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The Influence of 'No-self' on Ethics

Rachel Munger

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to explore the ethical implications of a Theravāda Buddhist doctrine of 'no-self.' To refer to 'no-self' or to a 'not-self' is to state something unsurprising, given the directly negated relationship: 'there is not' [a] self. Conceptually speaking, 'no-self' entails a denial of 'self' wherein which 'self' is an entity that is independent and enduring. 'No-self' not only refers to something which one might otherwise *think* possesses 'self' (such as a person) but also to the 'conceptual' universe at large. In Buddhism, it is said that 'all' is without 'self.'

In Buddhism the concept of a self [*Ātman*] is taken to postulate something wholly free from phenomenal determination, an entity independent of the process of karmic conditioning. Hence, when it is argued that because both the body and consciousness depend on previous conditions for their existence [it is conclusive that] 'body is not an independent entity [and] consciousness is a 'not-self.'" When the term is applied to a plural subject, particularly in the axiom 'all things are 'not-self,' the form is ambiguous and could be interpreted as 'without self'...in any case, the term applies to any and every item of the Buddhist conceptual universe.¹

¹ Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 95.

Rather than assuming the doctrine of ‘no self,’ I will argue for it, for there is no value in examining the ethical implications of the ‘no-self’ doctrine unless it seems like a plausible worldview to begin with. I consider ‘no-self’ in the light of Derek Parfit’s argument about personal identity – that there is no ‘further fact’ to personal identity – for Parfit’s reasoning about personal identity is on par with the flavor of thought that is to be found in the Buddhist tradition. In denying that there is a ‘further fact’ to personal identity, Parfit suggests that the ‘self’ exists only insofar as it has a superficial ‘location’ within the framework of human grammar and insofar as the concept is practical and convenient for the ways in which we must live our lives; he would not allow for the ‘self’ to be an independent entity, occupying its own ontological realm. In this way, Parfit’s argument as well as Buddhist arguments for the non-existence of ‘self’ target a specific ‘kind’ of ‘self’ which resembles a Cartesian Ego.²

Parfit recognizes the overlap between his ideas and those found in Buddhism, as he discusses Buddhist philosophy at several points in his book *Reasons and Persons*. It is important for me to emphasize that, like Parfit’s conception of ‘self,’ a Buddhist doctrine of ‘no-self’ does not deny the existence of ‘self’ at *every* level of existence, just at an ‘ultimate level’ – at a level at which metaphysical and ontological speculation takes place. In recognizing this characteristic of Buddhist thought, actually the only time there would be a problem with speaking of a ‘self’ would be when speaking under a philosophical umbrella in such a way

² It is this conception of ‘self,’ which I oppose. It can be thought of as a Cartesian Ego, but it can also be thought of just as easily as any number of other conceptions of a special ontologically privileged ‘self’ such as the self conceptualized by the Sanskrit term, *Ātman*, an integral part of the tradition of Hinduism as well as Buddhism (Theravāda Buddhism specifically having rejected such an entity as *Ātman*, giving way to its counter position, *Anātman* (no-self)).

that suggests its existence as something 'more' than its human construction from language and experience.

'Buddhism' does not represent a unitary system of belief and practice, and 'Buddhist texts' do not display a unitary type of discourse...the doctrine of *anattā* [no-self] and the problems of personality and continuity explained in its light form only part of the active religious life of virtuoso meditations and scholastic intellectuals[...] It is only where matters of systematic philosophical and psychological analysis are openly referred to or presupposed on the surface level of discourse that there is imposed this rigid taboo on speaking of a 'self' or 'person.'³

The spirit of Buddhism includes cheerfully and straightforwardly pursuing knowledge of both human life in its simplest terms and 'salvation' in its simplest terms. The way the Buddhist thinker justifies a belief in 'no-self' is on grounds of what may appear to be well-thought-out human psychology. However, in addition to describing human psychology, the Buddha does so also with a purpose in mind – one involving compassion for humanity. Essentially, the Buddhist thinker does not seek truth 'for truth's sake,' but rather does so in order to reach certain ends – specifically, soteriological ones, i.e. those related to ethics.

