parts. Do we have 15 or 16 objects, the parts-in-relation as well as the whole chariot? Parsimony dictates that we keep the count at 15.

On the other hand, parsimony might dictate keeping the count at 1 (if we really go down the rabbit hole of counting constitutive parts, we’d have a nearly infinite count of electrons, protons, quarks, and parts within parts—something the work of context-sensitive sortals can help us avoid by keeping us tethered to medium-sized objects). So let’s just say we have a single object, a chariot. But then how do things add up when the chariot has a single, dented wheel? In one sense, we can say that the chariot is dented. In another sense, we can say that the front-left wheel is dented, but the other three wheels are not. Taken as a real composite, the chariot is dented. But viewed in terms of only parts, the front-left wheel is dented. Does this mean that a composite is a useful, but ultimately hypostasized entity? Can

³⁶ For a thorough, analytic account of mereological reductionism in Buddhist metaphysics, and Vasubandhu’s attack against the Nyāya belief in real wholes and real substances, see Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), chapter 6, cf. 105-113.

³⁷ Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 109.

we do justice to the idea that there are real composites, and they are not simply conceptual fabrications woven over individual items?

On that measure, Nyāya philosophy appeals to a theory of substances and universals. So, a substance (say, tea) inheres in the atoms of which it is composed. Universals, like redness, inhere in the ruby ring and in the red paint. Naiyāyikas would further argue that a cloth is distinct from the threads of which it is composed, just as the universal quality, redness, is distinct from this particular red swath.³⁸ Now if we were to accept such a robust metaphysics, then we would encounter familiar problems with positing the existence of real universals, and we would definitely add entities to a world that we may otherwise wish to pare down. A vast literature is devoted to this issue in both South Asian and Euro-American philosophy—so I do not intend to rehearse that enduring conversation. Instead, I would like to propose a view developed in Baxter.³⁹ The idea here is that the chariot is exactly 15 things (in my simplified example), but at the same time, it is simply one chariot. The key point here is that if the chariot is genuinely one whole, then we have to devise a way to count the individuals making up that whole as *numerically identical*. Individuals cannot remain numerically distinct at the ultimate level, because then we would remain hampered by the “one versus many” argument (a

³⁸ Ibid, 110: Siderits reconstructs from the classic, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* Vasubandhu’s Buddhist attack against the Nyāya view: “Suppose there is a piece of cloth on the floor, but I can only see a single thread of its fringe. We would not say that I then see the cloth. Why not? If it is because I am seeing just one part of the cloth, then the cloth as a whole is not in that thread. To see the cloth I must see more than just one thread. And if it is a large piece of cloth, I may never see all the threads at one time...but if I never see the cloth as a whole, then it is something that is put together by the mind, not something existing in reality.”

³⁹ Baxter, *Altruism, Grief, and Identity*, 377.

favorite of Buddhist philosophers). Wholes would become mere playthings of the mind.

So how do we defend such a view? Like the Advaita Vedāntin, we can claim that distinction is ultimately illusory (*māyā*). Wholes are not reducible to parts-in-relation, because, in a Bradlyean twist, relations themselves prove illusory. There is simply an inexpressible whole (*Brahman* as *nirguṇa*: “without qualities”), out of which beginningless illusion generates the mistaken belief in pluralism. Some obvious problems plague this view (for example, the problem of explaining, without endorsing dualism, how a single block essence carves out a space of “beginningless illusion,” or, *māyā* within its omnipresent singularity). So let me illustrate another possibility.

Consider Leibniz’s Law. Ted is a handsome father and husband. Ted is also a media tycoon. These are various aspects through which Ted exists. As a loving husband, viewing women as his equals, Ted can object to one of his media outlets airing the Howard Stern show (a depraved show that objectifies women and applauds a multitude of lewd behaviors and outlandish pranks). But as a CEO, for some normatively relevant reason, he can give the green-light on airing the show. This is not a contradiction (although it generates an extreme tension with respect to his personal ethical loyalties and the normative requirements expected of him under the adoption of different social roles). However, when Ted is the CEO of a media empire on January 20th, 1995, then a bald Ted and a long-haired CEO of that empire on January 20th, 1995 would be a contradiction. Under all aspects of Ted considered in that moment, he will have baldness; so it’s a contradiction to say that

he is bald under all aspects in that moment, but not bald under the aspect of being a CEO. Baldness is a quality, or, property he bears whether he's a father, a board-member, or a devout Catholic. So one individual cannot possess and not-possess some property under all aspects. But the same individual can certainly manifest in aspectually complex ways. To say that Ted under one aspect is identical to a composite whole, and under another aspect, is individuated as a particular entity is not to say that he has a certain quality and lacks a certain quality under all aspects of his current existence. This aspectual distinction is akin to saying that Ted is both a morally conservative husband, and a Media tycoon who gives the green-light to a morally reckless show. From one aspect, Ted is an individual; and from a different aspect, Ted is the whole (non-individual). These are not contradictory properties, but only different aspects. We can loosely think of this in terms of time and four-dimensional metaphysics. My thin, unwrinkled self is identical to my plump, wrinkled self, because I am one whole stretched out over time. Granted, in the current spotlight of the present, I cannot be both wrinkled and unwrinkled. But under the aspect of this individual slice, and under the aspect of time taken as a whole block, I can manifest what would be contradictory properties at any single instance. This means that one temporal slice of me has one quality, while another slice has another quality. This is no more contradictory than saying that the road is both straight and curved—one stretch is straight, while another stretch is curved under the aspect of a single, whole road. Likewise, the individual threads of the cloth are whole, and therefore, numerically identical, but under a different aspect, one burnt section of the fringe is black, while another non-burnt section retains its lush,

pomegranate-red hue. There is no illusion involved here. We can view reality as multivalent, and therefore, describable under different aspects of its manifestation.⁴⁰

