

**Mark Johnston's Minimalism: reading *Surviving Death* in the light of Madhyamaka
Buddhist Philosophy**
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Introduction

Ever since Derek Parfit's publication of *Reasons and Persons* in 1984, there has been a steady growth of scholarly articles comparing Parfit's reductionist theory of personal identity with no-self (*anatta/anātman*) view found in the Buddhist tradition and commentarial literature. This line of research culminated in Mark Siderits' elaborately argued *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, setting an example of the way such cross-cultural juxtaposition of theories should be carried out in both analytical and comparative style.

Parfit's position is the most influential reductionist approach in the contemporary analytical metaphysics of personal identity and justly has received much attention, both positive by fellow reductionists and negative critique alike by non-reductionists of all stripes. Scepticism about a self as a continuous entity has a long pedigree in the European philosophy: its starts from Hume and runs through Wittgenstein to Daniel Dennet, and Galen Strawson, just to name a few. Likewise, philosophers have long suggested that our attitude of special concern for the future is problematic if one holds a reductionist view of personal identity, and this is the conclusion Derek Parfit draws in *Reasons and Persons*. On the other side, critics of reductionist views on personal identity have equally justly pointed out that elimination of personal concerns, and broadly natural ethical concerns, from metaphysics of personal identity, might lead to conclusions about human subjectivity and agency which are difficult to square with the way we actually lead our lives.

Roy W. Perrett in his 2003 article "Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka" surveys several contemporary responses to Parfit's reductionism, namely Non-Reductionism, Kantian response and Minimalism. A Minimalist approach is seen as a response to Parfit's strong form of reductionism, that advocates revision of our false everyday attitudes in the light of reductionist arguments suggesting that not only future self-concern for our persons should be removed, but also responsibility might be reassessed: if there are no stable persons to give us reasons to care about in the future, no none can be really held responsible for what they have done in the past. Minimalism, a position advocated by Mark Johnston, although broadly affirming reductionist approach, argues forcefully for the necessity to keep self-concern intact, as well as other broadly everyday approaches to personal identity, which give sustenance to our existence as socially engaged human beings. Perrett also attempts to situate the Western debate about Reductionist and Non-Reductionist theories of personal identity within the classical Indian debate about the persisting substantial self (*ātmavāda*) and denial of such persisting self (*anātmavāda*). After a detailed analyses of the themes common to both Indian substantialists and no-self theorist, which are mostly of a reductionist kind, Perrett suggests and strives to justify a claim that the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka position on personal identity is a Buddhist analogue of the Western Minimalist position on personal identity.

In my paper I want to revisit the subject raised by Perrett's paper and review his thesis of similarity between the Indian Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka and the Western Minimalist view in the light of Mark Johnston's recent restatement of his views on personal identity and post-mortem survival in the *Surviving God*. My aim is to answer the question of whether such a comparison between Johnston and Madhyamaka is justified. In order to accomplish this task I

will have to provide a synoptic assessment of both Mark Johnston's theories of self in *Surviving God* as well as no-self theories expounded in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* and *Madhyamakāvātāra*, which are the most notable representatives of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka position at least in the Indian Buddhist tradition. In addition, it will also be important to find which are the structural similarities of their views on self and which are mere superficial affinities, that would lead us only to anachronistic over-interpretation.

Schematic Overview of the Western Theories of Personal Identity

Raymond Martin and John Barresi in the introductory paper to the collection of essays¹ by various authors — among whom Bernard Williams, Derek Parfit, David Lewis and Mark Johnston are just the most prominent names — titled *Personal Identity* write, that Western theorising about self and personal identity seemingly divides neatly into three phases: from Plato to John Locke, from Locke to the late 1960s, and from the late 1960s to the present (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 1). Authors themselves hasten to call it the 'simple view' and further explain that this simplicity is betraying the actual complexity of views on personal identity in the Western tradition, which thus conceived excludes Greek materialism, Aristotle's hylomorphism, materialism of early Church Fathers, Neo-Platonism of Plotinus, medieval scholasticism, Descartes and others. They also point out that in the first decades of the eighteenth century in Britain there were discussions of relational character of personal identity that used their own fission examples, although not derived from science-fiction but religious-fiction ones, which have become so popular in the field of the philosophy of personal identity. (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 4-5)

To somehow simplify the matter, the "simple view" amounts to the observation, exemplified by that the Platonic approach, the self, or at least that part of the self that was thought to be highest and to survive bodily death, is a simple immaterial substance. Locke and his followers represent the view that the self should be understood not as a *simple* persisting substance, whether material or immaterial, but as a constantly changing process of interrelated psychological and physical elements, later phases of which are appropriately related to earlier phases. (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 1). Locke's contribution is acknowledged in his decision to treat the self and personal identity not as substance, but as a relational matter, according to which it is a complex mental and/or material process, the elements of which are appropriately related to each other (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 25). Thus conceived this relation is *intrinsic*: identity of a person through time is determined by psycho-physical relatedness.

The contemporary phase encompasses three major developments:

- 1) *Extrinsic* relations view (*closest-continuer* or *externalist* view). In opposition to *intrinsic* relation view: identity of a person through time is determined not by psycho-physical relatedness, but the relation to everything else: especially other persons. Thus the memory criterion of personal identity that Locke employed in the extrinsic relation view would involve not only your own memories of past actions, but also memories and reports of others. Methodologically the move from intrinsic to extrinsic relation views have been accomplished by the introduction of

¹ Martin, Raymond, and Barresi, John (Ed.). *Personal Identity*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

consideration of hypothetical fission examples, i.e., thought experiments that are supposed to draw out our intuitions about personal identity. (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 2)

- 2) The discussion of whether personal identity is primarily what matters in survival.
- 3) Since 1960: three-dimensional view of persons (endurantism) is challenged by a four-dimensional view (perdurantism) of persons. Endurantism posits, that a person is wholly present at a given moment, whereas perdurantism maintains that an individual exists in distinct temporal parts — “persona stages”. On a four-dimensional view, persons are aggregates of momentary person-stages (Raymond/Barresi 2006, 3)

Schematic Overview of Parfit’s Reductionism

Parfit’s discussions of personal identity are meticulously worked out in an elaborate argumentative structure, therefore to distil its essence in couple of sentences would be to do injustice to it, nevertheless for the sake of brevity, it is inevitable. Parfit defines the version of Reductionism that he espouses in the context of the physical and psychological criterion of identity, which are both related to the criterion of identity over time. (Parfit 1984: 201-202).

For Parfit the physical and psychological criterion are versions of the Reductionist View, each having two versions. Parfit’s reductionists might disagree when considering imaginary sci-fi fission cases of Tele-transportation and such, but they would agree about what “is in fact involved in the existence of actual people”, which is the restatement of the view that “what is necessarily involved in a person’s continued existence is less than what is in fact involved.” (Parfit 1984: 209). The definition of reductionism to which all reductionists in Parfitian sense would agree is as follows: “On the Reductionist View, each person’s existence just involves the existence of a brain and body, the doing of certain deeds, the thinking of certain thoughts, the occurrence of certain experiences, and so on.” (Parfit 1984: 210).

Parfit also considers alternative versions of reductionism contained in the statement : “A person is an entity that is distinct from a brain and body, and such a series of events” but finds no contradiction, inviting the reader to consider it in the light of Hume’s analogy of soul being understood as commonwealth. Indeed, we are all reductionist about nations, Parfit claims. (Parfit 1984: 211) To make the long argument somehow shorter, Parfit concludes that “though persons exist, we could give a complete description of reality without claiming that persons exist. I call this the view that a complete description could be impersonal.” (Parfit 1984: 210)

In another succinct statement Parfit observes that “[Reductionists] regard the unity of each life as, in its nature, less deep, and as a matter of degree. We may therefore think the boundaries between lives to be less like those between, say, squares on a chessboard, dividing what is all pure white from what is all jet black. We may think these boundaries to be more like those between different countries. They may then seem less morally important.” (Parfit 1984: 339).