In order to draw ethical implications from the 'no-self' doctrine, it will be necessary to explore the doctrine of 'rebirth,' as the latter sheds light on how the former doctrine situates the relationship between one being and another. For the purposes of this paper, my discussion of 'rebirth' can be considered something of an ethical thought experiment. I will only be evaluating the concept of 'rebirth' with regard to what it would mean to be 'reborn' as beings without 'selves.' I will not be evaluating the concept of 'rebirth' such that we could decipher, in its *totality*, what it means to be 'reborn' from a Buddhist perspective.

³ Collins, 70-71.

It seems that the purpose of ethical discourse is to answer a variety of ‘ought’ questions. “How ought we to live?” would be ‘the’ question someone could ask and expect an answer to in ethical discourse. In order to answer this question, however, it is necessary that we firstly understand how we ought to *view ourselves*, our existence as human beings. Ultimately, how we view ourselves determines how we feel we ought to live our lives. It influences what we feel the ‘good life’ is, for, in recognizing the nature of ourselves, we also come to recognize the kinds of relationships we possess in respect towards other beings in our conceptual universe. With a denial of ‘self,’ there include specific characteristics in how we ought to view these relationships and thus how we ought to view our ideas about the nature of morality – by which guidelines we ought to live our lives.

Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths & its Relation to ‘Self’⁴

The first of the Four Noble Truths is that ‘life is *dukkha*.’ *Dukkha* has been translated as ‘suffering.’ However, a much better translation is ‘unsatisfactoriness.’

Interpreters of Buddhism have often been puzzled by the idea of *dukkha* – it is clearly wrong to suggest that life is experienced as continuous suffering, and Buddhism has been thought a little over-pessimistic and peevish to suggest that what suffering there is overshadows the pleasure. Two things lead one to a correct understanding. First, *dukkha* is most precisely translated as ‘frustration’ or ‘unsatisfactoriness’ – and this is a judgment passed not as a description of life but as a reflective conclusion drawn from soteriologically oriented premises. Second, the suffering, or ‘unsatisfactoriness’ is not purely personal, but includes the experience of all beings, as a characterization of *samsāric* life as a whole.⁵

⁴ To be familiar with the Four Noble Truths may add a richness to one’s understanding of the motivation for the birth and implications of the concept of ‘no-self’.

⁵ Collins, 191.

Samsāra is the continual process of birth, death, and rebirth, and every being in *samsāric* life is subject to *dukkha*. What creates this 'suffering' (*dukkha*) is revealed in the second of the Four Noble Truths: this 'unsatisfactoriness' arises from an attachment to desires. The frustration with life we experience as humans comes from clinging to and craving things that we desire. Indeed, if we humans don't fulfill certain base desires, our lives can be miserable, and, even if we have our base desires fulfilled, people generally do not feel satisfied with their lives due to a variety of other possible reasons. This is common sense – people tend to want more, no matter how much they have, however you wish to interpret 'having' more, whether it be rooted in the senses (manifested through the desire for pleasure) or rooted in the intellect or emotions. Buddhism, at its core, can actually be thought of as a philosophical study in human psychology, and a descriptive study at that. Essentially, it is saying that 'this is the way we are' – if we are not always 'suffering' in the sense of *dukkha*, at least the parts in life that are pleasant (that we desire) are passing, and the fact that everything we desire is transient causes perpetual distress for the human family (and the biological family at large). The third of the Four Noble Truths connects the first two together, stating simply that if we are to only dissolve our desires, we can then dissolve our frustration with life. The fourth of the four noble truths claims that if you follow the Buddha's Eightfold Path, one can diminish desires and the clinging to transient objects, freeing oneself from such suffering as is conceptualized in *dukkha*. The psychological implications of the Four Noble Truths are important for understanding why we so vehemently believe in 'self' (and why such a belief is harmful and problematic).⁶ More importantly for the Buddhists who

⁶ To 'desire' not only *presupposes* a 'self' but also *reinforces* its supposed existence...this is seen as problematic from a Buddhist soteriological

live by these tenants, being able to overcome a belief in and attachment to a ‘self’ (*Ātman*) is one of the necessary steps in extinguishing the *harmful* properties of human desire.⁷

Self, or lack thereof

I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.
—John Lennon⁸

In exploring only one significant part of Theravāda Buddhist thought, and, in a way, attempting to remove the doctrine of ‘no-self’ from its cultural and historical background, we examine it from a philosophical and psychological point of view, examining its ethical implications.