This view affords us a different angle into the problem of “the one vs. the many.” We do not have to claim that the whole is something “above and beyond” the parts in which it inheres. The whole is simply whole (a fitting tautology), and yet it manifests under the aspect of individuation and numerical distinction. We can count reality in two distinct ways. Likewise, we can count the chariot in two distinct ways. When we count it as one thing, then a dent in its wheel means that the chariot is dented. When I’m rear-ended, I can say that my bumper is dented—but not my hood—and that’s important when I need to locate the damage on my vehicle. But I can just as easily call my insurance agent and file a claim for my “dented car.”

Let me further elucidate, through an example drawn from classical-modern empiricism,⁴¹ the distinction between aspectual complexity and qualitative diversity. Empiricists in Hume’s era might have claimed that it makes sense to talk about a simple, partless property like a red-simple. Consider a red-simple and a blue-simple. The red is similar to the blue in being simple, but it is dissimilar in being a red-simple rather than a blue-simple. So this hypothesized simple, which, *qua* simplicity, is a partless entity, nevertheless shows complexity. It does not have the contradictory *properties* of being similar and dissimilar. Rather, it manifests aspectual complexity.⁴² Likewise, reality does not have the distinct properties of

⁴⁰ Baxter, *Altruism, Grief, and Identity*, 376-383.

⁴¹ Baxter provides this example in *Altruism, Grief, and Identity*, at 379.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 378.

being one and being many; instead, reality may be viewed as aspectually complex, and this is what I mean by “mereological holism.”

Aspectual Complexity and the Ethics of Other Minds

The view I’ve adopted here does not succumb to the problems of simple monism. When a loved one passes away, my family does not have to hold a funeral for me and my dearly departed. In this way, things remain economically parsimonious for my family, and we do not proliferate entities beyond the pale of what commonsense would accept. Obviously, I can participate in the funeral without requiring my own funeral. However, I can also experience a metaphysical absence in my core. In some sense, I’ve been buried away with this dear soul. In this other sense, numerical distinction simply does not apply. This view allows us to do justice to calling a bad carton of eggs a single thing, while admitting that one broken egg in the carton entails only eleven good eggs.

Earlier, I claimed that an inference to the existence of other minds leaves us with an ethically relevant epistemological problem. I cannot know how your grief and suffering directly motivates me, nor if its value lies in anything other than my egocentrically present values. I might accept this fact, and simply believe that your grief only indirectly motivates me. But this can lead us to pernicious solipsism. Moreover, the motivated force of my action only indirectly includes your suffering. By this view, I can never really know how your “external” grief motivates me “internally.” However, with mereological holism, I can now bridge this gap by saying that your suffering is my suffering under the aspect of the whole. Any intrinsic worth my life has is just the intrinsic worth of sentient life as such. Under this view,

altruism may amount to recognition of unity that transcends the concerns of the delimited ego. I recognize myself as the whole, and my ingrained identification with my narrative self is temporarily elided. In other words, I do not project my ego over the whole (as in crude solipsism), but simply recognize pervading unity. Your grief is real, and it really motivates action (and sometimes it directly motivates my action), because grief and suffering are real and shareable as such. Sidgwick's dilemma falls away under the holism of aspectual complexity. Nevertheless, the difference between Śāntideva's ownerless strategy and mereological holism is pronounced. Without a self that underlies (and under an aspect, locates) suffering, and without a unifying thread that allows one to retain and genuinely respond to a flowing stream of passing experiences, altruism and other-regarding considerations remain empty.⁴³ Moreover, experiencing selfhood as such means that the reflexive nature of consciousness is partly constitutive of what existing as self amounts to. While consciousness can be "for itself" (in the sense of being reflexively aware) it can be "for another" (in the ethically relevant sense of caring *for* another) when it sees itself *as* other. But nowhere in this process does the concept of selfhood just fall away. Ownerlessness refers to the ego-self and not the unifying thread of selfhood in general.

⁴³ Perhaps even Śāntideva, at least rhetorically, could not resist such a solution: "If you think that it is for the person who has the pain to guard against it, a pain in the foot is not of the hand, so why is the one protected by the other" (8:99 in Crosby and Skilton; at 96). For this to make sense, the hand and the foot must be identifiable as a single, suffering body. If we extend this to cover suffering creatures in general, then the egoist cannot claim that it is ultimately every individual's own responsibility to cure their own pain. However, Śāntideva resists such a move, because he touts the Buddhist belief that unity and continuity—as well as the self—does not ultimately exist.