What is the moral significance of reductionism? Consequentialists/utilitarian like Parfit have criticised non-consequentialists, arguing that it is morally appropriate to overlook the separateness of persons. On Parfit’s reductionist view of personal identity, the

separateness of persons is a *shallow* fact, and thus he believes the utilitarians are correct — or at least more correct — to overlook its moral significance. Parfit relies on a dichotomy between *deep* and *shallow* facts, maintaining that deep facts are facts about things that exist independently of our practices. Deep facts are universal features of reality that are the way they are totally independent of us.²

To sum up: according to Parfit persons exist; however, persons are merely shallow entities. Thus, persons, like clubs and nations, can in some cases have indeterminate identity conditions over time because their identities are fully reducible without remainder to the holding of more particular facts. The four-dimensional boundaries of persons are fuzzy. In such cases of indeterminacy, we do create conventions for everyday life—our ‘person practices’—but, being shallow, the boundaries generated by our conventions are of little moral significance.

We are not carving the world at the joints when it comes to person and nations because there is no way-the-world-is that can be carved. Parfit seems to think that because we carve out these entities by convention and stipulation their boundaries lack moral significance or, at least, what significance they have may permissibly be overlooked. Parfit assumes that metaphysical primacy is a more appropriate carrier of moral significance than something that is not metaphysically primary; he assumes that our level of caring should match metaphysical depth.

Parfit’s reductionist project in *Reasons and Persons* is not only famous for setting much of the reductionist agenda in the contemporary analytical philosophy of personal identity, but also drawing cross-cultural parallels of family resemblances of kinship among theories of reductionism found in other philosophical traditions. Parfit sees in Buddha a precursor to his reductionism of the self. In the Appendices to *Reasons and Persons* Parfit quotes from *Milinda Pañha* and Vasubandhu’s “Refutations of Persons” — two texts that might be classified as representing the orthodox view of the Buddhist Reductionism, albeit not the only sources of the Buddhist *anatta/anātman* view. The most eloquent reference is found in the following statement: “The first Bundle Theorist was Buddha, who taught ‘anatta’, or the *No Self* view. Buddhists concede that selves or persons have ‘nominal existence’, by which they mean that persons are merely combinations of other elements. Only what exists by itself, as separate element, has instead what Buddhist call ‘actual existence’. ... Buddha’s claims are strikingly similar to the claims advanced by several Western writers. Since these writers knew nothing of Buddha, the similarity of these claims suggest that they are not merely part of one cultural tradition, in one period. They may be, as I believe they are, true.”³

² Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 336 and 339. This reading of Parfit is deeply indebted to Mark Johnston, ‘Human Concerns without Superlative Selves’, in J. Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 149-79.

³ Parfit, Derek. “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons” In *Mindwaves: Thoughts on Intelligence, Identity, and Consciousness*. Edited by Colin Blakemore, Susan Greenfield. Blackwell Publishers, 1989, p. 21.

Johnston's Minimalist Response to Parfit's Reductionism

Roy W. Perrett in his 2003 article “Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka” surveys several contemporary responses to Parfit's reductionism, namely Non-Reductionism, Kantian response and Minimalism. A Minimalist approach is seen as a response to Parfit's strong form of reductionism, that advocates revision of our false everyday attitudes in the light of reductionist arguments suggesting that not only future self-concern for our persons should be removed, but also responsibility might be reassessed: if there are no stable persons to give us reasons to care about in the future, no one can be really held responsible for what they have done in the past. Minimalism, a position advocated by Mark Johnston, although broadly affirming reductionist approach, argues forcefully for the necessity to keep self-concern intact as well as other broadly everyday approaches to personal identity, which give sustenance to our existence as socially engaged human beings. Perrett also attempts to situate the Western debate about Reductionist and Non-Reductionist theories of personal identity within the classical Indian debate about the persisting substantial self (*ātmavāda*) and denial of such persisting self (*anātmavāda*). After a detailed analyses of the themes common to both Indian substantialists and no-self theorist, which are mostly of a reductionist kind, Perrett suggests and strives to justify a claim that the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka position on personal identity is a Buddhist analogue of the Western Minimalist position on personal identity.

Mark Johnston's best presentation of his Minimalist position is found in his paper “Human Concerns without Superlative Selves” — which is also the basis of Perrett's paper. In his response to Parfit's reductionism, Johnston points out that Parfit's arguments force us to examine “the relation between metaphysics and our practical concerns.”⁴ Even if we assume Parfit is right—that, for the most part, we operate with a false metaphysical view about our nature—Johnston reminds us that it is not totally clear how this error should impact our practical lives. Johnston charges Parfit with creating a false dilemma: it is not true that either our practices must be based in deep entities like souls or else be morally insignificant.

Johnston names his minimalist approach a better reductionism, since it strives to keep the ordinary facts about how we define ourselves as persons and exercise our agency:

Let us call a better reductionism, the reductionism I have illustrated by the view that we are essentially human beings, reductionism with ordinary further facts. This differs from non-reductionism, which has it that personal identity involves what we might call superlative further facts – further facts involving the persistence of mental substances or Cartesian egos. Reductionism with ordinary further facts passes Parfit's crucial test for reductionism: it allows that the facts of personal identity may sometimes be indeterminate. (Johnston 1997: 153-154)

Since there is a widespread scepticism about superlative selves as independent justifiers for our conduct, there is a “philosophical temptation to disparage such facts and concerns organised around them because they do not involve the superlative entities in speculative metaphysics.” (Johnston 1997: 154) Therefore, Johnston criticises Parfit for disparaging those concerns in the light of his eliminativist thrust of arguments in favour of reductionism of personal identity and the subsequent inferences that there are no rational reasons to care about personal identity.

Therefore Johnston says: “The best defence against this tempting line of thought is a minimalist account of the justification of our practices”, offering another alternative to our

⁴ Johnston, Mark. ‘Human Concerns without Superlative Selves’, in J. Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 149.

practices that involve persons and take their basis in our empirical nature. Humans are naturally the kinds of creatures that have self-referential patterns of concern. This said, our practices regarding personal identity, while “natural”, are not uniquely and specifically determined by nature; these practices are not immune to criticism. Thus, Johnston agrees that our person practices are not self-justifying, but he also thinks he can appeal “to a broadly

coherentist view of justification” for the entire practice. He writes: “Concerns that are natural and fundamental have a certain kind of defeasible presumption in favour of their reasonableness; they cannot all be thrown into doubt at once, for then criticism would have no place from which to start.” (Johnston 1997: 158)

Johnston invites us to consider the case of free will and attributing of responsibility. If there are discoveries that undermine our intuitions about free will, then they might be reconsidered, but in the absence of them, mere philosophical analyses does not undermine our practices. Self-concern does not require a Cartesian ego or a superlative further fact, self-referential concern is not necessarily egoistic. (Johnston 1997: 156-157) Johnston sounds more Confucian than Madhyamaka, when he says “it is reasonable, or defensible, to have a non-derivative, though not inevitably overriding, concern for oneself, one’s family, one’s friends, one’s acquaintances and one’s nation.” (Johnston 1997: 158) Moreover: “The ordinary supervening facts of personal identity and difference are a real and sufficient basis for self-referential concern.” Doctrine of ‘Minimalism’ still can be vindicated: “metaphysical pictures of the underpinnings of our practices do not represent what crucially has to be in place if those practices are to be justified.” (Johnston 1997: 175):

“... I simply want to mention the possibility that we might be more protean than we appear to ourselves to be. Our turning out to be human beings may be more a matter of what turns out to be personal identity for us as we now are, than the matter of what it always must be, however we might refigure our concerns and expectations. That is to say, what instantiates the relation of personal identity for us may in certain sense be up to us, a matter more dependent upon our identity-based concerns than it might initially seem. Because human being is just one way of instantiating personhood, we might be able to remain the same persons, we might be able to remain the same person, and so the same subjects of benefit and loss, even if we ceased to be always and only human beings. *If* this were so, and if we could articulate a radical defect in the condition of being always and only a human being, we might find a real critical basis for radically refiguring our concerns and expectations. But that, as they say, is another matter.” (Johnston 1997: 176)

A Summary of Johnston's Arguments in *Surviving Death*.

1. Threat of death, goodness and naturalistic description of survival

The question of death is important. It threatens not only the person and his and her conscious presence, but also "goodness itself." (Johnston 2010, 5).

The aim of Johnston's lectures and the subsequent book is the following: "This is the constraint that I take myself to be under, namely to show that there is something in death that is better for the good than for the bad. The interest of what I have to say may lie in the fact that in doing this I shall have no recourse to any supernatural means. I shall take us to be wholly constituted by our bodies. I shall find that there is no separate self or soul that could survive without the body or be reincarnated in another body. I shall argue that the idea of the resurrection of the body after its corruption is not, in the end, a coherent idea. Still, I shall maintain that the good, but not the bad, can overcome death, in part by seeing through it. And this, in its turn, will help us understand what goodness, the goodness that survives the threat of death, is." (Johnston 2010, 13-14).

