

A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF ANATTA AND ITS  
RELATIVE TRUTH WITHIN BUDDHISM

by

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## ABSTRACT

Often times we question how two rational, logical, and intelligent people can observe a scenario or argument and come away with varying degrees of belief. The question of personal identity is no different, the self maintains its critics and followers, it is well documented through argumentation, defense, and theory, but though these arguments exist on three sides as rational and passionate defenses, debate continues between the three unique and well-founded sides of this issue. Whether it's the reductionist, the non-reductionist, or the no-self theorist, debate and disagreement exists over the consistency of doctrine and the viability of the theories presented by each group. To understand and decipher the elements of the debate, I propose a relative understanding of the question of personal identity, one consistent with the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity advocated by Peter Unger. Through careful study of the critiques, counter-theories, and counter-arguments of the doctrine of *anatta*, I seek to provide compelling reasons to doubt that an absolute answer to the question of the self is possible but also that a relative understanding of the no-self doctrine is plausible. Moreover, I focus on a new and distinct interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha, one of the central proponents of the no-self theory, whereby we consider a connection between the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity and one of the core metaphysical doctrines of Buddhism. Thus, I seek to accomplish two important tasks: I seek to cast doubt upon the absolute assumptions which drive the debate within personal identity, and I further hope to argue for a new interpretation of the Buddha's teachings that is both consistent with the

possible relative nature of the question of personal identity and true to the doctrine of *anatta* itself.

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTIONS AND EXPOSITION

A Comprehensive Study of Anatta and Its Relative Truth Within Buddhism

Recent discussions in the field of epistemology seem to forgo the arguments of the skeptic because it is assumed that skepticism has been proven false or simply cannot be true. Analogously, the not-self theory of personal identity seems to fall victim to the identical fate of thoroughgoing skepticism: both skepticism and not-self seem to entail harsh consequences and seem inconsistent with a commonsense understanding of our world. For these reasons, skepticism and not-self suffer from a lack of scholarly debate and apathy by many within the field. The modern debate within the philosophical field of personal identity tends to hinge not upon whether the self exists but upon what exactly constitutes the self. Of the many different concepts which permeate this debate, the Buddhist belief in not-self is considered to be incorrect and largely forgotten. While skepticism is not appropriate for our purposes, one of the goals of this thesis is to raise the level of discussion between scholars on the theory of not-self with particular emphasis on the Buddhist understanding of the doctrine.

In this thesis, I will argue for the comprehensive and consistent view embraced by the Buddhist concerning the doctrine of *anatta* (not-self) and reveal how the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity is crucial in gaining a richer understanding of *anatta*. It is important then to first offer a broad summation of the concept within western philosophy, and to explain how the concept of not-self has evolved within the arguments offered on its behalf. While this will demonstrate contemporary western thinking on the doctrine,

any presentation on the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* without strict interpretations of the teachings of the Buddha would be incomplete. Thus, chapter one will further discuss my conclusions concerning the teachings of the Buddha and reveal canon that will aid in my later development of a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist doctrine. My second chapter will begin with critiques meant to reveal the opposing side of the debate, but more than that these critiques will provide a basis for doubt within Buddhism as I call into question the internal consistency of core doctrines. I will further provide what I consider to be an intelligent and powerful critique of the no-self doctrine, one that is not easily answered or brushed aside. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the reductionism/non-reductionism debate as I seek to reveal the inherent reasons to doubt the no-self doctrine that is central to all Buddhist teachings. Finally, chapter three will bring chapters one and two into sharper focus by arguing two important conclusions I wish to advance: the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity is correct concerning the doctrine of *anatta* and the Buddha would not only agree with my conclusion but in fact that this interpretation raises a middle ground the Buddha would endorse. My overall goal for this thesis is to present a middle ground for Buddhist thought that reconciles many of the problems the doctrine itself faces, while further arguing for the interpretations inherent to an adoption of the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity.

## CHAPTER II

### REASONS TO BELIEVE

*Thus, monks, any body whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every body is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'*<sup>1</sup>

#### Back Story

At the foot of Mount Palpa in the Himalayan Ranges of Nepal, Siddhartha Gautama would be born nearly 600 years before the birth of Jesus. As the story is told, astrologists predicted that Siddhartha would become either a universal monarch or a monk whose life and accomplishments would lead to salvation for all of humanity. As any father would, Suddhodana wanted only the best for his son, and therefore set Siddhartha on the path towards kingship. Suddhodana beset Siddhartha with luxury and kept his son from witnessing the worst aspects of life. By executing his plan to perfection, Suddhodana hoped to create a bond between Siddhartha and this world, such that Siddhartha would naturally want to rule. However, Siddhartha would escape his prison of luxury and thwart the plans of his father by fulfilling his desire to observe the true plight of man. In the town of Kapilavastu in northern India, it would be fate that Siddhartha would come across the “four sights”: a dead man, an old man, a sick man, and a monk. Realizing the transitory nature of life, Siddhartha would come to realize that the attachments he held to in this world only caused suffering. With this discovery in hand, Siddhartha would set out on a quest for spiritual enlightenment and abandon all the attachments at the root of life’s problems. After years of frustration and disappointment,

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<sup>1</sup> Samyutta Nikaya XXII.59.

the Buddha, as Siddhartha would come to be called, would achieve Nirvana under a fig tree at Gaya. With a heart full of compassion and peace, the Buddha would set out to share his discoveries with the whole of humanity and provide a solution to the problems offered by life itself.

As a philosophy student and aspiring professor, I tend to delve deeply into ideas and search for the truth found in logic and reason. When I first began to study philosophy in depth, I wondered about the most basic questions of life, freedom, existence, knowledge, and religion. Then, when I was 21 years of age, I began to wonder exactly who I was and what the answers could mean on such a grand scale. Influenced by the arguments of Hume, Collins, Harvey, and Giles, I wondered whether my query would yield results inconsistent with the commonsense on which I relied. However, like Descartes, I knew that to truly discover my self I should question every argument and seek the most basic of truths even those that seem obvious or self-evident. Thus, I began to study the teachings of the Buddha and his doctrine of *anatta* because I wanted to discover whether the non-existence of the self had any merit within the most prominent system to embrace this principle. Of the many teachings the Buddha provided the whole of humanity, the doctrine of *anatta* developed into one of the most controversial and studied of Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, I wondered whether the Buddhist philosopher could defend the Buddha's doctrine and argue for a system of beliefs consistent with other teachings inherent to Buddhism. After careful study, I began to embrace the Buddhist concept of no-self and the consistency I discerned within Buddhism, but as my goal was to obtain truth, I knew that I would have to defend the concept against modern critiques and argue for the consistency of Buddhist doctrine. As philosophy had taught

me, only through careful reasoning and examination would my newfound belief become rational and justified.

### Early Insight Into the Not Self Theory

To properly ground our discussion, we must begin with Descartes and his most famous of philosophical arguments. After destroying most of his epistemic beliefs with the doubt he observed from a deceiving God, Descartes began his search for a belief capable of surviving the doubt he had created. Often referred to as his *first certainty*, the cogito served as a stepping-stone to restoring the beliefs he no longer held as a result of the influence of his evil demon hypothesis. The belief soon became all too clear:

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So, after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that the proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.<sup>2</sup>

While his evil demon could call into question almost all of his epistemic beliefs, Descartes argued that he could not doubt his existence because he was able to think and come to that decision. With this conclusion in hand, Descartes would attempt to recreate a structure of beliefs based upon solid evidence, rationality, and logic, such that he would hold only to those beliefs which could not be doubted or proven incorrect.