While Occam might not have approved of such an inflated metaphysics, this view provides us with the distinct advantage of locating our shared world—replete with shared feelings, and shared joy and suffering—in a field that reverberates with motivating forces available to us all. For the naturalistic-minded person—and for the materialist—this may not be as extravagant as it sounds. A field that manifests as a particle in a collapsed wave-function allows us to speak of the probability of a photon showing up in an exact location, while also allowing us to speak of an amorphous wave that defies exact location: we can speak of a holistic phenomenon that manifests as both wave and particle. No “ghost in the machine” is necessarily required in this model (nor is it inconsistent with this model). I employ this very loose analogy only to emphasize that a physical description of holism—and thus, ultimately “ownerless” and yet delimited manifestations of matter—can similarly make sense of things like quantum entanglement that by another description (of real, metaphysically individuated entities, occupying exact locations) would have to allow information to travel faster than the speed of light. Perhaps my “ethical entanglement” with your feelings allow us to remain numerically distinct while ultimately whole. In the holism I am developing here, altruism would be an emergent phenomenon located in the toggle between my sense of delimitation, and my sense of direct connectedness to a larger whole that transcends the limits of the ego.

4.8.1 Self and Other Minds...a Bridge to Motivated Altruism

I argued that viewing selfhood in terms of a normative, participant self helps ground altruistic reasons. Also, this view of self may provide steps for contextually

determining the authority of altruistic reasons over self-regarding reasons. Basically, when I believe that a context affords me the right to expect (and in this sense, *demand*) help, I cannot consistently claim that, all things equal, your occupying that position does not generate the same demand. In this way, the demand manifests as an “external” constraint, and not a mere product of my subjective desires: it emerges out of background prior-commitments that make communication possible. Just as I believe that my starving child is a reason for those in a position to help to give up some of their time, resources, or energy to help him, anyone else has the same legitimate reason that applies to me in spite of my immediate inclination to ignore their problem. It is altruistic when I recognize and act upon the legitimacy of the demand, without its legitimacy originating in a personal desire or an expectation that I directly benefit from it. Even when we view altruism as supererogation, this view has much to recommend it. On the applied-ethical side, we may not ethically chastise the soldier who does not leap on the landmine. We may not ethically scold the unsuspecting citizen, who, while waiting for a subway car, leaps onto the tracks with a train only dozens of meters away to save the life of a person who has unwittingly fallen on those same tracks. If that were the case, then we would have a whole subway station of morally reprehensible people, and our claim would seem to entail that everyone of able body ought to be a hero. The normative view only claims that reasonable demands emerging out of the background commitments that communication presupposes have normative grip without direct appeal to personal desires and self-regarding considerations. This shows how it can be reasonable to act on behalf of another without immediate

concern for advancing one's own agenda, and without concern for appeasing one's own self-regarding wishes.

Still, my problem with this view is that it leaves motivators out of the story. While much of my argument seems to hinge on a strict distinction between “reason” (rational principle) and “motivation” (a holistic and emotive responsiveness that drives action), this sort of distinction shapes various strategies, and pre-determines various conversations and philosophical puzzles from the outset, puzzles that may otherwise fall away without such prior commitments determining the domain of discourse. The egoistic worldview thrives on just this sort of firm distinction. My believing that it is reasonable—or somehow required—that a stranger who lives thousands of miles away should assist my hurricane-ravaged family is precisely the issue of contention for the egoist. Certainly, if we accept in advance that this is a rational requirement written into the speech-acts that shape our social living, the claim would have some traction. But an egoist might not *demand* help from others (granted, he may *want* it, but we're presumably not talking about only subjective desires or conative motivators at this level of normative analysis). He may believe that his demand is not legitimate, and that it ultimately lacks rational authority despite its emotive force. For example, he sees your new Tesla, and he wants it, but he's under no illusion that his desire entails a legitimate demand; after all, desire alone (so the egoist argues) should not be confused for a principle of action. The egoist might argue that his desire to call out for help should never be confused for an authoritative principle. Likewise, your desiring help from the egoist needs some sort of principled grounding that legitimizes it. While that may be true, perhaps we

go too far to assume that a “principled grounding” arises from some purely cognitive domain that somehow needs to connect to a separate, motivating and conative domain. The larger problem that I believe underlies this contention is the view that rationality somehow conceptually exists beyond the pale of motivators. Unlike Kant, I would argue that emotive force and motivation is bound up with rational reasons—by that, I mean that without a proper emotional economy, rationality would have no bearing on our lives; and this is not just a contingent issue; rationality shows up experientially as felt and emotively charged reasons. Not only do I respect your inherent dignity, but I also *feel* your worth. I *feel* the worth of acting on principle, and that is part of experiencing my decision as a rational choice. Sometimes the principle shines so powerfully that it requires things of me at odds with my immediate inclinations, and I experience considerable cognitive and emotional tension. But I nevertheless *feel* the weight of its authority (and I don’t mean this trivially—its authority is communicated through an emotive and representational pathway that allows it to show up as a guiding value).

You might argue that, metaethically, this reduces moral values to conative forces, thus rendering talk of truth-values moot when it comes to moral judgments. But I’m suggesting that we explore the possibility of our capacity to really share—not merely infer—an emotional ground that dovetails into guiding values. The truth-value of the principle lies in a common ground of experience, which under one aspect shows up as a motivating, emotional force, and under another aspect, shows up as representational content, something like a demand or a commitment. We have something that is both belief *and* feeling. This view requires making sense of how

any such “common ground” exists. Can we directly share common feelings, or do we only indirectly infer them? The latter possibility is attractive when we view an embodied psychophysical organism as part of a closed system. This sort of biological computer would operate on inputs and “decision modules”—replete with decision-trees and evaluation functions that adjust themselves to perturbations in its nervous system. I am suggesting that this requires we view “sharing” as inferences that keep us one-step removed from the environment (and our fellow creatures) that afford “inputs” for the organic system. But just as in the case of a cell membrane, perhaps the borders of our psyches—our thoughts and feelings—are more porous than we imagine. What we need to do is make sense of the exchange of ethically relevant materials that penetrate the dynamic membrane of our practical, ethical, and emotion-driven lives.