Derek Parfit, in his book, *Reasons and Persons*, argues for a reductive account of personal identity. His methodology of crafting an argument includes examining what make up the lives of persons to discover if there is any ‘further fact’ to personal identity as well as using a variety of thought experiments to illustrate justification for assuming a reductionist view. Parfit gives the example of teletransportation. He details a scenario wherein an individual is going to be relocated to Mars via some futuristic scanner that destroys an individual’s body and brain, records the exact location of all the specific particles involved in their cellular make up, then ‘relocating’ that person on Mars by using this information to create the ‘same’ person out of the physical matter available on Mars. Parfit asks if this person is the same. We have a tendency to say that this person is obviously different (being made of physically different

perspective, for it reinforces harmful concepts and false beliefs in ‘me’ and ‘mine.’

⁷ It is easier to shed human desires once one can identify with something more all-encompassing than the ‘conventional self’ of ‘every day reality.’

⁸ “I am the Walrus,” 1967.

material), and yet, so much of the person (their personality, memory, appearance) is the same that we have a difficult time saying they are actually significantly different. Parfit's ultimate conclusion about the self is that there is no 'further fact' of the matter in personal identity. You can see this lack of a 'further fact' by examining a person's life longitudinally: at one time, a person exists; at another time, presumably the 'same' person exists. These people *seem* to be the same person – Parfit recognizes that they seem to be this way, because, naturally, they possess shared traits, memories, experiences and the like, but these shared qualities *in and of themselves* do not constitute what could be called an all-pervasive all-enduring self. In this way, a person for Parfit is not a 'further fact,' but rather consists in a wealth of smaller facts, which, when combined, constitute what we think of as a separate and distinct person or self. The teletransportation thought experiment illustrates just how difficult it is to pin down an actual 'self' which is often thought of as 'attached' to a specific person. This thought experiment, though still severely abstract, is less mystical than some thought experiments to which it could be compared, like that of a person dying and going to heaven, or, from a Buddhist perspective, dying and being reborn.

Parfit's view of personhood can be described with Nagel's term, a 'series-person.' Parfit uses Nagel's conception of a 'series-person' in order to clarify his own view. According to this view, a person at any given moment is only a series-person if you are considering what 'holds' that person together 'as a person.' In thinking about people as 'series-people,' words like 'I' and 'me' are used in a way that is altogether new, referring to past experiences with speaking of an 'old-me' or present experiences as 'current-me' or, to the future, 'future-me.' All of these 'people' certainly have something in common, but the purpose of referring to them as separate parts of a 'series-person' is to recognize the mental and physical disconnect between any given individual and 'who they are' at separate times. Parfit describes the

difference between the reductionist and non-reductionist views as follows:

On the Non-Reductionist View, a person is a separately existing entity, distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences. On the best-known version of this view, a person is a Cartesian Ego. On the Reductionist View that I defend, persons exist. And a person is distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences. But persons are not separately existing entities. The existence of a person, during any period, just consists in the existence of his brain and body, and the thinking of his thoughts, and the doing of his deeds, and the occurrence of many other physical and mental events.⁹

Parfit's view on personhood seems to be on par with the Theravāda conception of 'no-self.' There are certainly quarrels about the exact nature of Parfit's account in relation to the doctrine of no-self; scholars argue about whether or not what he is saying *exactly matches up* with Buddhist thought. I disregard these concerns, as the relationship between Parfit's analysis and Buddhist thought ought to be seen as complementary at least in that they both view 'self' as something that only *seems* to have an independent existence due to the relationship between human experience and how we categorize that experience through our language as being something that is experienced by an 'experiencer' (rather than just the recognition that 'experience' is taking place.) Parfit illustrates this point in his reflection on Descartes' cogito:

Descartes argued that a thinker must be a Pure Ego, or spiritual substance...His famous *Cogito* did not justify this belief. He should not have claimed, 'I think, therefore I am'. Though this is true, it is misleading. Descartes could have claimed instead, 'It is a thought: thinking is going on'. Or he could have claimed, 'This is a thought, therefore at least one thought is being thought.'¹⁰

⁹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 275.

¹⁰ Parfit, 224.

Parfit, himself, recognizes the connection between his views and those of the Buddha. He cites a conversation between King Milinda and the sage, Nagasena, wherein which the King asks his name, the reply being:

'Sir, I am known as 'Nagasena'; my fellows in the religious life address me as 'Nagasena.' Although my parents gave (me) the name...it is just an appellation, a form of speech, a description, a conventional usage. 'Nagasena' is only a name, for no person is found here.'...Buddha has spoken thus: 'O Brethren, actions do exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not. There is no one to cast away this set of elements and no one to assume a new set of them. There exists no Individual, it is only a conventional name given to a set of elements.'¹¹

The following is a concise conception of human experience in Buddhist thought. It demonstrates the link between such a conception of human experience and the 'no-self' doctrine, revealing its compatibility with Parfit's account of human experience. It is important to note that both accounts of human experience do not include an 'experiencer' – all that exists is the experience itself.

Human existence is itself analyzed according to the components of its experience, classified as five aggregates, twelve sense fields, or eighteen sense elements. The doctrine which became established is called "the Five Skandhas", that is, the Five "Heaps" or Aggregates of Body, and of Feelings, Perceptions, Sensations, and Consciousness...For Buddhism, the Five Skandhas are not merely philosophical analysis, but the corollary of religious insight into the meaning of life. For life means suffering (*dukkha*), and suffering comes from attachment to the Five Skandhas...A denial of a Self as given substantial unity and permanent identity to the Five Skandhas is therefore regarded as the 'right view.'¹²

¹¹ Parfit, 502.

¹² Julia Ching, "Paradigms of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 4 (1984), 37.

These philosophies, taken together, suggest an illuminating sketch of what it means to ‘be’: we, only as *perceived* individuals, can be said to be parts of but one loosely defined state of ‘being’... this state of ‘being’ is characterized by its being subject to the cycling of rebirth, manifested in multiplicities (rather than separately existing entities in the form of ‘selves’). We are an amalgamation of desires, having been wrought of instinct and culture, our logical reasoning about our existence being also wrought of our instinct and culture combined. Humans are in a unique position to re-interpret these qualities to serve particular ends. Thus, how our desires, intellects, and bodies are interpreted, and what ends to ultimately choose, is the focus of ethical discourse and this paper. It seems that there is nothing intrinsically good or bad to be found in our ‘true’ existences as combinations of impersonal elements. In this way, the question of ethics within the framework of ‘no-self’ is one in which existential evaluation is necessary. It is up to us to decide how to deal with this kind of existence and judge what ‘living rightly’ would mean.

Rebirth

The king said: ‘He who is born, Nagasena, does he remain the same or become another?’

Neither the same nor another.’

‘Give me an illustration.’

Now what do you think, O king? You were once a baby, a tender thing, and small in size, lying flat on your back. Was that the same as you who are now grown up?’

No. That child was one, I am another.’

If you are not that child, it will follow that you have had neither mother nor father, no! Nor teacher. You cannot have been taught either learning, or behavior, or wisdom. What, great king! Is the mother of an embryo in the first stage different from the mother of the embryo in the second stage, or

the third or the fourth? Is the mother of the baby a different person from the mother of the grown-up man? Is the person who goes to school one, and the same when he has finished his schooling another? Is it one who commits a crime, another who is punished by having his hands or feet cut off?'

'Certainly not. But what would you, Sir, say to that?'