However, as one of the most famous arguments in philosophy, Descartes's cogito faced intense scrutiny and critics who passionately argued its fallacious nature. One of the critiques faced by Descartes claims that the cogito proceeds too quickly and asserts

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes, Rene. *Descartes Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans: John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge University Publishing, 1988. p. 80.

too much which has not been logically proven. Of this critique's main proponents, Georg Lichtenberg maintained that the cogito could not justify the logical leap from "I think" to "I exist" because the cogito does not go so far as to prove a thinker or "I", only that there is thinking somewhere and of something. As Bernard Williams would argue, this account seems to fail because "thinking" must be related to something and it must be the thinker or the "I" Descartes and his cogito imagine<sup>3</sup>. In that sense, Williams is able to show that Lichtenberg's objection to the cogito is faulty, but not that the cogito itself was wholly correct. The consequences of William's arguments imply that the objections raised by Lichtenberg are incorrect, but the validity and soundness of Descartes's argument could still be questioned by other more potent examinations. Thus, what Williams has achieved is only a partial defense of the cogito presented by Descartes. One of these objections to the cogito lies in the logic Descartes employs to deductively conclude his own existence and his method of questioning his beliefs. Known as the Cartesian Circle, Descartes seems to question all of his beliefs but heavily utilizes logic to begin anew with only those beliefs deemed justifiable. In fact, Descartes attempts to show the validity of his own existence by presenting an argument in the form of modus ponens. If we are to accept Descartes project how can Descartes make use of logical tools such as modus ponens without first arguing for the validity of these logical tools themselves? It is quite possible for the rules of logic to suffer the same fate as Descartes other beliefs at the hands of an evil demon, so why should Descartes be allowed to apply these rules to his project without freeing them of the doubt which plagues his other beliefs? Descartes project seems incomplete without a thorough proof of the tools he will use to get his project off the ground. In other words, Descartes must provide himself with sufficient

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, Bernard. *Descartes, The Project of Pure Enquiry*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1978.

tools free of the doubt he raises in order to argue effectively for his own existence, but he fails to accomplish this daunting task<sup>4</sup>.

While Descartes attempted to begin his project with the seemingly obvious deduction of his own existence, David Hume argued for a much different interpretation of personal identity. To a certain extent, Hume presented his *bundle theory of personal identity* as a reaction to Cartesian Rationalism. Hume's bundle theory maintains:

If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the argument put forth by Hume, think about the procedure we undertake to define physical objects in our world. For instance, if we wanted to define the nature of all cars, one way to arrive at the correct definition would be to search for things in common to all objects we consider car-like. This basic commonality would then lead us to a definition of cars that is all-encompassing and properly distinguishes between things considered cars and those not. Analogously, Hume maintains that all ideas such as the self must follow from real and constant impressions; in other words, to properly define the self we must find a basic and constant impression that distinguishes between self and not-self. However, our impressions are constantly changing, and there is never a thought or a feeling that lingers for an entire existence. Without this constant impression, there is no basic property of the self that can provide us with a basis for the definition we seek,

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<sup>4</sup> For a more in depth discussion of The Cartesian Circle than the summary I have provided will afford, see: Loeb, Louis E. "The Cartesian Circle." *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Ed. John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup>Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003. p. 180.

and so the idea of a self is fiction. Here, Hume's empiricism plays an enormous role, in that Hume seeks to experience the self but cannot do so because there is no basic commonality that can reveal the self. In fact, every time Hume seeks to discover the self he only experiences diverse and ever changing impressions that cannot be seen as the ever-elusive basic component of which he searches. With these deductions in hand, Hume declares the idea of the self to be non-existent and flies directly in opposition to Descartes and his cogito.

On one hand, the key component of Descartes's cogito is the idea that the self is intimately aware of itself because it thinks. On the other hand, Hume's *bundle theory of personal identity* argues that thinking does not necessarily imply a self because the product of that thinking is constantly in flux. For the self to exist, there should be one impression that persists through time, but there is no such impression. Even thinking is not constant because there are times when we simply do not think either through sleep, stupor, or unconsciousness. This would seem to imply that Descartes's cogito is incorrect because the basic trait of the self cannot be thinking, and according to Hume, to properly ground a discussion of personal identity and claim the self's existence one must experience this basic trait. The fallacy inherent to Descartes cogito then is the reason why Hume sought a basic trait: if we are to define the self through some trait that is fleeting, the idea of the self would fall into a contradiction wherein it both exists (when one is experiencing the trait) and does not exist (when one is not experiencing the trait). Through Hume's bundle theory, we gain two important lessons about Descartes's cogito and the nature of the self: Descartes's argument is incorrect because it implies that the

self can both exist and not, and that the idea of the self does not exist simply because we “think” it does.

However, my interlocutor might wonder, can we really conclude that the self does not exist from Hume’s bundle theory? While Hume’s basic premises provide insight into a critique of Descartes cogito, the conclusion Hume reaches can be called into question because it relies on the notion that Hume’s experiment is exhaustive in nature. As Saul Traiger posits: “But if Hume is allowing the possibility of a perception of self, then concluding that there is no such perception just because he is unable to locate it is at best jumping the gun.<sup>6</sup>” Essentially, Traiger wonders whether Hume goes too far in concluding the non-existence of the self because it would be quite possible for someone else to discover the basic trait in question. Because Hume does not argue that it is impossible for the trait to be discovered, Hume’s argument seems faulty and inadequate to answer the metaphysical question of the self’s existence. While Hume does provide us with a basis for debate against Cartesian Rationalism, it would seem that his argument fails to achieve his stated goal.

#### A Modern Argument

As one of the most famous arguments in philosophy, Descartes’s cogito is not as innocent or clear-cut as he would have us believe. Descartes’s argument implies the existence of a self as a continuing and unchanging entity, such that it exists as an ultimate object whose consciousness and experiences belong to a single and underlying self. With his bundle theory of personal identity, Hume argued against this notion by implying that the self does not exist in any form. More recently, Derek Parfit joined Hume and

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<sup>6</sup> Traiger, Saul. “Hume on Finding an Impression of the Self” *Hume Studies* 11.1 (April, 1985): 47-68. p. 51.

implicitly argued against the conclusions explored by Descartes in the *Meditations* by advancing his theory of personal identity through a reductionist account of the self or *ego*. Though he never mentions Descartes directly, Parfit's theory of the self lies in direct contradiction with Descartes, and what's more, Parfit seems to be successful in creating a plausible and consistent account of the true nature of the self.

Where Hume's argument falls short, Parfit seems to succeed in creating and establishing a complete theory of the self that revolves around the reductionism he employs. As my presentation will benefit from a thorough understanding of Parfit's position, we should begin with an understanding of the reductionism Parfit utilizes and the resulting non-reductionist claims of his critics. Mark Siderits characterizes reductionism as:

[A] view about what belongs in our ontology. To be a reductionist about things of kind K is, on this view, to hold that while it is not wholly false to claim that there are Ks, the existence of Ks just consists in the existence of certain other sorts of things, things that can be described without asserting or presupposing that Ks exist.<sup>7</sup>

And non-reductionism as:

When reductionism is seen in this way, non-reductionism is then readily characterized as the view that things of kind K do belong in our ultimate ontology--that there is nothing that Ks "just consist in," since Ks are ontologically primitive.<sup>8</sup>

As will be important later, think of the chariot from *Ben Hur* that Charlton Heston uses to win the race. A reductionist<sup>9</sup> about the chariot itself will conclude that the chariot does in fact exist as the sum of its parts, and that the ultimate existence of the chariot simply

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<sup>7</sup> Siderits, Mark. "Buddhist Reductionism" *Philosophy East and West* 47.4 (Oct 1997): 455-478. p. 457.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>9</sup> An important distinction here is the distinction between types of reductionism. As Parfit employs an ontological form of reductionism (ontological reductionism), this type of reductionism will provide us our basis for debate, and allow us to ignore, for our purposes, other types of reductionism such as methodological and scientific.

consists in the convergence of an axle, wheels, and carriage among other things. In fact, the reductionist will claim that we can describe events involving the chariot through this convergence instead of ultimately talking about the chariot. Let's think about the race from Ben Hur within the mindset of a reductionist: I can describe the events of the race without ever mentioning the chariot ("those axels are spinning fast as Ben rides in the carriage" for instance), thereby making the existence of the chariot ultimately the product of its components with regards to our ultimate ontology. In other words, I have reduced the existence of the chariot to its parts and shown that it is both unnecessary and incorrect to speak of the chariot as an independent self-existing object with special status. In a sense, we employ the word chariot to avoid the hassle of describing the race in such narrow and taxing terms, but more to the point, the chariot exists in our ultimate ontology as the sum of its parts and this distinction is what we describe when we employ the word chariot. To conceive of this in a less opaque fashion, any definition of the chariot has no special status other than to draw upon the parts consisting of the chariot, it has been reduced to the sum of the constituents which make up the chariot, and thus has no special ontological status as an object. Analogously, any definition of the self, according to the reductionist, has no special status other than to draw upon the physical or psychological parts of the self, it has been reduced to the sum of the constituents which make up the self, and thus has no special ontological status as an object. Parfit writes:

And, on our concept of a person, people are not thoughts and acts. They are thinkers and agents. I am not a series of experiences, but the person who has these experiences. A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is what has experiences, or the subject of experiences. What a Reductionist denies is that the subject of experiences is a separately existing entity, distinct from a brain and body, and a series of physical and mental events.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. p. 223.