On the ethical and epistemological front, this leads us to the problem of other minds. Empathy and compassion—not just pristinely principled reason—can motivate us to do what we feel is right. Sometimes the right thing to do is act on behalf of another without expecting (or desiring) anything in return. But how do I come to feel the gravity of your situation, how does your suffering or joy directly motivate my action, rather than remain an indirectly inferred data-point in a causal chain? Can I really know that your suffering motivates me to act strictly on your behalf? I do not believe that inference gets us there, partly because of its dearth of emotive force, and partly because I endorse the view that a third-person description of consciousness does not fully capture *qualia* and the “what-it’s-likeness” of a first-

person experience. In other words, the conscious *feeling* of grief or suffering is not just another object in the world, like a lap-top, stone, or a tree.

I offer one basic argument to defend this latter point. Any good revision must make sense of my experience. I still see the sun setting daily, but I do not believe it actually sinks below the horizon. I know that the appearance is caused by the rotation of the earth (among other things). Still, the revision that allows me to dispense with my thought also provides an answer to why I experience things that way. The self-reflexivity thesis, endorsed by both Abhinavagupta and Dharmakīrti—a thesis that I endorse—is not explained by an objectified account of the first-person experience. You might provide an excellent account of the physical mechanisms that underlie immersion in an experience, but you can only do so by ignoring the first-person experience altogether. The revision has not explained my experience, but instead, it has explained it away. Similarly, as Abhinavagupta points out, self-reflexive awareness is not an object that I can perceive. Even when I introspect, this occurs against a background of awareness already presupposed by the “inward gaze.”

Something like this last point—the inherently reflexive and first-personal view of consciousness—underwrites various forms of idealism. Dharmakīrti, and other Vijñānavāda Buddhists, provide ample reasons for endorsing idealism. While the Pratybhijñā philosophy of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta also endorses idealism, it parts with Dharmakīrti in positing both a real self, and metaphysical monism. These views collectively amount to solipsism, which on the surface seems to perniciously undermine the coherence of other-centric and altruistic

considerations. However, Abhinavagupta’s solution to the problem of otherness and other minds nicely parallels the mereological holism I have developed above. This is where I believe the metaphysical view has some distinct advantages in being able to better explain our sense that we share feelings, and these sometimes motivate selfless action. I will conclude by more thoroughly explaining how Abhinavagupta helps get us there, and what this might mean for altruistic action.

4.8.2 “Guessing” the Existence of Other Minds: A Śaivite Account of Reaching Common Ground

In his *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā-vimarśini* (IPV), Abhinavagupta comments upon Utpaladeva’s claim that “through action, knowledge of others is guessed (*ūhyate*).” Two things are puzzling in this claim. First, a superficial read of the claim might identify it as a form of behaviorism. I see Chakrabarti act in the right ways, and I assume that he is conscious just like me. Second, it seems that by “guessing” the agency and sentience of Chakrabarti (by observing his behavior), I’m only inferring that he has a mind. However, Abhinavagupta argues that Utpala uses the concept of “guessing” to avoid the claim that we infer the existence of other minds.⁴⁴ At stake in the distinction between “guessing” and empirically inferring is the belief that consciousness cannot be objectified, and thus, empirically inferred. Your feeling

⁴⁴ Cited from Ratié, *Otherness*, 355. The IPV verse:

| *ūhyata ity anena jñānasya prameyatvaṃ na nirvahatīti darśayati anyathā hy anumīyata iti brūyāt* ||

By “is guessed” (*ūhyate*), [Utpala] indicates that knowledge cannot bear to be an object (*prameya*), for otherwise he would have said [instead]: “is inferred” (*anumīyata*). IPV, volume I, 49.

is not an object that operates as a data-point in a causal chain motivating my action. Like the Buddhist idealists, the Advaita-Śaivite would not stand for explaining away the reflexive first-person experience through an objectifying third-person account. Your feeling is inherently first-personal and reflexive, something the description of a data-point or causal force does not directly explain.

But imagine if we adopted the inference model. Your suffering enters into the causal story of my decision to help you. But the only first-person presence I experience appears from a single vantage-point. I may act *as if* there were other minds with vantage-points, but “this immediate and singular presence” is all that I directly encounter. I do not need to commit to any metaphysical view of self here. On a purely empirical basis, I observe that the “I” is simply the vantage-point from which things are present in a first-person way.⁴⁵ Other first-person experiences are only inferred, and remain within the fictionalist-domain of “*as if*” semantics. Acting for the sake of the common good, or solely for the sake of your well-being, would amount to me acting out of the presence of my first-person considerations. Granted, the target of my action—that is, a sentient-sapient creature for which things can matter—is objectified as a special sort of perceptual object, but as an object nevertheless. Any sense of “I-ness” that would connect my action to an *agent*, and not a passive or inert object, would be derivative of the only “I” that I experience—*myself* (the one for whom things are present).⁴⁶ This does not rule out the possibility of acting on considerations of the greater good, but it comes with the caveat that all

⁴⁵ Caspar Hare develops this view in *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects*. He calls this “Egocentric Presentism.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, see chapter 1.

of my considerations are derivative of egocentric concerns. These are not necessarily selfish concerns, but they are always egocentrically *present* concerns. In other words, I am unable to be directly motivated by your suffering, or immediately experience you as a self-aware person for whom I can altruistically act. We lose the possibility of a directly other-centric action, because we lose the possibility of directly encountering the other.

Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva attack the inference hypothesis, because it objectifies consciousness. And yet, their monistic-idealism amounts to solipsism, and so the same sort of problem with respect to other-centricity also seems to emerge. However, Abhinavagupta develops Utpaladeva's point further, and offers what I believe is a solution to the problem that is very much aligned with the account of mereological holism I developed earlier. To develop Abhinavagupta's argument further, we need to look at some important premises driving his account.

Key Premises

[**Premise 1**]: Consciousness, understood as reflexive awareness, is a form of knowing, in the sense that perceptions include “self-grasping” (*svasaṃvedana*)⁴⁷ and “internal grasping” (*saṃrambha*).

⁴⁷ By this account, it seems, any expression of sentience would be, simultaneously, *sapient*. So if I were willing to admit that my beloved dog is sentient—which I am willing to admit—then my dog would be included in the class of things that have knowledge. More problematic, however, is the idea that consciousness comes with “self-grasping.” The view that a self is only formed in language, and that any robust notion of “I-ness” requires complex language-use and a developed self-narrative would not permit bare consciousness, say of a toad or a horsefly, into the class of things that have a self. But this problematic notion is also compelling: conscious things may very well be “selves” at various orders of complexity. This issue goes well beyond what I can cover here.

- By “self-grasping” I am referring to the view that when *P* is cognized, the cognizing of *P* is also simultaneously cognized.
- “Internal grasping” refers to my capacity to recognize that what is inert in my perception, say, this white sheet of paper, is indelibly manifested in a first-person experience; this is my conscious state cognizing a white sheet of paper. In this way, perception is always active and (at least in a broad sense) knowledge-producing (it manifests the knowledge of its own awareness).

[**Premise 2**]: Knowledge, understood as an inherent facet of consciousness, does not “shine as an object” (*na...jñānam idantayā bhāti*).⁴⁸ In other words, we do not experience the consciousness of other minds as a mere object, just as we do not experience our own minds as empirical objects replete with spatially locatable properties.

- For Abhinavagupta, consciousness is self-manifested in the sense that it cannot be proved, but only presupposed in any proof. For it to be the sort of thing that we experience, say, introspectively as an object, would be unthinkable, because experiencing my consciousness already presupposes the very awareness I may aim to objectify. Viewing the self as background reflexive-awareness, explains why Hume and the Buddha could not find the empirical object they were introspectively seeking: self-awareness is empirically transparent.
- The immediate grasping of my own conscious state is called “*vimarśa*,” and unlike Dharmakīrti, Abhinavagupta does not see the inherently conceptual

⁴⁸ See Ratié, *Otherness*, 356, where she quotes IPV.

nature of perception as error-producing, or something that covers over an initially non-conceptual and ephemeral property-trope. Instead, self-awareness is a self-standing background constraint.

These premises underwrite Abhinavagupta's solution to the problem of other minds. The "guess" of which Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva speak, amounts to a kind of recognition rather than a rational inference. Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva would agree that we distinguish the conscious from the inert by observing agency, but this is not an ordinary empirical claim. In Dharmakīrti's system, a *kārya-hetu* inference connects two independent events by locating one as part of the causal story of the other. But in his auto-commentary on the IPV, Abhinavagupta argues that our "guess" of other minds is an inference of the *svabhāva-hetu* variety. When I observe a closed-plane figure consisting of three and only three sides, I am grounded in calling this a triangle. I soon come to recognize that I am warranted in making the claim that the sum of two right angles is equivalent to the sum of the angles in a triangle by appealing only to the meaning of the terms involved. I was not initially in a position to make this claim, because I was initially confused about the nature of triangles and right angles. In this way, inferring that when I see the triangle, I also see the sum of two right angles does not provide me with independent, empirical knowledge. Similarly, when I see consciousness incarnated, say, in the speech-act of a person, I am not making an empirical inference between two independent events, one of which stands as the cause of the other (as in Dharmakīrti's argument). Instead, I recognize that the very essence of consciousness includes action. In this sense, I am "guessing" (but not inferring) the existence of

other minds, because I am coming to recognize that what allows me to call this an “action” (and not just a mere event) grounds my calling this an incarnation of consciousness.

But how does Abhinavagupta ground such a claim? The key lies in Premise 1. Consciousness is viewed as inherently knowledge-producing in the sense that it discloses itself in the very act of cognizing. Now, in Dharmakīrti’s example of the speech-act/mental-state pervasion (*vyāpta*), we can distinguish a mental state from the action it underwrites. However, for Abhinavagupta, since perception is itself already an action (in the sense that it grasps an external object while simultaneously grasping itself), incarnated action is only the final stage of consciousness itself. The power of “internal action” (*āntarī kriyāśaktiḥ*) is not something I infer. It is something immediately experienced, because to hypothetically observe consciousness grasping itself and grasping an object (say, as a third cognition observing the relation between the latter two) would, again, presuppose the very act of grasping I am attempting to observe. Consciousness does not see itself grasping itself as it might see a cup of tea on the desk. In the very act of seeing the tea, consciousness recognizes its own seeing. This may partly explain why I am shocked that what I was looking for was right in front of my eyes the whole time (literally), and yet, it is not as though upon learning this I see a new object filling space where, before, I was gazing at a mere void, or, an absence. Instead, I realize that in distraction (*moha*), I was indeed gazing at an object without explicitly recognizing the nature of the object standing before me. Consciousness was at work taking in its experience even in my distracted state.