Even before all the arguments are set out, Johnston clearly aligns himself not only with Parfit, but also with most of the mainstream analytic philosophers who espouse a broadly naturalist and physicalist stance: we are constituted by our bodies. He repeatedly stresses that his starting point is naturalistic, nevertheless he does not perceive himself as being dogmatically anti-supernaturalist, though all the empirical evidence weighs against it. (Johnston 2010, 15-16). It is obvious that Johnston himself subscribes to certain kind of reductionism about our constitution, although he is not ready to draw the conclusions about radical unimportance of self-concern that are hallmark of Parfit's reductionism.

What is radical about Johnston's view is his insistence, that a good person survives death owing to his death of various selves during the lifetime, a transformation of life which allows active empathising with others. The good person is a "caretaker of humanity" in himself as well as in others. Those who are genuinely good see death as no threat. And Johnston's whole book is devoted in meticulously working out arguments for a claim that the importance of goodness is vindicated even in the face of death. Furthermore the argumentative structure of the defence of his claim is built of the subjects of the philosophy of personal identity, with the aim to show that "this new identity is not a mere metaphor but a basis for survival in what John Stuart Mill called "the onward rush of Mankind." There is a clear ethical dimension in Johnston's presentation of the good person's survival of death — it is overcome through the New Testament's idea of *agape* — "a thoroughly objective relationship with the human being he finds himself to be" (Johnston 2010, 14-15).

2. The Case Against the Neo-Lockean Psychological Reductionism

Johnston's arguments are directed against contemporary Neo-Lockeanism, who share with Locke his view of psychological reductionism, i.e., the "Wide Psychological View": "the view that truths about personal identity over time have as necessary and sufficient conditions statements about the holding of relations of mental continuity and connectedness":

Connectedness involves the holding of direct psychological connections, such as the persistence of beliefs and desires, the connection between an intention and the later act in which the intention is carried out, and the connection between an experience and a memory of that experience. Connectedness can come in twice over in the statement of the conditions on personal identity. All psychological reductionists require that if two person stages are stages of the same person, then psychological continuity, the ancestral of strong or predominant psychological connectedness, holds between them. Some psychological reductionists also require that no two such stages be entirely unconnected psychologically. Neo-Lockeanism is sometimes called wide psycho-logical reductionism

because it has it that mental continuity and connectedness can secure personal identity even if the holding of these relations is not secured by its normal cause, the persistence of a particular human body or brain. For Neo-Lockeanism, any causal mechanism that operates so that these psychological relations hold will do. The identity over time of any particular human body or brain plays no strictly indispensable role in the identity of a particular person over time. Any particular human body or brain is just one causal means among others for the holding of the relations of psychological continuity and connectedness that constitute a particular person's survival. So the characteristic sign of Neo-Lockeanism is the consequence that a person would survive Tele-transportation.” (Johnston 2010, 27).

If memory is necessary and sufficient for identity, the general is identical with the lieutenant, and the lieutenant is identical with the boy, but the general is not identical to the boy. So mere psychological continuity, the ancestral or chained relation built up from psychological connectedness, seems insufficient for personal identity, at least if we are thinking of personal identity as in some way constrained by psychological sameness.⁵ (210).

3. How we trace persons — tendency to offload persons on to the substances

Johnston uses the term offloading to describe our natural, inborn, probably hard-wired, way of tracing persons through time. We offload on to substances, i.e., we do not use knowledge of sufficient conditions for cross-time identity. What happens when we track objects and persons in time, is that nature saves us inferential labor by equipping us with cognitive attitudes, aided by our perceptual system to exploiting an independently existing structure out in the environment. Instead of always attending to momentary particulars of experience, we offload on to wholes and substances. (Johnston 2010, 45-47; 209). Although Johnston's empirical examples are scant, this view could be readily supported by evidential findings of cognitive psychology and evolutionary psychology. It seems to me that Johnston by the term “offload” implies our innate, hard-wired so to say, ability or tendency to ascribe mental theory to persons and animate objects, for example of animals, which are anthropomorphised from the very early age. Thus offloading is an appropriated philosophical term borrowed from the evidence buttressed by cognitive, evolutionary and child psychology, or cognitive science in general. Therefore, we offload to substances, because evolution has provided us with such heuristic models, which presuppose an inborn mind/body dualism.

Johnston provides a welter of analytically sophisticated arguments, but actually it is fairly simple: we do not use philosophy of personal identity in everyday situations: “we are not employing metaphysically sufficient conditions for personal identity.” (Johnston 2010, 80-81). And this is a reason why Johnston is suspicious about imaginary cases like fission and tele-transportation as manifestations of our implicit intuitions about identity.

4. Self and its Non-Existence

Johnston acknowledges that the current research in neurophysiology and neural correlates of consciousness seem to burden as with a conclusion that “even the highest mental functions seem to have definite brain functions as their condition sine qua non.” (Johnston 2010, 132-133; 136). There simply is the absence of evidence for the existence of soul, out-of-body experience might be easily explained in neurological terms, near-death experiences, although might pose the biggest challenge to mind-brain identity theories, but evidence so far is scant and inconclusive, or spurious.

It seems to me that in the eyes of the Buddhists, not only Parfit, but also Johnston, by the way of their endorsement of naturalism and mind-brain identity, partly would be

⁵ Johnston misconstrues the memory criterion argument.

classified as a species of annihilationism, coming close to Ajita Kesakambali, Purāṇa Kassapa, Pakudha Kaccāyana and only to a certain extent those of Makkhali Gosāla. All of these thinkers, who were contemporaries of Gautama Buddha were reacting against Brahmanic metaphysical and social theories of their day. D.Kalupahana classifies them as ‘amoralists,’⁶ due to their disbelief not only in metaphysical persons and their post-mortem existence, but also the denial of the ability of humans to affect any ethical change, any accretion of merit and decrease of de-merit, that ethically informed life and karmically informed self-concern might require. Apart from the fact that both ancient Indian ‘amoralists’ and contemporary identity theorist like Parfit and Johnston espoused a kind of materialism/naturalism concerning the identity of persons and their post-mortem existence — of which there is none — this is were the similarity ends. Parfit and Johnston are very much concerned with the normative aspects of their theories, Johnston explicitly states in many places in the first chapter of his book, that he is attempting to reclaim the ground for the goodness what the finality of death — understood within the naturalistic framework and without the support of supernatural ideas — signals. (Johnston 2010, 120-130).

This leads Johnston to his “sobering verdict”: “The best hypothesis is that an individual mind is no more than a mode of functioning of its brain.” This sobering physicalist verdict allows us to classify Johnston and his fellow physicalists — and most of the practitioners of philosophy in the Western academia happen to fall within a broadly naturalist-physicalist category — as “annihilationists”, that is *ucchedavāda* nihilists about the continuity of self after death.

Johnston’s own argumentative stance is highly idiosyncratic. Having conceded that the burden of evidence weighs heavily against the existence of substantive, enduring selves, which survive somatic death, i.e. accepting “*the sobering verdict*, namely that death is THE END, total annihilation, the collapse of presence, the severance of life with others” he goes on to state the counter-intuitive claim: “as it happens, I do not believe that the sobering verdict actually follows.” (Johnston 2010, 136) And the whole of his book is a tour de force in the construction of philosophical arguments to bolster his view. Johnston states his argument as follows: “My argument will be-and, of course, this must at first blush appear deeply paradoxical-that the very nonexistence of the soul opens up the possibility of a kind of survival of death, one that does not depend on Neo-Lockeanism or on the bodily criterion. Moreover, this form of survival is secured by the very kind of self-transformation urged by the best forms of Judaism and Christianity. And the form of survival in question in no way depends on either the superstitious or, more broadly, the supernaturalist elements in those religions.” (Johnston 2010, 137)

4. Where the self operates: the arena of presence and action as phenomenological consciousness

Johnston introduces the concept of the ‘arena of presence’ which is his won way of describe what phenomenologists and philosophers of consciousness might understand as lived-experience and first-person subjective ontology: “One’s own consciousness, the arena of presence and action in which and out of which each one of us lives our lives, presents itself as a fundamental context for the worldly happenings that make up the details of one’s life. So long as we are alive, we ourselves are always around” (Johnston 2010, 137-138). The arena

⁶ Kalupahana, David J. *Ethics in Early Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press, 1995, pp. 16-20.

of presence is where I'm given to myself, it is not an objective position in the world, it includes all the items which are open to introspection in the broadest sense. Arena of presence is like a container, a bed in which the stream of consciousness flows. (Johnston 2010, 138-141).