In fact, in a later portion of *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit argues that Lichtenberg was correct to argue against Descartes cogito because Descartes failed to prove that thinkers are separately existing entities free of the reductionist view. In that sense, Parfit defends Lichtenberg and provides even further proof for his reductionist account of personal identity. On the other hand, the non-reductionist will claim that the chariot is part of our ultimate ontology because it cannot be reduced to its simple parts, and hence a definition of the chariot would define its ontologically primitive status as not the sum of its parts but rather as a whole object, one whose foundation is its own existence. When I am calling the race, I use the word chariot because the chariot is “ontologically primitive”, such that it is of the most basic form and cannot be broken down or reduced to the sum of its parts.

Parfit begins his discussion by positing that theories of personal identity can be placed into two general categories: the reductionist view and the non-reductionist view. The logical strategy employed by Parfit consists of showing one of these categories to be insufficient to deal with certain problems of personal identity, and therefore, through disjunctive syllogism the other must be correct<sup>11</sup>. To show the inefficacy of non-reductionism, Parfit makes use of a multitude of science fiction examples as proof of the deficiency of non-reductionism, whilst in contrast, his reductionism deals with these problems satisfactorily<sup>12</sup>. So what is Parfit’s reductionism, my interlocutor might ask? To adequately answer this question, let me begin with a presentation of one of the more interesting science fiction examples Parfit gives: the teletransporter case. Consider that a teletransporter has been set up and scientists have told you that they can transmit you to

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<sup>11</sup> A basic form of the disjunctive syllogism is:  $A \vee B, \sim A, B$ . In this case, A is non-reductionism and B is reductionism.

<sup>12</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Parfit’s theory than is appropriate for our purposes, see *Reasons and Persons* by Derek Parfit.

Mars. The teletransporter will destroy the body and mind you have now and will replace them with exact copies on Mars a few minutes later. You will have the same memories, personality, body type, and life as you did on Earth but will you survive as the same person? As a reductionist, Parfit maintains that survival is not what is important here because there is no ultimate fact about our existence; in other words, there is no underlying self that all our experiences, emotions, and memories belong. In essence, what we call a person or self is the causally connected components (such as memory or consciousness) and the relation (R) they have with each other. Again, let us return to the chariot: what we call the chariot is simply the convergence of the axle, wheel, and carriage. What we call the self is simply the convergence of the components that constitute the correct causal connections. Here, Parfit has managed to reduce personal identity to a series of causally connected relations without an ultimate self or ego that is the receiver of these connections. The question of whether you survive the teletransportation case becomes irrelevant because personal identity can be reduced to completely impersonal conditions. Thus, what matters is not whether you survive but whether the correct causal connections are preserved in the case of teletransportation. In this way, Parfit's reductionism is able to deal with the case of teletransportation and provide a clear answer to questions of personal identity that non-reduction theories cannot. Consider Parfit again:

We are not separate existing entities, apart from our brains and bodies, and various interrelated physical and mental events. Our existence just involves the existence of our brains and bodies, and the doing of our deeds, and the thinking of our thoughts, and the occurrence of certain other physical and mental events. Our identity over time just involves Relation R—psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity...<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

By showing how non-reductionism cannot handle cases such as the teletransporter or the combined spectrum, Parfit has shown his reductionism to be true through argument, but more importantly, he has provided a theory of personal identity that explains these difficult cases within personal identity theory. In the end, Parfit's theory of personal identity stands on its own as both a critique of Descartes and a seeming improvement on the arguments of Hume in favor of the no-self doctrine.

### Two Buddhist Arguments

Up to this point, we have seen Descartes's argument for the self and two replies from Hume and Parfit that argue in favor of the Buddhist understanding of the self. In Buddhist philosophy, one argument from a scholar other than the Buddha and one from the Buddha himself have become influential in the acceptance of the no-self doctrine. One of these arguments is derived from the conversation of the monk Nagasena and the Greek King Milinda where Nagasena convinces the king of the veracity of the doctrine of *anatta*. Nagasena's argument concerning the chariot is perhaps one of the most fabled stories of Buddhism and helps to ground the Buddhist in her beliefs in the Buddha's teachings concerning *anatta*. The conversation begins with Nagasena asserting that his name is but an empty designation:

[I]t is, nevertheless, your majesty, but a way of counting (his name), a term, an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name, this Nagasena; for there is no self here to be found.<sup>14</sup>

The Socratic questioning begins as King Milinda wonders how this name could be but an empty designation, a name which refers to nothing and describes the same. To illustrate his contention, Nagasena employs an analogy to fully explain the position he takes on the

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<sup>14</sup> Koller, John M. and Patricia Koller, eds. *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991. p. 22.

doctrine of *anatta*. Using the chariot with which the King arrived at the monastery, Nagasena questions him about the true nature of the chariot. He wonders if the axle, wheels, poles, unities amongst these items, or none of them are the chariot and the King replies in the negative to each question. It is here that Nagasena shows King Milinda that if none of these things can the chariot, then the chariot cannot exist. Analogously, the self is not the skin, eyes, blood, unities amongst these items, or none of these items, such that the self must not be an independent existing thing as well.

While explanation is needed, let me first point out that the argument by Nagasena is similar in nature to that of Hume's bundle theory, but it is different in one subtle sense. Hume focuses on the mental aspect of personal identity, while Nagasena's focus is much more broad, encompassing all the aspects which could possibly be the self within experience. Of course, this includes the union of all these aspects and the absence of those aspects, and it's this distinction that differentiates between reductionism and the arguments of the venerable monk Nagasena. To properly frame the argument, let me draw an analogy to something philosophers try to accomplish everyday. When we try to define objects or concepts, we usually try to do so in one of two ways: we either find all the things considered to be what we are trying to define and search for a common trait amongst all of the objects in question or we discover the trait through logic and reason and then employ our discovery to find all the objects which correspond to our discovery. For instance, if I were to define a chair, I could either gather all things considered to be chairs and seek to find a common trait among them or I could discover that trait through logic and reason. The reason we do this is simple--we want our definition of chairs to be as thorough as possible but not so thorough as to include non-chairs within our definition.

For all intents and purposes, we are searching for both necessary and sufficient conditions for our definition, and we must have both because if we only have necessary conditions our definition will be too broad and if we only have sufficient conditions our definition will be too narrow. This is important to King Milinda and Nagasena because King Milinda is seeking a definition of the self. When he comes to the realization that the self cannot be defined through logic and reason or through a common trait, he begins to accept the lesson Nagasena imparts. King Milinda is soon enlightened to the notion that the self can have no necessary or sufficient conditions, whereby there is nothing permanent that can help us to define the self. The self, according to Nagasena, is always changing, always in a state of flux, and there is no common trait that can help us to define the true nature of the self. With these assertions in hand, Nagasena shows the King that the impermanence of the self and its indefinability lead one to the inevitable conclusion that the self does not exist.