The idea here is that just as I recognize that the wave in the ocean is a partial state (*aṃśā*) of the ocean itself, I recognize that the action of the person in front of me is a manifested state of consciousness.⁴⁹ This view is attractive, because it collapses the distinction between logical behaviorism and irreducible first-person awareness—we move past the problem Wittgenstein was getting at with his “beetle in a box.” We do not reduce the inherent first-person experience of consciousness to a mere set of describable actions and subjunctives. Nor do we puzzle over how to connect first-person thoughts with external behavior. In some sense, we actually perceive consciousness incarnated through the carrying out of what (logically, not temporally) begins as an internal, but sentient action manifesting in bodily movement.

When we couple this view with mereological holism, we provide ourselves with just the tools we need to share motivating emotional states. In one state of the whole, I am numerically distinct from you, and can experience the independent validity of your needs (and my own). However, I may also come to recognize (in the sense that I re-cognize a background unity that was always there to begin with) the inherently motivating state of suffering itself. Suffering is “owned,” because it belongs to a suffering-self. But the suffering is only delimited by the incarnated manifestation of the whole under the aspect of individuation. This is the sense in

⁴⁹ Ratié, *Otherness*, 359: “And just as, when we perceive a wave, we are not perceiving an entity that would be different from the river and that the river would produce while remaining ontologically distinct from it, but a mere aspect (*aṃśā*) of the river itself...in the same way, to perceive the other’s action is not to perceive an entity different from him or her, and merely related to him or her by a causality relation, for the relation between a subject and his action is not a relation of causality but a relation of identity—only the latter is a partial aspect of the former, his objective aspect.”

which Abhinavagupta would argue that my awareness of you is recognition of my own subjectivity,⁵⁰ but not of the empirically grounded sort of ego-solipsism that “Egocentric Presentism” describes.⁵¹ I am not alone as a solitary ego. When we communicate with each other, and I recognize your suffering as the sort of thing that would prompt you to seek help, our subjectivity in some sense “fuses.”⁵² The degree to which I take your suffering seriously, and the degree to which it motivates me as it does you, is the degree to which it is possible for me to see past our distinctly self-interested trajectories, and act on behalf of the larger suffering I see before me. To see your suffering at this level is to see past the narrative and participant identity that shapes my social self, and recognize a will to act that responds to suffering as such. My delimited-ego is no longer the only ground of my action. Suffering itself moves me to act in the recognition that suffering requires action. Of course, at the applied level, the context will determine what sort of action suffering requires (for example, if we’re talking about helpful suffering, or suffering that warrants an act of omission). But I can respond to something beyond the constellation of “egocentrically present” empirical perceptions, because the motivation of my action does not need to be reduced to something my ego-self “owns.”

In this sense, I am merely pointing a way toward a metaphysical self. We may argue that unity across sensory modalities—my capacity to touch now what I saw then—requires a synthesizing self that allows me to experience the sensory

⁵⁰ Ratié, *Otherness*, 363: “To be aware of others is to recognize in them my own subjectivity.”

⁵¹ See fn. 42.

⁵² *Ibid*, 364: “For communication, according to [Abhinava and Utpala], is nothing but a partial fusion of the different limited subjects. Such a fusion is possible because the absolute consciousness is, in its essence, a free agency.”

wholeness of objects. We may argue that to make sense of a memory being more than an item of consciousness related to some earlier item in the “right way,” we need a unifying thread that makes these both experiences of a single self. But I am arguing that to make sense of my capacity to be directly motivated by suffering that is not just my own—and thus, not derived from strictly egocentric grounds—I must be able, in some sense, to directly experience manifested consciousness outside the boundaries of my narrative ego. The metaphysical self would simply be the background awareness that is presupposed in having a first-person experience, but not necessarily limited to a single vantage-point. Mereological holism is one way of providing a metaphysics that can support such a view, but the need for such a view is driven by the presuppositions of ethics. When I act for your sake, I am not just responding to stimuli locked into a closed psychophysical system. I can, in favored moments, transcend the ego, and be motivated to act in and for a larger whole that sometimes manifests as considerations for the greater good.

CONCLUSION

I can contract the notion of a self to a dense, but empty space. I can view the self as a place-holder, a necessary fiction that helps organize and support a purely biological, thinking system. But I can also expand the notion of self so far out that the place where one constellation of thoughts, feelings, and emotions leaves off, and another's begins, grows vague. The Buddhists believe that vagueness shows how the self is nothing other than a conceptual imputation, an error that might be remedied and experientially recognized. However, when we begin with assessing the self outside of the context of life and its ethical demands, we might more readily avail ourselves of puzzles and arguments that I believe hold less weight considering the demands that others often place upon us.