In the course of his arguments, Johnston takes in Descartes' Cogito, saying that even that does not survive as something indubitable, the source of our knowledge of our own existence is not merely introspective awareness of an arena and its contents considered as merely inner items. (Johnston 2010, 142-144). Nevertheless, Johnston is not ready to take Wittgenstein's and P. F. Strawson's idea that the self is just an artefact of misunderstanding the peculiar grammar of "I". (Johnston 2010, 146) He distinguishes between *purely* indexical uses of "I" from truly subjective uses of "I" "where the intent is, *in effect, or can be reconstructed as*, the intent to pick out the one at the centre of an immediately available arena of presence and action." (Johnston 2010, 151).

5. The Importance of Everyday Egocentrism

Probably as response to Parfit's radical conclusions about unreasonableness of future directed self-concern as a result of his reductionist arguments, Johnston's minimalist view implies the value of everyday egocentrism, which is perfectly intelligible, since we mostly organise our lives around it — it is a reasonable default starting point in our practical deliberations. "But this kind of everyday egocentrism is perfectly intelligible; we mostly organise our lives around it, and so it is treated as a reasonable default starting point in practical deliberation. In ordinary decent people, such everyday egocentrism does not so much disappear; it remains at the core of a pattern of concern C. D. Broad once called 'self-referential altruism;' an expanded circle of special concern for oneself, one's friends, one's familiars, one's family, and perhaps one's tribe or nation." (Johnston 2010, 146)

6. Self-Identity versus Personal-Identity

It is important for Johnston to distinguish between self-identity and personal identity: Self identity, the identity that guarantees the continuation of one's immediately available arena of presence over time, is more basic in its importance than personal identity, the identity over time of the public person who happens now to be at the centre of one's arena of presence. When they are *imagined* to come apart, self-concern follows the lineaments of self identity, not personal identity! (Johnston 2010: 162-163)

Johnston's conclusion is that self-identity and not personal identity is what is rational to care about in survival. Therefore, "The topic of personal identity is organised around a blind spot, for the central importance of self identity has been obscured by the way the topic is framed":

Along with many others, Derek Parfit and I have been involved in a debate, on and off over twenty years, as to whether it is personal identity or the associated physical and psychological continuities that are of non-derivative importance when it comes to caring about survival or continued existence. On the present view, we may all have been wrong. On this view, it is self identity that is of non-derivative importance; personal identity gets to count because it makes for self identity. (Johnston 2010: 163)

But this semantic distinction is not to be perceived as consolation: "the idea that there is nothing real to being *you*, when properly grasped, is even more terrifying than death." This is even more so when we realise that the arena of presence where many selves play out during our life, is a merely intentional objects. (Johnston 2010: 165) Furthermore, there are no superlative selves to ground our egocentric concern:

Perhaps the key to deathlessness is the realisation that YOU, in the relevant sense, could not possibly be real-or anyway, not *real enough* to justify a certain temporally extended pattern of self-concern,

which manifests itself in your everyday egocentrism and in your special fear of your own(most) death. (Johnston 2010: 178)

Johnston's conclusions are unexpected, one's own-most death is impossible, because it is radically undefined: "The absence of mental substances not only eliminates the basis for hope in an afterlife, it also eliminates the death we feared most. Properly thought through, the rejection of the soul goes hand in hand with the rejection of the self, at least if the self is thought of as the independent justifier of that special self-concern our evolutionary history has implanted in us." (Johnston 2010: 179-180). It seems to me that Johnston uses analytical arguments to achieve the objective that Epicurus did by merely evocative expressions:

Johnston also spares no arguments for showing that there is no persisting self worth caring about, and that this undermines the thought that our ordinary egocentrism is in fact a response to basic *de se* reasons,⁷ and this conclusion draws him closer to Parfit's stance, although Parfit's case is about persons. (Johnston 2010: 192). This is because our everyday egocentrism is distinctive in its operation as if there were also non-derivative or basic *de se* reasons. (Johnston 2010: 190) Thus our everyday operational mode is non-reductive.

Having constructed his arguments in the aforementioned manner, Johnston arrives at the doctrine of *anatta*: "There are no persisting selves worth caring about." Likewise:

If there are no persisting selves worth caring about then there are no non-derivative *de se* practical reasons, no *de se* practical reasons that are not simply the upshot of impersonal reasons applied to one's own case.

This means that command of *agape* or radical impersonal altruism is not a call to irrational heroism; it is simply the command to respond to the structure of the reasons that there actually are. (Johnston 2010: 238)

7. Self-based future-directed concern and individual personality

Notwithstanding the fact that there are no selves worth caring about at the centre of the arena of presence which is a mere intentional object, self-based future-directed concern is not completely undermined by the denial of a persisting self worth caring about. Special self-concern is just a natural fact, like offloading, selected for by evolution. But special self-concern is also to some extent under our emotional and rational control. (Johnston 2010: 241; 244). What is more important, temporally extended agency, which is constituted by these ephemeral selves, secures a kind of unity which in its own way creates a persisting individual personality:

There is a certain kind of practical unity required by, and to some extent directly enforced by, temporally extended agency. When that unity is secured within the life of a person, I will say we have a persisting individual personality. I will then go on to distinguish persons and individual personalities, and argue that what we want in survival is not only personal identity but the continuation of our individual personality. (Johnston 2010: 259)

An individual personality can be thought of as a dynamic aspect of a person, one that persists as long as the person is able to sustain a distinctive style of agency over time, a style of agency that requires the holding of certain psychological continuities and connections, and partly enforces them by way of ongoing commitments to distinctive projects, policies, and relationships. (Johnston 2010: 289)

Personal identity merely provides a frame for successive individual personalities. It is shaped by future directed concern, it response-dependent, partly determined by certain dispositions that one has at a time (Johnston 2010: 262; 267; 272). The candidate for an identity-determining disposition is a deep and consistent identification with some future person.

⁷ Definition of *de se* and *de re* reasons are following: 1) Mere "de re" thought about oneself- thought that *happens to be* about oneself; 2) True "de se" thought about oneself - thought that involves the recognition of who one in fact is, thought about oneself *as oneself*, thought characteristically captured by identifications involving the first-person pronoun and its cognates. (Johnston 2010: 189)

Johnston further provides a connection that will lead him to the conclusion that we are Protean, namely by pointing out that there are no metaphysical justifiers, “such as a self or a soul or ego, which could independently determine which parts of nature *ought* to be the foci of our respective patterns of self-concern.” That is to say, that there can quite different implementations of personal identity. (Johnston 2010: 293)

8. Malleable Personalities: we are Protean.

If we allow that it is within our abilities to practically change our identity-determining dispositions,⁸ which can open or close as off to certain forms of survival, then there is a sense in which our natures are Protean. (Johnston 2010: 283) Figuratively speaking:

As with Proteus, who could assume the forms of a lion, a leopard, a serpent, or a pig, our essence could allow changes in our form of embodiment.

All these arguments are used in order to draw a conclusion that the ideal of *agape* would allow us to survive death not in a supernatural manner as disembodies souls in heaven, but that given the response-dependent element in personal identity, living out the ideal of *agape* would make us live on “in the onward rush of humankind” (Johnston 2010: 293).

9. Johnston vs. Parfit: arguments from below and above revisited

In the final lecture and chapter of his book, Johnston provides argumentative justification for his new refutation of death. He also explicitly states that he together with Parfit share a thesis with ancient Buddhist tradition of *anatta*: that there are no persisting selves worth caring about (Johnston 2010: 307). Johnston hastens to add that he arrives at his conclusions via different arguments and does not share the overall Parfitian framework: that what matters in personal identity are bundles of future states and events which are psychologically and physically connected and are no different from our brains and bodies, as well as his Extreme Claim, that even the continuity of bundles is not worth caring about. Leaving the argumentative sophistication aside, Johnston’s contention with Parfit is on ethical grounds: if we don’t keep persons and personal identity, albeit even in minimal sense as described by Johnston in the preceding four chapters of the book, there is no reasonable ethical outlook one could draw from the reductionism that Parfit advocates. In short, Johnston wants to reclaim the notion of interest as fundamental to ethical outlook. (Johnston 2010: 308).