The Elder replied: 'I should say that I am the same person, now I am grown up, as I was when I was a tender tiny baby, flat on my back. For all these states are included in one by means of this body.'

'Give me an illustration.'

'Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp, would it burn the night through?'

'Yes, it might do so.'

'Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second?'

'No.'

'Or the same that burns in the second watch and in the third?'

'No.'

'Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?'

'No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through.'

Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness.¹³

If we are to assume some degree of truth to the concept of 'rebirth,' what is then 'reborn,' if we are beings sans selves? Based on this passage from *The Questions of King*

¹³ *The Questions of King Milinda* Pt. I., trans. Rhys T.W. Davids, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 63.

Milinda, it seems that we can view ‘rebirth’ as meaning not necessarily anything more than the *reinterpretation of samsāric experience* in freshly formed beings. To assert that one believes in a Buddhist doctrine of ‘rebirth’ can include a savory spiritual richness, but for the purposes of this paper, I will say that the only requirement for a true belief in ‘rebirth’ is one in which the interpretation focuses solely on the relational aspects of ‘rebirth’ which are meant to foster compassion – these relational aspects involving the idea that as old beings die and as new ones are born, one could say that the old beings can be said to be born *again* in that these new beings will have to put up with the same kind of ‘*struggle*’ that the old ones had to live with, to push through, to surrender to, etc. These beings are all in a constant engagement in the ‘round of rebirth’ (*samsāra*). Another way to look at it would be, in continuing one’s existence as one ‘series-person,’ experience is ‘reborn’ again and again, from moment to moment. As people die and are born, cessation of *directly continual* experience takes place, but also the rebirth (reinterpretation) of experience takes place – however, this time, in the form of different ‘series-people.’ This is not to say that there is necessarily any *direct* connection between the death of one specific individual and the birth of another (after all, there couldn’t be under the ‘no-self’ doctrine). The important idea behind the doctrine of ‘rebirth’ is rather simple: it is the notion that at any given moment, some subjective heap of experience is ceasing to be experienced while other subjective experience begins to take place (preferably thought of in a linear fashion) – *but* – it is ‘neither the same nor different.’ Parfit, in accepting his philosophy about personal identity, appreciates the same ethical point that ought to follow from acceptance of the ‘kind’ of rebirth that I have just detailed:

There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am

less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others.¹⁴

Naturally, we should query the reasons for Parfit's above proclamation: *why* he is less concerned about the rest of his life (his 'perceived self's' future life/lives) and *why* he is more concerned with 'others.' How does this sentiment relate to his views about personal identity and, subsequently, the 'no-self' doctrine? We will address these questions directly by examining the ethical implications of a 'no-self' doctrine.

Ethical Implications

According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine,' selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egotism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.¹⁵

It is this point in our discussion wherein an existential evaluation appears to be necessary in drawing the ethical implications out of a doctrine of 'no-self.' An existential evaluation is particularly needed only because (and insofar) as we have been previously discussing the ontological status of 'who we are.' In having previously developed said ontological status of 'no-self' or of a world inhabited by 'series-people,' and having outlined the implications of a Buddhist doctrine of 'rebirth' in relation to the 'no-self' doctrine, a variety of

¹⁴ Parfit, 281.

¹⁵ W. Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed., (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1967), 51.

emotions may have been evoked. It is actually my initial reaction to think, like Parfit, that once you recognize the non-existence of ‘self’ in the ways in which we have conceived the idea, the notion of caring about other people becomes very appealing, and the idea of *not* caring appears unreasonable in certain sense. This is an emotional reaction, but it is important to flesh out the reasoning in such an emotion, because sometimes emotions act as signifiers for important considerations. This is because emotions can actually point to some things, which we, as human beings, tend to care about deeply and fundamentally. Emotional reactions are rather subjective (even if ‘taken as a whole’ i.e. in the ‘general sentiment’ of ‘historical humanity’), but, after all, our ethical systems (at least right now) need, if not only, mostly deal with human beings. With that said, one emotional response to our discussion could include something like the following:

Because past rebirths are numberless, and because future rebirths are also numberless, a Buddhist can conclude that she has been in every possible relationship with every other sentient being, and that every sentient being has been her mother, father, best friend, and so forth.¹⁶

The above statement carries its own weight in metaphor. With the conception of ‘rebirth’ I have given, you could consider all the physical matter on the earth, which make up life, having been recycled: beings die and other beings are then generated out of the old material. It is not to say that to be ‘reborn’ means to have another being exist that consists in your own individual subjective experience as a person, nor is it that another being is created out of the same exact physical material as yourself. Rather, to recognize the implications of ‘rebirth’ is to recognize that the energy and

¹⁶ John Powers and Deane Curtin, “Mothering: Moral Cultivation in Buddhist and Feminist Ethics.” *Philosophy East and West* 44 no. 1 (1994), 3.

physical matter used to make up life is constantly in flux, being renewed, recycled, etc. In this way, you can see all beings as being intimately interconnected. This interconnection is not only plainly physical, but also can be conceived of psychologically. This psychological interconnection comes into play when we consider that all beings we know of (i.e. biological beings) must be exposed to the suffering as conceptualized by the term *dukkha*. Recognizing this nature of 'biological being' – the fact that we all share certain basic desires and ranges of emotions in respect to a similar range of life experiences – fosters compassion.

The idea here is simply that since each person is naturally concerned with his own welfare, a truly moral agent should realize that to cause suffering to others is to cause them the same distress which the agent knows well enough in his own experience.¹⁷

In this way, the idea of relationship becomes much more important than it usually is in ethical discourse. I am not the first to see the parallels between Buddhist ethics and an ethic of care (grounded in feminist philosophy). The core idea of an ethic of care revolves around the notion that, in living an ethical life, one ought to focus on the relationships one has with others, rather than appealing **merely** to following rules and principles. In this way, an ethic of care stresses a kind of responsibility that is directly related to other humans. This particular responsibility involves an individual having to follow but one guiding principle, that they actively *become* someone who develops the quality of care and the actions that would thus ensue.

In each tradition [Buddhist and feminist] release from oppression is not a matter of committing to a new, more

¹⁷ Collins, 72.

accurate, representation of reality, to “another philosophy.” It is not simply a way of *thinking*, but a new way of *being*...Both oppose a conception of morality as universal and rule-bound. Both emphasize that compassion or care can be cultivated. One must *become* a certain sort of person, one must experience the world in a certain sort of way, to be moral.¹⁸

To say that the worldview of a ‘no-self’ doctrine would *only* reasonably accept an ethic of care is a bit of a stretch, but it does seem that in embracing a doctrine of ‘no-self,’ ethical discourse morphs into something in which becoming a certain kind of person is *much* more important than ‘following’ universal rules and principles. At any rate, it would be more *helpful* in attaining the goals of a compassionate mindset if one *became* an individual who would live with those goals in mind at all times in daily interaction with individuals. Certainly rules and principles can be helpful as part of any ethical system because it gives an ethical system a kind of ‘satisfying structure,’ but it seems that an ethic based *purely* on rules and principles would never be found in a world in which the people inhabiting it recognize their deep interconnectedness grounded in subjective, relational experience. After all, it seems implicit in an ethic based in rules and principles that one ‘does not *have* to’ become a certain kind of person – you can ‘be’ however you want to be, and the only time ethical issues are at stake are ‘in-the-moment-of-a-moral-obligation.’ To view ethical behavior as obligatory seems counterintuitive from a Buddhist perspective. If we are to construct an ethic from the worldview of ‘no-self,’ we must attempt to think as the ‘no-selfers’ would reason. In recognizing our emotionally charged interconnectedness, it is made plain that the differences between one another are small – anyone may as well be our enemy, our best friend, our lover, our child. Every person, of course, does not *play* these relational roles,

¹⁸ Powers, 11.

