

Good example of
analyzing the
implications of no self
from parfits and the
buddha...

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



The question as to the continuity of personhood is a question that has been addressed to Buddhism since its beginning. In Henry Clarke Warren's Pali translation of select passages of Buddhist Sacred Books, "Buddhism in Translations" there is a scene where a between The Buddha and a wandering ascetic who demands desperately for an answer of the Buddha to his question, "Whether or not the Saints exist after their death?" The Buddha saw this as a dualistic question, and gave him a nondualist answer which stemmed from the basic phenomenology of Buddhism. The Buddhist answer the question of whether the saints live after their death by saying that the question is an invalid one because the notion of the "saint" does not exist and is only perceived to exist as an thing. Derek Parfit has a similar, but distinct notion on the continuity of a person—one that Parfit has updated to deal with a modern post-Newtonian cosmological view.

In Robert Ellis essay "Parfit and the Buddha: Identity and Identification in Reasons and Persons" he believes that Parfit's notion of identity is "less clear" and "Less useful" than they might have otherwise been "because of an unacknowledged tension between what might broadly be called the Buddhist and the analytic tendencies in his work" (Ellis, 1). Parfit claims that a Buddhist would support his notions of personal identity. Ellis believes that the disparity between Parfit's and the Buddhist view arise from the much narrower analytical premises of the Buddhist. He believes though that Parfit's conclusions are more in line with the Buddhist view. In order to fully explore the issue, it is necessary to establish what consist of the Buddhist phenomenology and where this differs with Parfit and what this means for individual persons and the tangibility of their identities.

In many ways, there is not a marked different between the conclusions of Parfit and the Buddhist, but the manner of arriving there is strikingly distinct. Ellis writes, “ Buddha reject fixed criteria for self-identity, Parfit does so on grounds of metaphysical truth whilst the Buddha does so on pragmatic grounds.” For Parfit it was a matter of pure logic, for The Buddha it was a rested on the fact that there was know self, only the five aggregates which become confused as the self.

The Sanskrit word for the self is Atman. It is often translated as the self but is also translated as Ego (Warren, 111). The word can also be used to refer to as the individual. For the purposes of analysis, we can take for granted that when Parfit describes the self, he is referencing the same notion of Sanskrit Atman. Parfit makes the claim that he is referencing the same concept (Parfit, n. p.). A Buddhist believes that the self is an illusion. It is the five Skandhas or aggregations, which leads a person to incorrectly believe that there is such a thing as his or her self. The five Skandhas are form, sensation, perception, mental formations and states of consciousness (Hahn, 33). From a dualist perspective, the self is composed of body and soul, or mind and soul. A Buddhist believes that there are five things that compose the illusion of the self.

Form is the substance that makes the body. This is the equivalent of what for a dualist is the body. The mind for a dualist is a single object, but for a Buddhist, there are four Skandhas, or illusions, that compose what the dualist considers the single object of the mind. The four Skandhas, which compose the mind, are sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness (Hahn, 33). Sensation is what a person is feeling. Feeling hot

or cold would be a sensation including in this Skandha. Perception is what a person is experiences. It is the notions of our cognition. Mental formations include memories, thoughts, habits, opinions, compulsions and addictions. Consciousness exams the state of the other three Skandhas which compose the mind. Meditation is a markedly different state for the Buddhist than not being in meditation.

All five of the Skandhas emerge from what the Buddhist theory of causation. The Buddhist theory of causation is a simple principle that everything is because other things are. One things happens because something else has happened. A Buddhist does not seek to find principal cause as the Judeo-Christian worldview does to argue for the existence of God. To ask a Buddhist what the was the first cause would be as impossible a question to ask as “ Do the saints persist after they die?” It is a question that does not make sense under a Buddhist cosmology. The Buddha said, “ When this is, that is. This arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not. This ceasing. That ceases” (Hahn, 44). While some world views seek to find the first cause, the Buddhist is less concerned about what happened in the past and what is going to happen in the future and is most concerned about what is occurring the present.

The doctrine of Atman is a doctrine of no self. The self for a Buddhist is never more than the temporary creations of the Skandhas. Things fold and unfold, emerge into existence and go out of existence. There is disorder in these comings and goings because things in the physical world have not found harmony. Dukkha is the doctrine of suffering and disorder in the world. The ultimate goal of Buddhism to cause all Dukkha to cease by analyzing oneself

in the doctrine of Nibanna, or Nirvana.