The final argument we will discuss here is the argument expressed by the Buddha and his venerable monk Ananda in the *Maha-nidana-sutta*. The logical strategy undertaken by the Buddha to teach Ananda is to employ the concept of *reductio ad absurdum* to show that the concept of the self leads to an inconsistency. For his part, Ananda reasons that sensation or feeling must play a vital role in defining the concept of the self, and he creates an exhaustive list of connections between the self and sensation. By systematically illustrating that each of the possibilities is incorrect, Ananda is able to conclude, with the Socratic questioning of the Buddha, that the self does not exist and that the consistency with the doctrine of *anatta* is logical. The argument runs as such:

1. One can hold three distinct views concerning the self: sensation is the self, sensation is not the self, sensation is neither the self nor not the self but the self has sensation.
2. Sensation cannot be the self.
3. Sensation cannot not be the self.
4. Sensation cannot be neither the self nor not but the self has sensation.
5. The self does not exist.<sup>15</sup>

According to Ananda, an enduring and lasting self can consist of three possibilities concerning sensation, and if it can show that none of the possibilities are possible, we can conclude through *reductio ad absurdum* that the self does not exist. Our priority in presenting this argument is a comprehensive defense of premises two, three, and four, such that we can show the argument to be of a valid form.

In his influential book *The Selfless Mind*, Peter Harvey reasons that the argument put forth by the Buddha and Ananda is meant as a *reductio*, in that Ananda reveals conditions the self must have but that the only way for the self to have these conditions is if there is no self. He maintains:

The 'I' that is self would thus turn out to be not-Self, which is a contradictory situation. That is, if there can only be a self under conditions which make it not self, then it is clearly impossible for there to be such a thing as the self.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning with premise two, the Buddha argues that sensation cannot be the self because there are three types of sensations: a pleasant sensation, an unpleasant sensation, and an indifferent sensation. In other words, a person can feel pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent to situations and events which affect them. However, we cannot associate our identity with these sensations because they are transitory and regularly change. At one moment, I may be happy that the Cowboys have scored a well-earned touchdown, but I would be sad a moment later when the play was called back because of an offensive penalty. If I

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 226-227.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, Peter. *The Selfless Mind*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 1995. p. 31.

were to associate my existence with the happiness I feel when the Cowboys score a touchdown or my sadness when the play is called back, I would only exist part of the time (either when I was happy or sad, depending on which of these association I attributed to the self). Thus, the Buddha is permitted to claim that sensation cannot be self because of the inherent contradiction shown. Moving on to premise three, the Buddha argues that sensation cannot not be the self because without sensation of any kind, there would be no person. The Buddha contends that without feelings or sensations, there would only be an empty shell void of conscious and personhood. Ending with premise four, the Buddha contends the third and final possibility for the self is that the self has sensation but this sensation is not a defining quality of the self. In this case, the Buddha suggests:

Suppose, brother, that utterly and completely, and without remainder, all sensation were to cease—if there were nowhere any sensation, pray, would there be anything, after the cessation of sensation, of which it could be said, “this am I?”<sup>17</sup>

The Buddha is teaching Ananda that sensation is an integral part of what defines the self because if it were to be taken away the self would cease to exist. Thus, sensation must be apart of what makes up and defines the self, but our third possibility denies this integral fact and cannot be true. Premise four follows from this explanation, thereby completing the Buddha’s proof of the *anatta* doctrine.

### Buddhist Canon

As we begin our discussion of the Buddha and his formulations of doctrines within Buddhism, it is important to understand how the Buddha sought to understand and answer questions from inquisitive monks who sought the knowledge of the path towards

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<sup>17</sup> Koller, John M. and Patricia Koller, eds. *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991. p. 227.

nirvana. This distinction is essential because the knowledge imparted by the Buddha was allegedly experienced first hand, and thus the Buddha is our one and only source of information crucial to a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism. The Buddha divided questions into four distinct categories: those that deserve a straightforward or categorical answer, those questions that deserve to be analyzed and clarified for further explanation, those that deserve a Socratic questioning where the question is turned on the inquisitor, and those questions which have no merit on the path towards nirvana and should be brushed aside. The Buddha teaches that the responsibility of other teachers is not to simply answer a question concerning Buddhism but to first divide the question into one of the four categories and act appropriately. For instance, if a monk were to ask a teacher a question that clearly falls into the last category, those that need not be answered, the teacher should not answer the question and respond in silence.

From this distinction, controversy arises today regarding the true intentions of the Buddha and his doctrine of *anatta*. The question is quite simple: did the Buddha mean to provide a metaphysical proof against the self or was it only a prescription to end life's suffering? The four noble truths are crucial to the foundation of Buddhism, and one of these tenets is that life is suffering. To end this suffering, one must free themselves from the attachments of this world so that Nirvana can be attained. On one hand, those who argue that the Buddha did not argue against a metaphysical self embrace the notion that the self is an attachment which must be broken free of on the path to enlightenment. It is not important then to answer the question of a person's existence, it is only important to take a practical and pragmatic approach to the question of the self. By freeing yourself of this attachment, the Buddhist practitioner is taking a further step towards achieving the

ultimate goal. On the other hand, those who maintain that the Buddha really did intend to argue against the notion of the self point to the many arguments which pervade the Tipitaka in favor of the doctrine of *anatta*. Although we will save my answer to this controversy until later, it is important to understand that the question of the self is a question that would have been divided into one of the four categories above by the Buddha. Thus, the real answer to this question lies in the answer to this: in which category did the Buddha place the question of the self? If he placed the question into the category that maintains the question should be ignored, those who argue against the Buddha's defiance of the self will hold much stronger logical ground. If the question falls into the category that maintains the question should be answered categorically, those who argue for the Buddha's defiance of the self will hold the upper ground.

Of those who contend that the Buddha merely presented a practical strategy, Thanissaro is one of the most vocal proponents. He argues:

So, instead of answering “no” to the question of whether or not there is a self—interconnected or separate, eternal or not—the Buddha felt that the question was misguided to begin with. Why? No matter how you define the line between “self” and “other,” the notion of self involves an element of self-identification and clinging, and thus suffering and stress.<sup>18</sup>

As a pragmatic strategy for seeking enlightenment, the doctrine of *anatta* works to curb the attachments of the Buddhist practitioner and relieve the stress inherent to the true nature of life. The Ananda Sutta is employed here to bolster the argument of Bhikkhu because of the method the Buddha employs to teach the monk Ananda. The Sutta begins with the arrival of Vacchagotta as he seeks knowledge of the true path. The wanderer arrives with a single, seemingly harmless, question for the Buddha, “[n]ow then,

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<sup>18</sup> Thanissaro. “No-Self or Not Self” Access To Insight. 11 Oct. 2006  
<<http://accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/notself2.html>>

venerable Gotama, is there a self?”<sup>19</sup> Much to his surprise, Vacchagotta receives only silence as an answer and is puzzled by the reaction of the Buddha. After asking another question and being met with silence for a second time, the wanderer Vacchagotta respectfully turns and leaves. Even more puzzled, the monk Ananda turns to the Buddha and inquires as to why the Buddha did not answer the question posed to him. The Buddha responds:

Ananda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those priests and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those priests and contemplatives who are exponents of annihilationism. And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self I used to have now not exist?’<sup>20</sup>

The importance of this passage is that the Buddha seemingly divided the question of the wanderer Vacchagotta into the category requiring silence, and thus, did not answer the question posed to him. The Buddha asserts that the answer would only confuse the weary wanderer and distract him from the path towards enlightenment. This only lends credence to the notion that the Buddha only put forth the doctrine of *anatta* as a therapeutic prescription because here he is asked the question concerning the self directly. Yet, he fails to answer the question because he observes that it will do more harm than good, and many wonder whether this was the Buddha’s true intent from the beginning.