We might consider the metaphysical question of the existence of Self to be entirely distinct from the very practical, ethical question of what this contextually situated person ought to do, and for whom this person ought to do it. But in chapter 1, I argued that ontological (and metaphysical) commitments carry normative force. At very least, "purely" theoretical beliefs commit us to various other beliefs, and in this way, present us with what we *ought to do* (namely, adopt and endorse certain beliefs). Thus, believing is a kind of action, and therefore our ontological commitments and non-commitments will impact what it makes sense for us to do, as belief is bound up within a cluster of dynamic actions and responses to experience. Claiming that selves do not exist—in the way some Buddhists have—is consistent with acts of omission that we would usually view as being negligent and selfish. The Buddhists believe that suffering is the fundamental existential predicament that

must be eradicated, and the chief culprit of this disease is “clinging,” or, the natural selfishness that comes with believing that we persist over time, and that we must obtain various goods for ourselves in that span of time. This highlights the natural origin of self-regarding and self-centered concerns. From this perspective, we are presented with the problem of determining the origin and rationality of directly pursuing someone else’s concerns, especially when the pursuit comes at a considerable cost to our own well-being. Pursuing our own good needs little justification, but making another’s concern the sole target of our action requires some explanation.

The Buddhist, particularly Śāntideva, provides an ingenious solution: the non-existence of a persisting or substantive self means that the suffering we witness and react to is *ownerless*. Put simply, *I have no reason to be selfish, since there is nothing for this empty self to obtain or lose*. To this point, I argued that either the conclusion does not follow from the premises—having no reason to be self-centered is consistent with having no reason to care about others—or we need to commit to moral truths that exist in the fabric of being itself; namely, we must commit to the idea that self-aware suffering, even if ownerless, is inherently bad. But if we can have something like a basic moral truth written into the fabric of being, then it would not be preposterous to assume that selves can exist at the most basic ontological level, especially given how useful the concept is for making sense of memory, the synthesis of sensory experience that unifies objects and events, synchronic identity (and its implications for self-regarding concerns), and communication through language.

To the charge that our normative and practical identity is sufficient to make sense of other-regarding considerations and obligations—and therefore, metaphysics is again left to the dusty armchairs of Baroque thinkers—I argue that even a normative self is consistent with an attenuated form of rational egoism. The normative self is constituted by its various commitments, many of which are inherently other-regarding; but other-regarding commitments make little sense when they are not grounded in background concerns for our own personal projects. I sacrifice my time, time that I can devote to earning money, furthering my career, or simply enjoying the free play of my senses, to help my son complete his homework, even when he shows little respect for me or the process of learning. This is not too difficult to understand. But when I do it free of charge for your child, or for a stranger’s child, what sense does that make? I am endowed with a healthy dose of benevolence, but so what. My personal endowments hardly justify obligations, especially obligations on your part. Show me that we’re all better for expressing states of compassion and other-centric concern, show me that my projects are supported and nurtured by such virtuous qualities, and now I’ve got a direct reason to cultivate other-regarding virtues.

I explored the possibility that reasons, produced out of the normative sphere of speech-acts, carry “external force” to the extent that we attempt to communicate and to understand one another. To use a word is to be committed to its contextually-shaped meaning regardless of what some individual desires. So, it is possible to take on desire-independent obligations, that is, obligations that simply come with being a language-user participating in the social play of communication. But I think it

presumes too much to assume that when I plead for you not to treat me inhumanely, that I believe that my pleading necessarily provides you with a reason to respect my wish. Certainly, if I believe this to be true, then the reason should apply universally, and in this way, I now have a reason to respect your humanity despite my immediate or occurrent desires. But the very issue at stake is whether my pleading really is a reason for you to promote my well-being. Certainly, you may understand why I *wish* for you to stop torturing me—and in this way, my speech-act works in the context—but nothing in my pleading necessarily requires that you (or even me, for that matter) recognize an external obligation to stop. Plain old wishes do not amount to commands. A greater affective force must be in play to charge that reason with any sort of compelling, obligatory force.

When I view the self as non-substantial, or, an empty place-holder for a *singular point of view*, then I am presented with a kind of pernicious solipsism. I cannot account for subjectivity other than my own, but I can indirectly infer that you enjoy “presence,” or, the first-person experience of a world. This view may have some ethical benefits. I am faced with the problem of harmonizing my self-regarding considerations—my mildly hedonistic, self-centered considerations—with considerations of the greater good. I would like to be able to help myself in helping you, and, likewise, I would like to avoid self-abnegation while acting upon and taking other-regarding considerations seriously. When I treat you “as if” you enjoy a perspective, and to this degree, I take your “as if” needs into consideration, then I’m acting out of my egocentrically present experience of subjectivity, and I am ultimately doing so for the sake of something that matters to me, namely, “you” (the

indirectly inferred first-person experience that is not directly present to me). In some sense, then, any other-regarding consideration will be derivative of (or secondary to) the only present considerations that I can act upon, *my own*. So, I reach out to help you “as if” you have needs like my own. I sacrifice my energy and well-being for you “as if” your needs matter to you. But I happily exist with you in a web of fictional intersubjectivity that ultimately only begins and ends with me.

My problem with this is that it underestimates my capacity to recognize subjectivity and consciousness, incarnate, and manifesting on the very sleeves of your actions (or better still, *as your actions*). As I argued in chapter 4, to see you as an agent is not a theoretical assumption I must make (A.I. bots notwithstanding), it’s something I simply recognize when clear-headed. I do not usually confuse the rolling rocks for children gleefully rolling down hills. When I watch the child leap from the swing, I watch her will incarnate. I see agency in the flesh. The data-point is not a set of molecules, or some substantial entity that I can measure. Rather, I can be immediately familiar with action as an extension of will. Not only can I possess familiarity with other minds, but I can also distinguish these minds from non-minds without availing myself of complicated inferences to the best explanation. In short, *I share a world with you*. We might even go so far to say that this primordial “we” is the background out of which “I” has a point of view.