Mere short-lived bundles of beliefs and desires are not bearers of interests; interests arise only where there is a sense of an ongoing life to be lived or, in the last act, to be brought to an end. That is, interests arise within the lives of persons and, more specifically, within the lives of individual personalities. (Johnston 2010: 308).

This observation is precisely the one that leads Parfit to think that Johnston’s position shares certain kinship with Madhyamaka views on self.

In order to understand the difference between Parfit and himself, Johnston revisits what he has dubbed Parfit’s ‘Argument from Below’ against his ‘Argument from Above’ to which Parfit has contributed a counterargument. What Johnston calls “the argument from below” is that:

⁸ This leads me to think about the whole tradition of practices of self in the Western philosophical tradition, and even more so the ubiquity of the notion of self-cultivation 修身, 修己 in the Chinese tradition of Confucianism and Daoism.

Reductionism about personal identity, [is] the thesis that personal identity does not consist in the persistence of separately existing entities distinct from brains and bodies but rather in the holding of patterns of physical and psychological continuity. (Johnston 2010: 307).

Since the value of personal identity precisely consists in these fundamentals, and it does not transcend the value of these fundamental particulars, therefore it is not what really matters above this presumes continuation of bundled states. Parfit disagrees with Johnston's counterargument what concerns critique of his line of argument concerning examples of the examples of Combined Spectrum examples – the vagueness of personal identity, as well as fission examples, which Johnson explicitly doubts as experientially and evidentially possible at all, therefore:

It would be more rational to adapt and extend our identity-based concern to such cases rather than completely junk it in favour of concern for the holding of the more particular relations of bodily and psychological continuity. (Johnston 2010: 307).

Nevertheless, the main contention, as already mentioned above, is disagreement about the status of persons, and of personal identity in rationally ethical outlook. As Johnston notes, Parfit thinks, “that talk of persons and personal identity is entirely dispensable in such an outlook, for all the relevant facts can be captured by a description of the underlying physical and psychological continuities.” (Johnston 2010: 308)

Johnston reiterates that “form of argument, an argument that supposes that the importance of a fact is to be found in the facts in which it consists, is not in general reliable” since it would lead as form materialism to nihilism. (Johnston 2010: 310). The value of constituted facts comes not from facts themselves but from their place in our lives.

This is not just a local scholarly dispute about the soundness of certain arguments; it bears directly on just what form of the doctrine of *anatta* one should endorse. And that will have enormous practical consequences. (Johnston 2010: 311)

Johnson further addresses Parfit's response to his critique – the new criterion, which Johnston accepts, and is stated in a way that “the argument from below only works when the equivalence between the constituted fact and the constituting facts *holds as a conceptual matter*.” Therefore “when a claim of constitution is made true by the way we use our words or by which concepts we deploy then *we surely have the option of using other words or other concepts*.” Johnston interprets Parfit's view as stating that “since our diminished description of the world captures all the facts in this sense, it ought to capture everything that is important. For just by choosing to speak in a certain way, we cannot create things with distinctive value (other than certain speech acts or tracts).” (Johnston 2010: 312). To somehow simply the matter, what Parfit means by it is that by changing our vocabulary we do not add to the stock of ontological constitution of basic facts. Nevertheless, Johnston's conclusion is that:

...we can admit the doctrine of *anatta*, in the sense that there are no persisting souls or selves worth caring about, and yet still allow that personal identity and the persistence of individual personalities matter. These latter are not merely conceptual additions to a world that really would be the same without them. (Johnston 2010: 315)

Johnston presents his “least revisionary or the most purely descriptive account of what it is rational to care about in caring about survival” in “a package deal consisting of self identity, that is, the continued existence of the self one is and the persistence and flourishing of one's individual personality.” (Johnston 2010: 316) And even more importantly:

Relative to this package deal, personal identity is important because its continuing to hold is the practically necessary, and perhaps even the metaphysically necessary, way in which self identity can be secured. (Ibid.)

The doctrine of *anatta*, that Johnston sets out to defend still involves the notion that is not rational to care about self-identity, since there is no persisting self. However, this does not

entail, on Johnston's account, "that there is no coherent first-personal way of privileging a particular person as me now, and then caring especially about him, his future, and his individual personality." By concentrating on the person what presently occupies the arena of presence as myself, it makes rational to especially concerned about that person. (Johnston 2010: 316)

How, after the treatment of sophisticated arguments, one is supposed to understand the initial claim that one survives death without recourse to supernatural explanations? In the remaining part of the fifth chapter Johnston concentrates upon providing arguments for the idea that we go on living in others — "in the onward rush of humanity" after our own demise. Apart from the aforementioned discussion of Parfit's arguments, Johnston draws examples from classical thought, especially the mythical case of Phoenix as presented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in order to argue for his notion of us being higher-order individuals: given that we are Protean, "each of us in principle has access to a higher-order identity." (Johnston 2010: 319-322). The discussion of the parable of Phoenix provides a further allegory that Phoenix's case is that of "*anastasis*, the raising up of one's identity to that of a higher-order entity. So, if there are beings with Protean identities they are capable of *anastasis*, that is, they are capable of coming to be variably constituted by a series of different individuals over time." (Johnston 2010: 326) The allegory of the Phoenix, in Johnston's own words is "employed to illustrate that a certain conception of the dispositions characteristic of the good, when wedded to our thesis that persons are Protean, would count the good as living on in the onward rush of humanity."

A person comes into being in the usual way, he is embodied by a particular human organism, and his fundamental dispositions develop over time, along with the development of his individual personality. But if that person becomes good, that is, if his practical outlook is an expression of *agape*, then he becomes generally embodied; his constitution is made up of the constitution of all present and future beings with interests. This is how, when death brings the destruction of his initial individual personality, he continues on in the onward rush of humanity. (Johnston 2010: 331)

A good person who once lived is now partly embodied by the human organism that embodies me and you, though there is no identity between you. If one chooses selfish future self-concern, one remains within the confines of his individual personality, never rising to the level of higher-order. But the good in person who existed and good in you, if you choose to lead a life directed by the idea of *agape*, is "He is generically reincarnated in the onward rush of humanity." (Johnston 2010: 331)

Buddhist Reductionism and Non-Reductionism

In the schematic presentation of the Buddhist reductionist and non-reductionist theories of self I wholly relied on reworking and systematising the analyses give by Duerlinger (1993; 2003; 2013) on Indian and Buddhist theories of self in general, and Vasubandhu's and Candrakīrti's arguments in particular. What follows is my own schematic arrangement of Vasubandhu's and Candrakīrti's main points of agreement and contention, as well as their basic philosophical stances on the issue of self. In no way my presentation exhausts the detailed presentation found in Duerlinger's studies on these two philosophers. Duerlinger's interpretation has also changed, the older terms and concepts have been reworked in the course of twenty years since the publication of "Reductionist and Non-reductionist Theories of Persons in Indian Buddhist Philosophy" (Duerlinger 1993: 79-101), culminating in the most detailed work published in English so far on Vasubandhu - *Indian Buddhist theories of persons: Vasubandhu's "Refutation of the Theory of a Self"* (Duerlinger 2003: 1-71) – and Candrakīrti: *The Refutation of the Self in Indian Buddhism: Candrakīrti on the selflessness of persons* (Duerlinger 2013: 32-55). All the sins of omission and commission that have resulted in cross-referencing three texts are therefore my own.

I'm also aware that the subject of the Buddhist discussions on reductionism and anti-realism have been thoroughly researched and forcefully argued for and against in Mark Siderits' *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* and his earlier paper "Buddhist Reductionism." I have consulted these three works to various degrees, but have not included them as my reference or have drawn from them by not acknowledging it. If my broad conclusions relating reductionism and non-reductionism have been covered by Siderits' work, in further re-working of my paper I will have to pay due attention to his observations and conclusions. In the current phase of my work I wanted to remain as much uninfluenced as possible, to the detriment of soundness of arguments, I suspect.