By contrast, some Buddhist philosophers point to the arguments the Buddha presents, throughout the Tipitaka, as proof that his true intentions were to argue against a metaphysical self. One of the Buddha’s arguments used to bolster this position lies in the *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta*, where the Buddha presents his argument against the self through

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<sup>19</sup> Samyutta Nikaya XLIV.10.

<sup>20</sup> Samyutta Nikaya XLIV.10.

a lack of control. As a response to early Brahmanical Hindu<sup>21</sup> thought, the Buddha argues that the five *khandas*, constituents of personality, cannot be the self because each of these elements are impermanent and easily diseased. Before I explain the argument further, I would like to back track for a second and discuss the five *khandas* and the impermanence which is so important to both the doctrine of *anatta* and Buddhism. The five *khandas*, also referred to as the five aggregates, consist of form, sensation, perception, habitual action and response, and consciousness and make up the components of an intelligent being. Moreover, impermanence (*anicca*) forms a Buddhist triad along with *anatta* and *dhukka* which serve as the three essential characteristics of existence within Buddhism. Returning to the argument of the Buddha, we will use consciousness as an example into the insight of the Buddha here:

Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not self, consciousness lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.'<sup>22</sup>

With this, the Buddha seeks to show that all five *khandas* are vulnerable to the impermanence and disease that pervade life. Each one is inconstant, open to stress, and constantly in a state of flux, and this, the Buddha argues, is not fit to ascribe to the self. Because we cannot ascribe the self to any of the five aggregates, there cannot be a permanent and enduring self, the kind argued for by Descartes, that is a combination of these aggregates. This argument is similar in nature to the one the Buddha presents to the

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<sup>21</sup> The thought is really that the self (atman) can provide us with power if only we can attain true knowledge of the self. The reason is that in Hinduism, atman is Brahman (God). In essence, early brahmanical thinkers were looking for knowledge of God through the self.

<sup>22</sup> Samyutta Nikaya XXII.59.

monk Ananda concerning sensation because the self can only exist when conditions are correct for no-self, and this is a contradiction.

While I will not argue for one camp over the other just yet, the stage has been set for a defense of Buddhist teachings. The question of whether or not the Buddha meant to argue against a metaphysical self is an important one and is crucial to my interpretation of Buddhist teachings. Therefore, it is important to understand the nature of the Buddha's arguments and his method of teaching. With this understanding of the Buddha in hand, we are free to defend the doctrine of *anatta* and bring the Buddha's teachings to new light.

## CHAPTER III

### REASONS TO DOUBT

*And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in all the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual<sup>23</sup>.*

#### The Opposite End of the Spectrum

While examining the plethora of arguments set forth in support of the no-self doctrine, I also encountered a multitude of counter-arguments and theories which opposed the doctrine itself. No philosophical journey worthy of knowledge itself would be complete without considering those critiques and enquiring about the validity of the arguments I faced, so I began to critically examine the theories and critiques which directly opposed the no-self doctrine. While just as vibrant and passionate as the arguments in favor of the no-self doctrine, what instantly rose to the surface within many of these counter-arguments was the idea that a consistent system of beliefs, such as the system sought by the Buddha, would be impossible if that system included the no-self doctrine. Hence, while arguing against the critiques themselves, I realized that I would also be forced to show how the ideals and doctrines of Buddhism could be considered a consistent system of ideas and beliefs with the doctrine of *anatta* as a pivotal element. In the second phase of my journey, I will first argue that the doctrines of Buddhism, including Karma, Reincarnation, and Nirvana, when considered together, face a formidable challenge from those counter-arguments. I will further argue that the modern argument presented by William Vallicella against the doctrine of no-self has some merit

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<sup>23</sup> Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002.

and raises interesting questions that will be answered later in this thesis. Finally, I will argue that the reductionist/non-reductionist debate concerning personal identity is one that is fundamentally important to the project I undertake, and that one approach is more feasible than the other. Before we begin the second phase of our project, however, I must point to a caveat that should shed some light on what I am attempting to accomplish. My real goal for this chapter is to show that there is a strong opposing side that does not favor the no-self doctrine. Essentially, my goal is to show that both sides of the debate have incredible tools at their disposal, with answers not so easily achieved.

### Nirvana, Reincarnation, Karma, and Everything Else

Within any religion, what becomes paramount is to establish a consistent system of doctrines and beliefs to better serve its followers. The system created by the Buddha is one that includes doctrines such as karma, nirvana, transmigration, and *anatta*, and thus the viability of Buddhism becomes wholly dependent on the consistency of the principles the Buddhist embraces. Many of the arguments volleyed against the no-self doctrine involve calling into question the consistency of this doctrine with other doctrines pivotal to the foundations of Buddhism. Inherently, these arguments maintain that the Buddhist cannot hold doctrines such as karma and *anatta* within the same logical system because these beliefs are inconsistent together. To counter these arguments, the Buddhist must do one of two things: the Buddhist must show her interlocutor to be incorrect or she must abandon one of the doctrines as false in order to avoid the charge of inconsistency. However, our aim here is not to answer the questions but to simply provide counterpoint, and thus our aim is tied into calling the doctrines of Buddhism into question.

The opening salvos of charges against the doctrine of *anatta* involve the inconsistency between moral responsibility (karma) and the thought that no-self is a viable doctrine. The doctrine of karma states that morality is a product of the cause-and-effect relationship between actions, but more than that karma is employed within Buddhism as a moral compass that maintains that we are responsible for our actions. The problem that arises between *anatta* and karma is tied directly to this principle, for it seems illogical to maintain that we are responsible for our actions if we are wholly different from the person who committed the offence. What's more, it seems illogical to even argue that a person could be responsible for the karmic consequences of her actions if there is no person which exists. Dale Tuggy summarized the argument as follows:

1. If the no-self doctrine is true, then there are no persons A and B such that A exists at t1 and B exists at t2, and A=B.
2. Persons are often blameworthy for what they did some time ago.
3. A person B at t2 can be blameworthy for what person A did at t1 only if A=B.
4. The no-self doctrine is false.<sup>24</sup>

The pivotal premise of the argument lies in premise three where Tuggy maintains that only if person B is numerically identical to person A can she be blamed for the actions of person A. For instance, if person A commits murder on June 20, 1987 but is not captured and arrested until May 4, 1996 that person cannot be guilty of murder unless she was the same person who committed the crime in 1987. And while the person may not be the same quantitatively, the person of 1987 and the person of 1996 cannot be blameworthy unless they are numerically identical. The inconsistency becomes less opaque when we consider that the no-self doctrine posits that there was no person in 1987 or 1996, and

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<sup>24</sup> Tuggy, Dale. "Class Notes: Objections to the No-self Theory". Note: The website where this was obtained in October of 2005 is now unavailable. Here is the original site, <<http://home.dbclickit.com/~tuggy/por.html>> and here is Tuggy's homepage <<http://filosofier.googlepages.com/dt.html>>.

that those two “selves” are not the same. Thus, premises two and three work concurrently on premise one as a denial of the consequent, and through modus tollens, the conclusion follows logically.

As the salvos continue, the doctrines of *anatta* and transmigration come under attack from those who see an inherent inconsistency between the doctrines. The doctrine of transmigration maintains that if one fails to escape the cycle of *samsara* driven by karma, they will be reborn according to their karma. Transmigration acts as cosmic justice, its annihilation the ultimate cosmic reward in nirvana, and as it works through karma, it is a just system allowing one to be reborn into a life worthy of the acts and moral deeds of her previous self. Naturally, the doctrine of *anatta* seems to conflict with the doctrine of transmigration because if the no-self principle is true, then it is unclear what or can be transmitted from this life to the next. Tuggy presents the counter-argument as a triad where one statement is inconsistent with the other two:

1. Reincarnation [transmigration] theory shows how the universe is just.
2. No-Self doctrine.
3. Reincarnation shows how the universe is just only if the people getting punished and rewarded are numerically the same as the people who did the evil and good deeds.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the previous argument against karma, the set of statements presented here are simply shown to be inconsistent together. If the Buddhist gives up the no-self doctrine or the doctrine of reincarnation, then she has effectively answered the question. However, this is something many, if not all, Buddhists would be unwilling to do, and thus we must look to see if the Buddhist maintains a recourse. At the heart of the matter, so to speak, is statement three: inherently, this statement questions the connection between the organism that dies and the one that is reborn. If, as the no-self doctrine advocates, there is no

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

permanent self, then there appears to be nothing to tie the old organism to the newly born organism. As argued before, reincarnation can only be just if the organism being punished is numerically the same as the organism before, and if we consider the no-self doctrine along with the doctrine of transmigration, it seems these two concepts are inconsistent together.