In 8:99 of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva challenges the egoist: “If you think that it is for the person who has pain to guard against it, a pain in the foot is not of the hand, so why is the one protected by the other?” If my pain is privileged simply because it is viscerally experienced as being distinctly *mine*, then why should

I care so much for a distinct part that does not constitute my selfhood. The hand is distinct from the foot, so why does it bother to massage the aching foot when it does not directly experience any pains itself? The crying child is not me or my own, so why should I bother myself with its pain? When it comes to my body parts, the answer is painfully obvious: they are both parts of a whole, and in this way, a pain in the foot is a pain in the hand is a pain for the whole person. Situated in context, I may have to focus on the exact location of this pain (the doctor stitches the laceration of my foot, not my hand). But from another description, *I* am simply in pain, and require attention, whether I locate the pain in my head, my foot, my back, or my thoughts. Śāntideva's point is compelling with respect to another's pain, when, despite his Ownerless view, he seems to argue that we may share each other's pain. I both recognize a distinctly located instance of pain—the pain of another—and I recognize pain writ large over the whole. Likewise, I never remain smug, because “only my foot is aching, not *me*.” My aching feet are simply a description of the whole me, suffering in this very moment.

Just as the concept of self unifies and synthesizes an otherwise chaotic panoply of dislocated events and sensory experiences, it can also unify instances of needless suffering, and motivating pleas for help. The self is an inherently recognized, but not empirically measured, source of unity. Kant taught us this much. But when the dynamic flow of events rests upon a substantial base underlying and threading our experiences, then it can unify not only my own world, but also *our* world. The vagueness arguments the Buddhists offer—the fact that the “one” cannot be both one and many—and the Ownerless thesis they offer to motivate unselfish

behavior, can actually work in favor of positing a unifying self that synthesizes distinct experiences. Composites can be real. We can speak both of the whole house, and of its termite-rotten foundations. The house has monetary value as a whole. This can be measured by parts that only show up as “parts,” because they belong to a whole. The house can be accurately described as one *and* many. Hegel taught us this much. Likewise, my debilitating loneliness may be described and recognized as more than an infinitely dense and singular point in a lonely private world. It is “ownerless” (and thus capable of being co-owned) to the extent that it can be shared with you, who may or may not elect to recognize and act upon that instance of suffering.

I recognize that a heavy price comes with the sort of monism I am endorsing. Empirically, this is far-fetched and does not address the real or very useful distinctions that push knowledge forward. Moreover, I seem to be reifying an abstract unifying principle, a conceptual scheme that is useful in categorizing and clumping our world together, but proves to be lame with respect to honoring the rich variety of distinct items that make up our world. “Nature” is not a thing, it’s a variety of things that are sometimes usefully designated in the singular. Hume taught us as much.

However, vagueness and counting and Sorites problems plague our conceptual categories. Medium-sized objects turn out to be many things depending upon which categories of analysis are most useful to a context. And this problem arises in the context of empirical knowledge and the reductionist program. The program seems most successful when it privileges a particular reduction-base, a set

of foundational structures that we can say (or hope) accounts for the self, the medium-sized object, the molecule, the electron, etc. Believing that reality has some privileged base of analysis is a regulative ideal that motivates reductionistic explanations, and to the degree that such reductions proffer greater control of our environment, they remain compelling. This may even operate at the level of ethical analysis. The belief that I can come to *know* your pain, and learn what you need may motivate me to analyze our experiences into a base of shareable elements. The problem is that unifying things to the point of a Parmenidian “One” amounts to an inscrutable, and ultimately inexpressible, block that does little to explain what we as individuals ought to bother ourselves with, and in this world, we must bother ourselves with quite a lot, particularly, ethically salient social relationships.

I am not, therefore, recommending that we are all the properties of some one, grand *thing*. I am exploring the possibility that reality shows up under different aspects of itself, aspects that support speaking in terms of individuals, and aspects that support speaking in terms of a whole composite. Properties operate at the level of aspectual descriptions, they are not the aspects themselves. My foot, described as an individual, has a laceration that needs mending. My body—as a *whole*—requires mending, because the whole thing has been compromised. When I can view your pain as a property of you as an individual, but I can also recognize it as our pain—or “pain as such,” recognized under the aspect of a whole flow of suffering—then I can directly know of pain existing outside the borders of my skin, and I can therefore be motivated to mend a pain that is not distinctly my own. I can be motivated to mend a pain that is not isolated inside the sphere of my own private experience. By saying

this, I am not intending to reify some singular, block “whole.” I am simply recognizing that mereological vagueness, and endless reductions that find deeper and deeper levels of analysis proceed because they do not “bottom out” in a privileged set of material things. They are aspects of a dynamic “bringing-forth” that can be described as “whole” to the extent that speaking about boundaries at this level is meaningless. When it comes to my capacity to be motivated by a target that is not derivative of my embodied history and constellation of personal concerns, the reasons I have for helping you are supported by my capacity to acknowledge you, in the literal sense that I come to know *you*. In this way, I can sometimes, like a character acting in a play, embodying a narrative and emotional field much larger than “Kevin,” act *as* you (as *us*). Therefore, I can act *for* you. Unwittingly, Buddhist No-Selfism and interdependence, becomes a truly interdependent whole, bridging the empty space between self and other through the ownerless (or, under certain descriptions, unbounded and co-ownable) flow of a shared *Self*.

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