1. Indian Theories of Self

Indian theories of persons generally differ from Western theories in respect that persons conceived from the perspective of everyday singular perspective turn out to be not existent with their own natures, independent of conceptualisation. Therefore, most of the Indian philosophers have strived to explicate the true persons and what they consist in. Thus Indian theories of persons entail both reductionist and non-reductionist approaches alike. For Duerlinger this dichotomy stems from the way we naturally perceive ourselves to be: both as identical and different from the body, as well the same and different over time with respect of our relation to either body and mind. This is clearly self-contradictory, therefore "theories of persons, insofar as they are formulated in response to this problem, are attempts to deal with the fact that our actual concept of ourselves would seem to be without a real object. And historically there have been three approaches:

1. Non-reductionist theories of persons. Classical form on non-reductionism is the separate self theory of Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika. (Duerlinger 1993: 83)
2. reductionist and revisionist – revision of our actual concept of ourselves, providing it with a real object of some sort (Vasubandhu);
3. Non-revisionist non-reductionist theories of persons:

- a. Realist (like Vātsīputrīyas⁹ inexplicable persons);
- b. Conventionalist (like Candrakīrti's view that real person do not exist, they are mere convention).¹⁰ The former view may be called the realist, the latter, the conventionalist, version of the non-revisionist theory. All non-revisionist theories are non reductionist in character." (Duerlinger 1993: 79)

Vasubandhu's theory of persons "may be regarded as the classic statement of the Buddhist version of the reductionist theory of persons of the sort held by David Hume and Parfit himself." (Duerlinger 1993: 79). Duerlinger believes, that contrary to the common view that Vātsīputrīyas were representatives of non-reductionist view of the Buddha's theory, "much more successful non-reductionist interpretation of of the Buddha's theory" we find "in the 8th century A.D. founder of Prasaṅgika interpretation of Nāgarjuna's Madhyamaka – Candrakīrti. (Duerlinger 1993: 79-80)

2. Theories of self in Indian Buddhism

1. For all Indian Buddhists: conception of ourselves in dependence upon our bodies and minds as separately existing is false and is the root cause of suffering. (Duerlinger 2003: 1).
2. Pudgalavādins: we ultimately exist without being the same in existence as our bodies and minds and without being separate substances.
3. Candrakīrti: since that nothing ultimately exists, first-person singular reference to ourselves does not depend upon a reference to something that ultimately exists. The expression "I" refers to a mentally constructed "I" and to nothing else.
4. Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins: first-person singular reference to us is possible because it is also a reference to something that ultimately exists.

3. Intramural points of agreement in the Buddhist traditions

1. Vasubandhu, the Pudgalavādins, and Candrakīrti agree that the conception of ourselves is formed in dependence upon collections of aggregates and that insofar as we are conceived on this basis we are conventional realities. (Duerlinger 2003: 27)
2. Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins actually agree that persons are conventional realities (*saṃvṛiti-satya*) that ultimately exist (*paramārthasatya*), but disagree about the form in which persons ultimately exist, and so, about what can and cannot be a conventional reality. (Duerlinger 2003: 14)

Therefore, two interpretations of the selflessness of persons thesis accepted in all of the Indian Buddhist philosophical schools:

1. The separate substance interpretation: we are not other than collections of aggregates. To be other than collections of aggregates is to be a separate substance.
2. The selflessness of persons interpretation:

⁹ Theory of persons refers to us as conventional realities because it also refers to an entity that cannot be independently identified. This entity, they claim, is perceived when the aggregates in the collection in dependence upon which we are conceived are present. The Pudgalavādins' theory we may call the entity without a separate identity version of the ultimate existence theory of persons, since in it the thesis is asserted that we are the same in existence as an entity without a separate identity. (Duerlinger 2003: 34)

¹⁰ I would call them eliminativist-conventionalists

- a) we do not possess any attributes apart from being conceived in dependence upon collections of aggregates.
- b) when we conceive ourselves, we naturally appear to ourselves to possess attributes apart from being conceived in dependence upon collections of aggregates. (Duerlinger 2003: 16)

4. A Schematic overview of Vasubadhu's position in *Abhidharmakośa*.

The ultimate existence theory - substantially established reality version of the ultimate existence theory of persons. “The selflessness of persons” refers to independent existence and “persons” refers to person-property selves. (Duerlinger 2013: 33)

1. **Vasubandhu's Basic Argument:** “The expression, 'self' (*ātman*), is known to be applicable to the aggregates in a continuum and to nothing else because there is no direct perception or sound inference” (Duerlinger 1993: 88)
2. **Sameness thesis.** We ultimately exist in spite of not existing apart from our aggregates. A self is the same as the collection of aggregates in dependence upon which it is conceived. The aggregates are the ever-changing momentary elements of our bodies and minds that the Buddha identifies as the phenomena in dependence upon which a self is conceived. (Duerlinger 2013: 3-4)
3. **No independent object of a person:** The conception of a person does not have an object that can be identified independently. (Duerlinger 2003: 34)
4. **Conception has an object:** the object of the conception of ourselves is a conventional reality. The conception is used to refer to us as conventional realities because it also refers to our aggregates as a collection. This reference to us, of course, also depends upon the convention that we are present when the aggregates in the collection of aggregates of which we are composed are present.
5. **Acceptance of SPA¹¹ and CPA¹² argument.** SPA and CPA arguments as the middle way between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Mādhyamikas fall to the nihilist extreme because they deny the real existence of all phenomena (Duerlinger 1993: 91; 93)
6. **Conventional and ultimate reality:** An object of knowledge is a conventional reality just in case it is no longer conceived to be what it is conceived to be if analyzed or broken into parts. An ultimate reality, by contrast, is an object of knowledge whose identity is retained if analysed or broken into parts. Because ultimate realities are

¹¹ *Selfless persons argument* (SPA): the name and concept of person are known not to be applicable to a self because a self is not known by direct perception or sound inference to exist among the phenomena on the basis of which a person is named and conceptualized. The purpose of the argument is to bring us to the realization that, even though we appear to be selves, we are not in fact selves, since a self is not known to exist among the phenomena in reliance upon which we refer to ourselves from the first person singular perspective. (Duerlinger 1993: 91)

¹² *Continuum persons argument* (CPA). The second of the two arguments is that the name and concept of a person are known to be applicable to a collection of aggregates in a causal continuum because the phenomena on the basis of which the person is named and conceptualized are known by direct perception or sound inference to be a collection of aggregates as a causal continuum. The purpose of this argument is to enable us to see that, since it is known that there is a continuum of aggregates in reliance upon which we refer to ourselves from the first person singular perspective, there really is something to which we refer when we refer to ourselves, even if it is not a self. (Duerlinger 1993: 90)

substantially real phenomena, they exist and have identities apart from being conceived. (Duerlinger 2003: 19)

5. Schematic overview of Candrakīrti's position in *Madhyamakāvataṛabhāṣya*: "the no ultimate existence thesis."

1. **By definition to be a self is to possess ultimate existence.**
 - 1.1. We are selfless in the sense that we lack ultimate existence.
 - 1.2. We are conceived in dependence upon collections of aggregates, but aggregates are not substances
 - 1.3. The conception of a person does not have an object that can be identified independently.
 - 1.4. The object of the conception of ourselves is a conventional reality.
 - 1.5. The conception is used to refer to us in dependence upon collections of aggregates, but it itself does not also refer to the collection of our aggregates or to an entity without a separate identity, since we are not the same in existence as either of them. (Duerlinger 2003: 29; 34)
6. We do not exist independently with natures of our own on the basis of which we can be named and conceptualized. (Duerlinger 1993: 89)
7. We are selfless in the sense that we do not really exist, since our existence is neither separate from, nor reducible to, that of the phenomena in dependence upon which we are named and conceptualized. (Duerlinger 1993: 92)
2. **Conventional reality:** To say that something exists by convention does not simply mean that people have entered into an agreement that it exists. To exist by convention is to exist according to functional criteria of conventional existence. (Duerlinger 2013: 40)
3. **Suffering:** We suffer because we see ourselves as selves in the sense that we see ourselves as phenomena that really exist. (Duerlinger 1993: 87)
4. **Critique of the sameness thesis.** All proponents of the sameness thesis believe that the aggregates are substantially real in the sense that each exists by its own nature. What exists by its own nature is what exists independently or by itself. Two interpretations of the sameness:
 - 4.1. A self is an object of the first-person singular pronoun that does not possess person-properties, and the sameness thesis is the thesis that it is the same as a collection of substantially real aggregates. "A self without person-properties"
 - 4.2. A self is an object of the first-person singular pronoun that is a possessor of person-properties and the sameness thesis is the thesis that it is the same as a collection of aggregates in the sense that the conception of a self refers to a collection of substantially real aggregates. "A person-property self". (Duerlinger 2013: 3-4)
- 4.3. **Non-existence of self without person-properties:** It is not only the independent existence of a person-property self that the Buddha taught does not exist by itself. The primary self whose independent existence the Buddha taught does not exist by itself is a self without person-properties. (Duerlinger 2013: 5)