As the salvos come to an end, the doctrines of nirvana and *anatta* are the subject of the inconsistency charge levied against the principles of Buddhism. The doctrine of Nirvana maintains that when one is able to escape the cycle of *samsara* and rid themselves of the desires that plague humanity, they achieve cessation of the suffering (*dukkha*) that desire causes. Naturally, the doctrine of *anatta* seems to conflict with the doctrine of nirvana because nirvana is the reward for becoming an enlightened being, yet if the self does not exist, it seems like nothing can truly experience this reward. Tuggy summarizes the charge thusly:

1. There is No-Self.
2. The hope of Nirvana provides one with a reason to seek Enlightenment.
3. The hope of Nirvana provides one with a reason to seek Enlightenment only if one can correctly anticipate the experience of nirvana.
4. Current person A can correctly anticipate an experience by future person B only if A=B.
5. If the No-Self doctrine is true, no present person is ever numerically identical to any future person.
6. No one can correctly anticipate the experience of Nirvana.
7. The hope of Nirvana doesn't provide one with a reason to seek enlightenment.
8. But this is contradictory. Hence at least one of 1-4 is false.
9. Three and four are obviously true.
10. One and/or two are false.<sup>26</sup>

This is a much more complex argument which attempts to show the inconsistency of holding both a belief in nirvana and *anatta*. The conclusion maintains that the doctrines of no-self and nirvana are inconsistent beliefs to be held together, and thus one of those

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

doctrines must be incorrect. This argument works through contradiction, premises two and six are contradictory in nature, and therefore premises 1-4 must contain at least one false statement. According to the argument, premises three and four are obviously true, and in that case, at least one of premises one or two (*anatta* and nirvana) must be false.

With these three arguments in hand, the personal identity theorist is skillfully able to question the consistency of doctrines central to both the understanding and practice of Buddhism. What's more, the arguments offered here further plague the no-self doctrine because they are able to reveal inherent inconsistencies with our conceptions of justice and morality. In fact, these problems would force Derek Parfit to devote entire sections of his influential book to reconciling his belief in reductionism with these problems of justice, identity, and morality. Similarly, the Buddhist is faced with a daunting task; she must answer these questions effectively and truthfully or face the logical problems of inconsistency which seem apparent in the foundations of Buddhism. However, the Buddhist may have a logical response to the critic in both the works of Nagasena and the personalist, and though answers and consistency seem to be elusive, a survey of both of these positions may save the Buddhist from the inconsistent foundation seemingly unearthed by the personal identity theorist.

#### Nagasena, Personalists, and Answers

One of the most influential texts of Buddhism centers on the conversations of King Milinda and the venerable monk Nagasena in the *Milindapanha*. Nagasena sought to enlighten, figuratively speaking, King Milinda concerning the ways of Buddhism and the consistency of the internal doctrines that were foundational to the teachings of the Buddha. These discussions provide two distinctly important areas of understanding; the

first deals with a general understanding of the concepts upon which Buddhism is based and the second deals with answers to possible questions the novice and the critic may encounter or bestow upon the teachings themselves. In that sense, Nagasena speaks to teach King Milinda about karma and transmigration, and further attempts to answer the first two objections summarized by Tuggy:

Nagasena: Yes, that would be so if one were not linked once again with a new organism. But since, Your Majesty, one is linked once again with a new organism, therefore one is not freed from one's evil deeds.

And

Nagasena: Just so, Your Majesty, it is because of the deeds one does, whether pure or impure, by means of this psycho-physical organism that one is once again linked with another psycho-physical organism, and is not freed from one's evil deeds.<sup>27</sup>

From the years 115 B.C.E to 90 B.C.E, King Milinda ruled Bactria, modern day Afghanistan, and as a Greek King his rule was just and his thirst for knowledge unquenchable. Desperate for the knowledge attained by the Buddhist Arhats who resided in the secluded Himalayas, he constantly badgered the monks with questions about the nature of Buddhism. There, in the company of 500 Greeks, the venerable monk Nagasena and the great King Milinda would debate the very foundations of Buddhism, and provide pivotal pieces of the Buddhist puzzle to the novice. In one of their first encounters, Nagasena would attempt to answer the King's puzzlement over the apparent inconsistency between karma and *anatta*, but more than that Nagasena would attempt to further the king's understanding of this crucial doctrine. In an attempt to further our understanding of these core doctrines let us begin with two definitions:

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<sup>27</sup> Chia, Brother Henry. *The Questions of King Milinda*. 14 September 2006  
<<http://web.singnet.com.sg/~rjp31831/nagasena.htm#KARMA>>

Karma: Our actions and their effects on this life and lives to come. The law of cause-and-effect.

Reincarnation [transmigration]: The process of the continuity of life after death.<sup>28</sup>

In earnest, Nagasena argues that there is a connection between the person of 1987 and 1996, and while that connection does not represent the permanent self the Buddha argued against, that connection is important to understanding the consistency of the two Buddhist doctrines in question. In that sense, Nagasena is upholding the tenets of the argument presented in premises two and three but Nagasena is calling into question the use of modus tollens to show that the two doctrines are inconsistent. Premise one becomes the incorrect assumption for Nagasena as he argues that the no-self doctrine is true but that some organism does exist, such that A is connected to B. In this case, the connection between A and B allows Nagasena to maintain the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* and uphold the blameworthy aspects of Karma, where neither principle is inconsistent with the other. To carry out a just moral code, whether it is karma or Kant's Moral Imperative, Tuggy argues that there must be someone blameworthy from the time of the crime to the time of punishment, and though Nagasena agrees, his argument works much like the greater goods defense with respect to the problem of evil. The greater goods defense reveals how the concepts of evil and God are not inconsistent, and analogously the connection between persons A and B reveals how the concepts of Karma and *anatta* are not necessarily inconsistent. Whether Nagasena is successful in his defense is debatable because it seems as if the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity is incorrectly applied, but a clear and precise understanding of the inner-workings of the doctrine of karma is apparent throughout the discussion as Nagasena attempts to explain how this complicated doctrine coheres with other core

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<sup>28</sup> Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2002.

Buddhist doctrines. The venerable monk Nagasena then proceeds to a discussion of transmigration:

King Milinda: Give me another simile!

Nagasena: Milk, once the milking is done, turns after sometimes into curds; from curds it turns into fresh butter; and from fresh butter into ghee. Would it now be correct to say that the milk is the same thing as the curds, or the fresh butter, or the ghee?

King Milinda: No, it would not. But they have been produced because of it.

Nagasena: Just so must be understood the collocation of a series of successive dharmas.<sup>29</sup>

And,

Nagasena: Even so must we understand the collocation of a series of successive dharmas. At rebirth one dharma arises, while another stops; but the two processes take place almost simultaneously. Therefore, the first act of consciousness in the new existence is neither the same as the last act of consciousness in the previous existence, nor it is the another.<sup>30</sup>

Nagasena contends that a succession of *dharmas* exists between the deceased person and the person reborn. In that sense, the connection works much in the same way as our previous argument except now the connection is maintained over the expanse of life and death. According to Nagasena, the first act of consciousness in the organism reborn and the last act of consciousness in the previous life are connected through a succession of dharmas, and more importantly it works in much the same continuous way that the connection exists between person A and person B in our example above. And because that connection exists, the justice intrinsic to the doctrine of transmigration can be preserved along with the claims of the doctrine of *anatta*. Once again, whether Nagasena is correct in his assertions is debatable for reasons mentioned above, but what is clear is that Nagasena is able to clearly articulate a vision of reincarnation consistent with the teachings of the Buddha. Of course, one might wonder whether Nagasena has truly

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<sup>29</sup> Chia, Brother Henry. *The Questions of King Milinda*. 14 September 2006  
<<http://web.singnet.com.sg/~rjp31831/nagasena.htm#KARMA>>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

answered the objections levied against the central doctrines of Buddhism, and though on the surface Nagasena seems successful, his answers to the questions of King Milinda may be lacking where other answers are not.