but what is important to recognize is that they 'may as well.' In this way, harming anyone is like harming your mother, father, child, friend, or even your own perceived 'self.' Indeed, in truly understanding the nature of such a world and the nature of how an individual fits *into* that world, rules and principles would not be considered as the first way of promoting an ethical life! To be sure, an ethical system of rules and principles could function in *promoting* the values of a world sans 'selves.' One could apply the tenants of utilitarianism, for instance, to a world in which the 'no-self' doctrine is embraced. This kind of utilitarianism would create an ethical motivation revolving around the solidarity of a 'human family' that values each other insofar as they recognize their common struggle as human beings. In this way, the classic utilitarian value of 'pleasure' would be replaced with a kind of utilitarian value of avoiding pain, because we would recognize our solidarity as a human family and try our best to respect our family by not causing harm. However, the main point in emphasizing an ethic of care is that it seems the integrity of the 'no-self' doctrine is lost when we *merely* apply an ethical system of impersonal rules and principles. To say that the integrity is lost when we merely apply *impersonal* rules and principles is to refer to the nature of an ethical system being composed of rules and principles, which, by their very nature of being rigid rules and principles, lend no faith to the relationships of the people actually involved in the ethical system. *Relying solely on an ethical framework of principles and rules implies that we cannot (or have no desire to), with each of our individual endeavoring, cultivate compassion and care such that we needn't constantly rely on such preset rules and principles in order to live in harmony with those around us.*

We tend to oppress and devalue people toward whom we feel no particular attachment, and rather than value them we treat them as means to be used for our own purposes. When one fully understands the kindness of one's own mother and understands that all other sentient being have been equally kind, however, then one comes to feel a pervasive love that extends to all other

living beings, even those toward whom one previously felt animosity.¹⁹

Truly viewing one's being in accordance with a doctrine of 'no-self' would change the way we view how to approach certain moral situations. When you ask, for example, "is prostitution wrong?" you would formulate a response to this in considering if you would be okay with your mother, sister, daughter, etc., living the life of a prostitute. It seems fairly clear that most would say it was wrong, because to think of anyone close to you being forced into a situation where they must sell their body to live seems abhorrent. The flavor of reasoning goes thus:

1. Whoever I am considering that will presumably live the life of a prostitute is not that removed from who I am and who I care about.
2. No little girl dreams of being a prostitute when she 'grows up.' (Actually for many little girls, this is probably a nightmare.)
3. The above fact does not say anything to us about the ethical nature of prostitution unless we recognize that whoever has to live the life she never dreamed of and probably originally found (or finds) excessively frightening might as well be our daughter.
4. Therefore, prostitution is wrong (or, rather, ought not be an institution), because you would be a neglecting/uncaring parent to accept prostitution as a reasonable (good) way for your daughter to spend her life, that is, to expect her to have to numb herself from her strong emotions in order to psychologically survive such a lifestyle.

¹⁹ Powers, 5.

Conclusion

To be born means to be born into a world that will punish you for having been born. I only say punish because the world can be cruel – that is, people can be cruel; selfish, egotistic, negligent. I have demonstrated how this cruelty is wrought, among other things, of the repercussions of belief in ‘self’ or rather *the repercussions of a lack of a belief in ‘no-self’* and everything that surrounds that belief or lack-of-belief, including the selfish clinging to desires.

Appealing to a false belief in ‘self’ proves to be unhealthy for an individual human, but, more importantly, it proves to be unhealthy for humanity at large, for it *provides no solidarity* – no recognition of the interconnectedness of the human condition. A healing process can begin to take place once people recognize the inherently small differences and large similarities between themselves and others. One can view any situation as being part of a larger and more continuous chain of life events in which the entire human family is involved, generation after generation. When I say family, I mean that in quite a literal sense. We are all part of that family, directly interconnected and interdependent. Our ethical systems are pervaded by rules and principles, but, as is informed by the ‘no-self’ doctrine, they ought also to include as equally important, an emphasis on relationships and responsibilities. People ought at least to consider cultivating care and compassion so that we might arrive at a time wherein ethical systems are never more seen as necessary tools for mankind’s cooperation and survival.

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