- 4.4. The conception of a self to be abandoned is the conception of a self without person-properties opposite to Vasubandhu and Pudgalavādins who assume that the conception of a self to be abandoned is the conception of a person property self. We reify the person-property self in dependence upon reifying the self without person-properties, since this self is the self that acquires person-properties. (Duerlinger 2013: 18)
5. **Non-acceptance of SPA argument.**
 6. **Conventional and ultimate reality:** no phenomena possess ultimate existence. Persons are conventional realities.
 - a) Conventional realities are objects of knowledge that appear to minds in dependence upon the causally efficacious conventional framework of conceptions used by them during their beginningless journey through saṃsāra.
 - b) Ultimate realities, are objects of knowledge that appear to minds in dependence upon analysis that dissolves this conventional framework of conceptions. An ultimate reality, in this scheme, is an object's emptiness of ultimate existence. Every object of knowledge, including this emptiness, is empty of ultimate existence. For this reason, in his system of thought, conventional realities may be defined as all existent phenomena other than emptinesses. (Duerlinger 2003: 24)
 7. **Preservation of conventional beliefs:**
 - a) The Buddha said that he does not dispute the truth of the conventions of the world.
 - b) The Buddha never intended that we revise our actual concept of ourselves, but that we retain it so that we can use it in an effort to realise our mode of the existence;
 - c) is needed in order to formulate the problem of suffering in terms of our acceptance of the false appearance of ourselves as really existent: it is to be a useful tool for the conduct of human affairs.
 - d) the elimination of either the reductionist or the non-reductionist components of our actual concept of ourselves has absurd consequences by reason of undermining our conventional idea of what we are.
 8. **Critique of Buddhist realists:** Buddhist realist and modified realists forms of reductionism fall prey to the nihilist view that we do not exist at all as we actually conceive ourselves. (Duerlinger 1993: 96)
 9. **Fallacy of eternalism:** Revising of the concept of self Buddhist realist and modified realists are suspect to the eternalist view that we really exist, since even though they deny that we really exist as what we actually conceive ourselves to be, they assert that there is in fact something real to which we refer when we attempt to name and conceptualise ourselves. (Duerlinger 1993: 97)
 10. **Our false appearance:** We are deceptive, we name and conceptualise ourselves, we falsely appear, to our ordinary consciousness, to exist independently with natures of our own by virtue of which we are named and conceptualised, when in fact we exist in dependence upon the functionally necessary convention of being named and conceptualised in reliance upon the presence of the aggregates as a collection in a causal continuum.
 11. **Our ultimate reality,** is our emptiness or absence of real existence.

Conclusion: is Johnston's *Minimalism* amenable to comparison with Madhyamaka?

Having schematically laid out Parfit's definition for reductionism and its purported consequences for ethical theory, I proceeded to sketch the main outlines of Johnston's minimalist approach, both in his earliest response to Parfit, as well as in his recent book *Surviving Death*. My summary of the arguments in *Surviving Death* has been somehow drawn out, partly necessitated by the desire to understand Johnston's relevant argumentative strategies in their own context. This summary was then followed by equally schematic presentation of the main Buddhist approaches to the self, namely Vasubandhu's realist-reductionist position, as well as Candrakīrti's anti-realist non-reductionist thesis. In order to save space and time I have, unfortunately, neglected not only Pudgalavādins, but equally unjustifiably have not paid attention to the original texts themselves: my references are not to *Abhidharmakośa* or *Madhyamakāvataṛabhāṣya*, but are entirely based of Duerlinger's presentation of them. Needless to say, this is a serious drawback, nevertheless at this stage of my research I was more attracted to arguments themselves and their possible consequences in answering the question whether there are grounds to compare Johnston's minimalism with Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka approach to no-self theory. The following is my attempt to work out my own conclusions.

At the start it needs to be reminded that Johnston in the final chapter of *Surviving Death* mentions Perrett's comment, which aligns him with more "conservative schools of Buddhism, which insist that the doctrine of *anatta* does not remove persons and personal identity from the landscape or make them merely verbal or conventional entities, which could be left out of a complete description of reality." Since Parfit's critique of Johnston involves a charge that he is "bewitched by language" instead suggesting "that all talk of persons and personal identity could be left out of a complete description of reality", this in Johnston's view, following Perrett, allows to conclude that Parfit "aligns himself with the more radical elaborations of the doctrine of *anatta*." (Johnston 2010, 309).

In this observation Johnston seems to turn the table around by suggesting that his views are closer to more conservative schools of Buddhism, but those of Parfit are closer to more radical descriptions of personal identity. It seems to me to be the very opposite. Parfit's views are closer to the orthodox.

Returning to Perrett's own position we see that it was stated unambiguously:

These Prasaṅgika themes are obviously much closer to Minimalism than to Reductionism. Indeed, I want to claim the Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka position on personal identity as a Buddhist analogue of the Western Minimalist position on personal identity. (Perrett 2002: 379).

This resemblance, Perrett goes on to claim, suggests that both minimalists and Prasaṅgikas assume that "metaphysical view that we may have of persons is not indispensable to the practice of making judgments about personal identity and organising our practical concerns around these judgments." That the metaphysical facts about personal identity are "largely irrelevant to justifying our ordinary normative practices because these are founded not on a metaphysics of persons but on our circumstances and needs." This assumption makes both of them "deflationary about the normative pretensions of metaphysical Reductionism and Non-Reductionism", nevertheless "both acknowledge, however, that this does not mean that the philosophy of personal identity must leave everything as it is. Our everyday practices are open to criticism and revision, even if neither they nor their alternatives are ground-able in the inherent existence of things in themselves." (Perrett 2002: 379)

What Perrett calls deflationary account of reductionism¹³ in his understanding is Johnston's minimalism. Let's recapitulate Johnston's definition of minimalism:

'Minimalism' – the view that metaphysical pictures of the justificatory undergirdings of our practices do not represent the real conditions of justification of those practices. The minimalist has it that such metaphysical pictures are mostly theoretical epiphenomena; that is, although ordinary practitioners may naturally be led to adopt such pictures as a result of their practices and perhaps a little philosophical prompting, the pictures have relatively little impact on the practices themselves. (Johnston: 1997: 149-150)

So the question about reductionism vs. minimalism is not about whether reductionism as a metaphysical theory or scientifically informed theory of personal identity is true or not, but about the moral consequences one is ready to draw from them. It is not a metaphysical contention after all, but an ethical. Nevertheless, even after a superficial glance at the arguments and positions that either Parfit and Johnston have worked out and defended in the aforementioned works, there is enough reason to conclude that their basic starting points are almost identical. Both of them are naturalists and physicalists, both subscribe to the most scientific findings on mind-brain identity and deny supernatural explanations — as long as there is no evidence to support them. Both deny that—personal identity in Parfit's case, and self-identity in Johnston's case in *Surviving Death*— are not really worth caring about, since there are none of the superlative enduring selves worth caring about. Both authors are engaged in metaphysical analyses of personal identity, but draw different conclusions from their reflections. The force and consistency of Parfit's arguments lead him to conclusions that do not sit well with our everyday experiences and folk-intuitions. Indeed, our sense of self is so intertwined with certain cultural and social practices that the whole reworking of them would involve an analogue of total annihilation of society as we know it. Take the notion personal responsibility out of the picture of selfhood and all our ethical outlook, our talk of rights and duties might go to smithereens. Some philosophers like Derek Parfit and Galen Strawson, at least in their theories, pay a lip service to their readiness make such steps, although such famous eliminativists as Daniel Dennet have constantly claimed that even if much of our intuitive folk-theories of agency and consciousness are cognitive illusions, they do not take certain kinds of free-will and views of personal identity out of picture. They are here to stay, since they are the current end result of a very long process, that we as biological organisms have been equipped with by evolution, both natural and social. So it is perfectly justified that Johnston, and others who are not willing — on both philosophical and heuristic grounds — are not ready to draw such radical conclusions, and are reasonably right about keeping the appearances. Indeed, real justification of our practices comes from biological, social and anthropological factors, which are slowly being understood by cognitive sciences and cultural anthropology. But I think that reductionist of any kind, if they are not outright eliminativists, would perfectly endorse these conclusions. But if the reductionist view is to be taken seriously, some metaphysical conclusions might loom uncomfortably in the background of our default vision of ourselves.