Throughout the Suttas of the Pali Canon, the Buddha argues against the affliction of the self, he holds to the doctrine of *anatta* as a pivotal piece of the prescription for enlightenment, but it seems as if Nagasena fails to answer the consistency questions of Tuggy in his dialogue with King Milinda. Though person A and person B may be connected through a series of *dharmas*, this seems to maintain neither a qualitative or numerical identity between person stages, and though consistent with Buddhist teachings this approach is unable to answer the objections summarized by Tuggy. Where Nagasena seems to fail, as maintained earlier, is that he does not call into question the numerical identity requirements of the critiques summarized by Tuggy. Though he provides a deep understanding of the core doctrines of Buddhism, it seems that Nagasena lacks the identity requirements needed to provide a consistent basis for Buddhist doctrines against the apparent inconsistencies of these doctrines with *anatta*. Hence, it seems the Buddhist might seek other answers to the inconsistency charges she faces. Of the various and ample amount of discussion and theory concerning the doctrine of *anatta* and its consistency within Buddhism, one view above all seems to both answer the question and create controversy within Buddhism. As an answer to the critiques summarized by Tuggy, the Pudgalavada or personalist school of Buddhism argues that the five *khandhas* of individual experience constitute not a permanent or enduring self but a person. As Webb shows, the argument is strikingly simple:

The dhamma requires as a matter of logic and grammar a doer of deeds, a recipient of karma, an object of compassion, and a transmigrator. Perhaps that

thing is not a self, but it must be at least a person. We know that all there is to me or you is a collection of aggregates, the *khandas*; therefore, this person must be nothing over and above those *khandhas*.<sup>31</sup>

While the personalist argument is quite simple, its implications and conclusions are far-reaching and interesting as a defense. For one, names would no longer maintain the empty designation spoken of in the *Milindapanha* by the venerable monk Nagasena because those names, while not referring to the enduring self argued against by the Buddha, would refer to a the person. What's more, if the Buddhist adopts this view of the self, she is well equipped to answer the objections raised by Tuggy because the person is what transmigrates, the person is what receives the effects of karma, and the person is what ultimately achieves enlightenment. Moreover, the personalist provides an answer not to the requirements of qualitative identity but to the requirements of numerical identity which drives the counter-arguments related to *anatta*. In that sense, to be true to the *dhamma* the personalist must accept the doctrine of *anatta* on merit, but her claims of personhood allow the Pudgalavada to save the consistency of core Buddhist teachings against objections summarized by Tuggy by providing the identity which seems lacking in the dialogues of the *Milindapanha*. Though other critiques exist and other pit-falls exist for the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, it seems as though the Buddhist is well-equipped to answer the inconsistency charges levied against the core doctrines of Buddhism if the personalist doctrine is seen as right view<sup>32</sup>.

### High Standards

After revealing the inner-workings of the core doctrines of Buddhism, we now proceed to a modern argument against the doctrine of no-self. In the *Anattalakkhana*

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<sup>31</sup> Webb, Mark. "Personalism as Right View." Unpublished Article: p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> For a defense and a more thorough-going understanding than is appropriate for our purpose, see Webb.

*Sutta*, the Buddha argues against the very notions of personal identity by claiming that the self does not exist as a permanent entity. In his article “No-Self? A Look at A Buddhist Argument”, William Vallicella posits that the Buddha is mistaken in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* because the Buddha sets a standard that is too high. In what I believe to be the best modern argument against the Buddha’s position, William Vallicella sets out to place the words of the Buddha under scrutiny, and though I will argue that Vallicella’s argument seems promising, what will become clear is that Vallicella did not go far enough.

To begin our discussion, Vallicella presents the Buddha’s argument as the basis of his discussion:

1. If anything were the self, then it would have two properties: it would not be liable to disease, decay, destruction or change generally, and it would be self-determining, i.e., it would have complete control over itself.
2. But nothing in our experience has either of these two properties, neither the body, nor feeling, nor perception, nor consciousness, etc.  
Therefore
4. Nothing in our experience can be identified as the self.<sup>33</sup>

Vallicella charitably interprets the Buddha’s argument by presenting what he calls the restricted argument. By adding the phrase “in our experience” to premise two, Vallicella’s interpretation of the Buddha’s argument restricts the unrestricted *anatta* doctrine by limiting the argument to those things which cannot be characterized as the self within our experience. The unrestricted argument maintains a fourth premise, one which concludes the argument in the *anatta* doctrine and the renunciation of the self as a metaphysically permanent object. As Vallicella acknowledges though, it is one thing to argue against the self by showing what it ontologically cannot be but it is something

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<sup>33</sup> Vallicella, William F. “No-Self? A Look at a Buddhist Argument.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24.4 (2002): p. 457.

completely different to argue against the self on an absolute metaphysical level. Positing what a concept cannot be does not imply that the concept or metaphysical object does not exist, what it does mean is that there are certain characteristics which cannot constitute the object in question. For instance, I can argue that unicorns cannot be magical or have two horns, but inherently I have not succeeded in disproving the existence of the unicorn, I have only succeeded in arguing what cannot constitute a unicorn. Though the Buddha may be correct in his assertions that nothing in his experience is the self, it does not logically follow that there is no self because something outside our experience could be the self. Here is born the difference between the restricted and unrestricted arguments of the Buddha.

As we begin to examine Vallicella's argument, Vallicella places special importance on premise one by attempting to show how premise one is inconsistent with the unrestricted argument (the *anatta* doctrine). Vallicella begins his argument by drawing a distinction between two sets of conditions: those that are absolutely permanent against those that are relatively permanent and those that are absolutely self-determining against those that are relatively self-determining. According to Vallicella, the body cannot be relatively permanent or relatively self-determining because our body does maintain a relative permanence over some of our features and we maintain some control over our actions. Hence, premise one cannot feature a dependence on the relative aspects of control and permanence, and therefore must maintain a reliance on the absolute aspects of self-determination and permanence. More importantly, according to Buddhist teachings a self that relies on the absolutely permanent and absolutely self-determining is one free of the suffering which logically follows from these principles.

Properly understood, then, (1) says that for anything to count as a self it must be both *absolutely* permanent and *absolutely* self-determining. But given the soteriological context of Buddhist thought, we may immediately add that a self both absolutely permanent and absolutely self-determining will also be absolutely devoid of suffering: the state of such a self would be a wholly satisfactory and maximally desire-worthy state.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, premise one of the Buddha's argument requires that the self be absolutely permanent and absolutely self-determining because it is the case that one's body seems relatively permanent and that we are able to determine some of our bodily and mental states. Thus, what premise one requires as a condition for self-hood is the absolutely permanent and absolutely self-determining because if it required the relative the argument would fail as the denouncement of the permanent and absolute self it seeks. What this further implies, according to Buddhist teachings, is that if the self exists it must exist without suffering, without decay, and as something wholly perfect, but more than the self must exist in an ideal state if it were to exist. The Buddha's argument proceeds by showing how the self cannot exist because it cannot satisfy these conditions:

What premise one does, therefore, is to set an exceedingly high standard for selfhood: to be a self, or to have self-nature, or to be veridically identifiable as one's very self, a thing must be absolutely permanent, self-determining, and desire-worthy. But the further course of the unrestricted argument makes it clear that nothing at all comes up to this standard: nothing is a self. Now if nothing is absolutely permanent, self-determining, and desire-worthy, then the idea or concept of self-nature invoked in the initial premise is fictitious in that it fails to apply to anything. This suggests the following questions. How could a fictitious idea be held up as an ideal or standard by which to denigrate ontologically the things we encounter?<sup>35</sup>

Vallicella has constructed a clever form of argument here. By revealing the high standard the Buddha holds for the self, Vallicella turns the Buddha's argument against him. The unrestricted argument contends the self to be illusory and non-existent, but in that lies the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 459.

inconsistency problem advanced by Vallicella. If nothing can live up to this high standard, then the standard invoked by premise one is fictitious and illusory as well, but it seems illogical to hold up a false standard as the pivotal tool in our attempt to ontologically denigrate the metaphysical self.