When the wandering ascetic Malunkyaputta questions The Tathagata, or The Buddha, about whether or not the Saints persist after they die, he is not given a straight answer. He wants to know either or—so he is asking dualist question—to the Buddha, who imparts a nondualism worldview. The Buddha answer his question by telling him the question is irrelevant. He tells him the story of a man who has been shot by an arrow. Then he asks him to imagine that the man refuses medical attention that will save his life because before the arrow is removed he wants to know everything there is to know about the arrow. He wants to first “ learn the name of the man who wounded me, and to what clan he belongs.” He also wants to know “ Whether a man who wounded me was tall or short, or of the middle height.”: The Buddha goes on, telling of all the details that a man wants to know before the arrow is removed. Malunkyaputta had asked the question as an ultimatum. He did not care what the answer was, he just demanded an answer, or he threatened the Buddha that “ I will not lead the religious life under The Blessed One until the Blessed One shall elucidate to me wither that. . . the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death” (Warren, 120). The Buddha reminds Malunkyaputta that he has not him to live a religious life. The Buddha tells him “ The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the saint exists after death.” Under a Buddhist worldview, the important dogma is not whether or not the self exists after death, but the fact that no self begins in the first place, there is only the illusion of self. There is a selection from The Translations of The Buddha called Milindapanha in which the Buddha lays out clearly that there is no personal identity. A person believing in personal

identity would believe that the different from life and death represented a profound shift in personhood. But the Buddhist sage in this passage says that they will be “ Neither the same nor different.” If no change occurred, then nothing existed to begin with.

When The Buddha was formulating his doctrines, he did not have the advantage of modern day neuroscience to support his conclusions. Derek Parfit did, and while his conclusions are similar to the Buddhist doctrine of the self, Parfit’s view and The Buddhist view are distinct. Parfit begins his discussion but discussing what he calls are “ streams of consciousness.” He notes that evidence in split-brain patients suggest that one person with a single mind could experience streams of consciousness. Like the Buddhist believes that the five Skanda’s are responsible for the state of mind in which a person believes he has a self, Parfit believes that the notion of the self can be reduced down to a stream of consciousness. Rather than saying that the misperceived notion of the self is the result of the Five Skanda’s Parfit believes that the Ego is composed of a Bundle, in what he calls his Bundle Theory (Parfit, 92). Parfit sees two dominant views that account for what persons are—the Ego Theory and the Bundle Theory. Under the Ego Theory, the self or the ego, is a particular thing. While it is composed of its constituent parts, such as neurons, it has a “ thingness” which gives it an independent existence of its own. While an advocate of the ego theory believes that there is a man behind the controls of experiences and sensation and this underlying personality is the self. This, Parfit points out, is a Cartesian view of the world that a person is a “ purely mental thing – a soul or a spiritual substance” (Parfit, 92).

The self in bundle theory is accounted for by “ a long series of different mental states and events - thoughts, sensations and the like - each series being what we call one life” (Parfit, 92). Here Parfit would agree with the Buddhist. The Buddha would say that every current state of being present can be understood from the underlying causality behind it.

Parfit wants to look at each series of states, which in the long run constitute a life as having an internal causality. The identity of a person over time is that a ten-year-old-self’s subsequent decisions (causes) led to an eleven-year-old-self. Under this view, there is the independent agency of the individual over time, and one can refer to the “ self” as a something without being corrected that it is only an illusion. The Buddha would see the self as the product of “ Dependent Origination.” Under this view every other cause in the universe is at much at place as any personal, individual causality.

While a past version of the self is responsible for causing the current version of the self under Parfit’s view, under the Buddhist view the most that would be allowed would be to say that a past version of the universe was responsible for causing the present version of the self. Under the Buddhist view, there is no individual attribution for creating or shaping the self. The self is emerged from preceding causing into existence and will eventually succumb to Dukkha and pass out of existence.

While Parfit admits that in a sense “ Bundle theorist denies the existence of a person” he believes “ An outright denial is, of course, absurd” (Parfit, 92).

This outright denial was precisely what The Buddha was advocating when he corrected Malunkyaputta’s question on the matter of whether or not the saints continued to exist after their death. Buddhism denies the existence of

self because it sees the self of aggregates of independent processes. Parfit believes in the same basic view of the nature of the self, but take a further jump in deciding what the Bundle Theory means for personal identity over time. He saw the Buddha as the first Bundle Theorist, although the Buddha would disagree with Parfit on some key points. While Parfit does not believe there needs to be a definite answer to the question, "Will I exist after I die," he acknowledges that this is a question that should be asked in order to gain insight into the nature of personal identity—or the self. Parfit believes that people can live on through other people. He does believe that the walls between ourselves and others are thinner than we imagine them to be. But in doing this, he departs from the Buddhist because he still advocates a self. His self is just a self through different means. The Buddhist does not advocate changing the definition of what we consider to be the self; The Buddhist rejects the very notion that there exists a self.

Works Cited:

Nhat Hanh, Thich. Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001. Print.

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

Derek A. Parfit, *Divided minds and the nature of persons*, In Colin Blakemore & Susan A. Greenfield (eds.), *Mindwaves*. Blackwell (1987)

Derek Parfit (1986), 'What we believe ourselves to be'. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press, Chapter 10

Ellis, Robert. "Parfit and the Buddha: Identity and Identification in Reasons and Persons." *Moralobjectivity.net/philosophy/Parfit*. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

<https://assignbuster.com/good-example-of-analyzing-the-implications-of-no-self-from-parfits-and-the-buddhas-standpoint-argumentative-essay/>

Warren, Henry Clarke. Buddhism in Translation: Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books. S. I.: Lightning Source, 2010. Print.