There also remains the question of how it relates to the Buddhist discussions of reductionist and anti-realist sort. As with Parfit and Johnston, they all agree that the basic fact about sentient beings is that there is no enduring substantial self. The idea that there is such an entity is seen as the root cause of suffering. So, in all our discussion on this subject we

¹³ "Minimalism, then, is a deflationary account of the normative significance of ontological Reductionism." (Perrett 2002: 375)

should never forget the soteriological background against which the Buddhist discussions are set. The orthodox view, elaborated by Vasubandhu is very explicit about it: A self is the same as the collection of aggregates in dependence upon which it is conceived. Madhyamakas, Candrakīrti in particular, might object that this view does not go far enough, since it still postulates substantially existing elements upon which this conventional and fictional self supervenes. The denial of *svabhāva* is justified on philosophical grounds, as it entails many metaphysical difficulties in explaining how simple and non-partite fundamentals as *dharmas* can engender change and themselves remain changeless. Nevertheless, it seems to me that these are what they are: metaphysical discussions, they in no way endanger the soteriological import of the no-self theory, unless we conclude that Madhyamaka version of it, with their insistence on emptiness of persons and elements of existence alike, is a far better way to deliver us to *nirvāna*. And this is precisely what Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions have insisted, albeit always keeping other approaches as skilful-means. But when it comes to the view of self as a conventional designation, then it is difficult for me to see where the greatest difference between Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti might be found. Candrakīrti's objections to reductionism is that they reify aggregates, thus going against Buddha's insistence on the lack of self-existence of anything: and that is a perfect example of a metaphysical discussion. But as we know, this is another thorny issue in a long dispute on who's interpretation of the Buddha's teaching is to be preferred. But when it comes to conventional-ultimate distinction, and we for a moment leave elaborate metaphysical discussions aside, all the sides agree that we are conventional entities. The contention is about the metaphysical foundation of the conventional, this is where the orthodox view parts with Madhyamaka, or let's say: a realist view parts with an anti-realist view. But when it comes to the import of the conventional, I do not see any practical difference. Both Buddhist realists and anti-realists conform to the usefulness of the conventional. Does the orthodox view of Vasubandhu involve anything of the kind that Parfit would draw, namely that we are not really responsible for anything if the metaphysical facts of personhood hold true? Both the orthodox and anti-realist view presupposes the acknowledgement of the conventional view of personhood, since it has simply been our default attachment, conditioned by equally default ignorance since beginningless times. Therefore, to say that Johnston's minimalism is closer to Madhyamaka since both hold deflationary view on the pretensions of metaphysical reductionism to guide our practical affairs and justify our normative practices as irrelevant, is to falsely attribute views that philosophers as Vasubandhu and more practical ethical and meditation traditions never endorsed. I find Madhyamaka attempt to escape all metaphysics via postulation of emptiness of everything and deconstruction of all views via reduction ad absurdum equally metaphysical, i.e. putting forward conclusions about how everything fits together as a whole. Although I state it in a superficially trivial manner, nevertheless I contend that to think that *reductio ad absurdum* sceptical arguments and adoption of global anti-realist view might settle the problem of reductionism, is too optimistic. It might be that the mistakes of both the Buddhist discussants and contemporary analytical metaphysicians of personal identity lies in their insufficient attention to empirical evidence. And although Wittgenstein once claimed that philosophy can never be either above or next to science, I on the contrary think that philosophy straying too far away from the currently best scientific research is committing itself at best to obscurity and at worst to irrelevance when it comes to translating its arguments into everyday practices, which we are either never to escape or are bound to come back to, whenever reflective work of the philosopher is finished. It seems to me that the

burden of irrelevance is heavily on the shoulders of contemporary philosophers, since even those who oppose stronger forms of reductionist ethical conclusions, have no relevant practical philosophy to contribute. But that, alas had been a long charge against philosophy as an academic discipline and here it is not my task to discuss it.

Mark Johnston's *Surviving Death* is a rare exception to the rule of technical field of analytical metaphysics of personal identity. Although Johnston uses a full gamut of the methods of conceptual analyses in tackling the problems of personal identity, his initial desire to address the 'un-academic' subject of post-mortem survival in wholly naturalistic terms, is highly commendable. The view on how we are to survive our inevitable demise is highly idiosyncratic. Although he hopes to provide a naturalistic explanation, a route to his conclusions lie in the metaphysical terrain. To my knowledge, reductionism still remains largely unchallenged, at least in its weak form: that our everyday conceptions of self can still be reduced to the existence of more fundamental elements. The strong form of reductionism, which posits that facts about personal identity diminish the importance of it in our day to day deliberations and as well in our future directed concerns are still largely open for discussion. There are aspects of reductionism worse salvaging, nevertheless there are aspects of natural attitude towards personhood, which, if taken out of the picture of how we actually conduct our lives and think about others persons, would lead as to some nihilistic outcomes. In this view practical concerns trump metaphysical theories.

But one thing is almost certain, even trivial: there is a gap between what our theories say and how we talk and act. We both live and don't live in the world described by metaphysicians and scientists. Evidently we live in the world where the Earth does rotate around the Sun, therefore our talk of the Sun rising and setting is due to our perceptual illusion caused by the our relative size compared to that of the Earth. We explicitly do not live as social beings in the world described by mathematics and physics, although our supervenient first-person subjective perspective is an emergent phenomena. So reductionism just goes half way, nevertheless all the current evidence in neurobiology, neuroscience and cognitive psychology strongly suggests that reductionism, at least in its weak form, is true. On the other hand, as with cognitive illusions, which are founded on the facts of our limited cognitive buildup and access to reality — there are still enough philosophers who explicitly deny that — we are not to escape them, at least for now. The illusion of self is here to stay.

The Buddhists, on the other hand, would point out, that as long as we cling to this default socio-biological sense of self, we will forever be experiencing all sorts of physical and mental distress, ranging from bodily pain to psychological suffering, culminating in the terror of death. There also is a considerable difference between what practical consequences are drawn from the no-self view in the Buddhist tradition and the Western metaphysics of personal identity. One the one hand we have Vasubandhu's and Candrakīrti's sophisticated metaphysical analyses of no-self doctrine, on the other we have a long and equally sophisticated tradition of cultivating wholesome states of mind, which are conducive to realising the emptiness of the self, thus bringing the adept ever closer to the *Nirvāna*. The experience of *suññatā* (as in Pāli Theravāda tradition), the emptiness of bodily and mental elements — the five aggregates — of abiding self is to be experienced and realised, not merely affirmed intellectually. And depending of doctrinal affiliation and meditative techniques, the idea of emptiness of *sūnyatā* (as in Mahayāna traditions) is extended to cover not only five aggregates, but all existents — *dharmas*.

And there is another observation to add. All of the authors writing on the subject of the parallels between Buddhist views of no-self and contemporary theories of personal identity, seem to ignore the fundamental fact about the Buddhist worldview, namely *karman*. In their desire to probe into the argumentative similarities, the views of the post-mortem existence and the law of *karman*, that governs the *samsara*, are relegated to general background assumptions of ancient Buddhist, which they shared with other Indians, as we share the knowledge of the spherical character of the planet Earth with those of different metaphysical and religious dispositions. In my view, the Buddhist reductionist theories are very much intertwined with the notion of *karman*, even more so, *karman* and *samsara* are *sine qua non* of no-self theory, understanding and realisation of which can guarantee the severance of the bondage that ties oneself to *samsara* and all the structural deficiencies that human condition involves. By neglecting the tenet of *karman*, one is anachronistically, therefore mistakenly, assuming that ancient Indian Buddhists are somehow in the same boat with contemporary reductionists. There certainly are similarities in argumentative strategies, and analytical approaches, nevertheless one should be very careful in making hasty generalisations.

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