What Vallicella must accomplish now revolves around turning this problem into a viable argument where he can conclude premise one and the unrestricted argument encompassed by the *anatta* doctrine signifies an inconsistent system. I will charitably present Vallicella's argument in a logical form:

- 1) If the self ideal is illusory, then a thing's failure to measure up to it cannot be taken to show that the thing in question should be renounced.
- 2) The self ideal is illusory.
- 3) A thing's failure to measure up to it cannot be taken to show that the thing in question should be renounced.
- 4) The unrestricted argument is false<sup>36</sup>.

Through simple modus ponens, Vallicella is able to show how the unrestricted argument presented by The Buddha in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* is incorrect. But Vallicella is not simply allowed the conditional residing in premise one, and thus he must argue for its valid placement as premise one. As the unrestricted argument makes clear, nothing is permanent, nothing is the self, but inherently, premise one of the restricted argument maintains that the self ought to live up this standard. By the imperative "ought implies can", premise one of the restricted argument also maintains that the self can live up to this standard, but the conclusion of the unrestricted argument makes it clear that this is not the case. In other words, the restricted argument presents the standard by which the self ought to be able to satisfy; this implies that at least one thing can satisfy this high

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

standard, but the conclusion of the unrestricted argument implies that nothing can satisfy this standard. One final quote should suffice:

For a standard that everything must satisfy is a standard that something can satisfy by the generalized “ought implies can” principle above; but this contradicts the unrestricted *anatta* doctrine according to which the Self-ideal is a standard that nothing can satisfy.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, Vallicella is allowed his conditional in premise one, the inconsistency is brought into sharper focus, and Vallicella’s claim against the unrestricted argument is bolstered.

Though I do not intend to argue against Vallicella, one final point must be addressed as we advance our reasons to doubt. If Vallicella is correct and the standard for self-hood set forth by The Buddha is much too high, then it is either the case that The Buddha was incorrect in his argument for the *anatta* doctrine or the Buddha meant something wholly different by his argument in the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. Though we will not answer this question presently, Vallicella’s argument against The Buddha’s argument evokes many interesting thoughts and forces the Buddhist to wonder whether a defense is possible. As will become clear, I believe there is an appropriate manner in which to answer Vallicella, but for now, the seed of doubt remains.

#### The Reductionism/Non-Reductionism Debate

As the modern argument over personal identity progresses, two distinct theories have shone their way to the top of many metaphysician’s belief systems. Whether a reductionist or a non-reductionist, the modern metaphysical philosopher has patently sought these views to maintain the correct views on the person or self. Unlike the arguments of The Buddha, Hume, or Ananda, the veracity of the reductionist account is tied to a middle ground between person-hood and no-self. In that sense, the reductionist

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 466.

account is less severe than the arguments of the no-self theorist but still contradictory with the notions of the non-reductionist. Here it seems, reductionism seems to be the one argument within the realm of non-person-hood most successful against the challenges offered by the self theorist. However, even though its position as one of the most successful arguments to call into question the idea of the self cannot be denied, philosophical problems exist for the reductionist. Here we will address two crucial arguments against reductionism, and though one is answerable the other calls into question reductionism much like previous arguments against the self.

One of the many tools available to the self theorist is to “drive up the price” of accepting a certain theory. For instance, Pascal’s Wager is the classic example of an argument which employs this tactic: Pascal argued that those who do not believe in God risk an eternity of pain and suffering. In that sense, Pascal sought to create a system where the risk of atheism simply did not fit the price one might pay for their ignorance. Reductionism is attacked similarly. In her book *The Constitution of Selves*, Marya Schechtman argued that any theory of personal identity should incorporate the “four feathers” of personal identity. Any theory of personal identity should thus include theories on survival<sup>38</sup>, moral responsibility, self-interest concerns, and compensation<sup>39</sup>. Reductionism suffers from the same fate as the doctrines of Buddhism mentioned earlier, in that, the reductionist theory of personal identity calls these feathers into question. Though we do not need to delve too deeply into the counter-argument here, it seems any account of personal identity which maintains the lack of an enduring self will be prone to these types of attacks. And like the Buddhist before him, the reductionist must reveal how

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<sup>38</sup> You may recognize these feathers as *anatta*, Karma, Reincarnation, and Nirvana respectively.

<sup>39</sup> Schechtman, Marya. *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. P. 2.

the inconsistencies presented by her interlocutors do not create too high a price. By demonstrating how the reductionist account of personal identity is not inconsistent with the four feathers of Schechtman, the reductionism can answer the challenges of those who seek to drive up the price of one's acceptance of reductionism.

Another of the most palpable and compelling arguments against reductionism involves simply accepting non-reductionism on its merits. In his paper "The Irrelevance/Incoherence of Non-Reductionism About Personal Identity", David Shoemaker argues that the non-reductionist is incorrect to accept her theory on merit because her theory contains an inconsistency. According to Shoemaker, one of the central claims made by the materialist non-reductionist revolves around a conditional inherent to personal identity and encompassed in the first premise of the argument presented:

- 1) If we are separately existing entities, then questions of identity will always have determinate answers.
- 2) At least one question concerning personal identity does not have a definite answer.
- 3) We are not separately existing entities.<sup>40</sup>

Shoemaker's argument performs modus tollens on the conditional employed by the non-reductionist, but Shoemaker is not simply allowed to do this without justification.

Premise two turns on the notion that there is at least one question of personal identity which cannot be answered. To suitably justify his claim, Shoemaker must reveal the inner-workings of this question and show how this question cannot be answered.

As Shoemaker undertakes his justification, he draws upon the combined spectrum example of Parfit but alters the idea slightly to fit his need. Shoemaker's combined spectrum example proceeds this way:

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<sup>40</sup>Shoemaker, David W. "The Irrelevance/Incoherence of Non-Reductionism About Personal Identity." *Philo*, 5: 143-160.

[S]uppose I am seated in a special chair where I am hooked up to the machine of an evil scientist, and attached to the machine are, say, 100 switches. If the scientist were to flip one switch, then one percent of my body and brain cells would be destroyed and replaced with one percent of the corresponding cloned body and brain cells of Greta Garbo at the age of thirty. Indeed, let us further suppose that the scientist has the full blown Garbo Replica (cryogenically preserved, shall we say) seated next to me, and he simply draws from its cells as needed. So, for example, in the 1% case, some of the cells in a specific area of my left elbow might be replaced with cells from that area of the Garbo Replica's left elbow, and some of the cells of my brain might be replaced with cells from a similar area of the Replica's brain. In this case, the person who woke up would perhaps have one new memory and a body slightly different from mine. If the scientist were to flip two switches, then two percent of my body and brain cells would be destroyed and replaced with two percent of the Replica's corresponding body and brain cells. And so on. If the scientist were to flip all the switches, my entire body would be destroyed and replaced with the Garbo Replica. What would exist in my original chair in this case would be a person with 100% of Garbo's cloned cells, a person henceforth called GarboR<sup>41</sup>.

The question of identity pivotal to this example is who is Greta Garbo at each stage of the process? According to Shoemaker there are three possibilities: the person in the chair is always the original person, the person in the chair, at some point during the experiment, becomes a new person, or the identity of the person in the chair is indeterminate. While the third option represents the view of the reductionist, the first and second options need to be addressed. The first option is rather easily dismissed as fallacy because this would imply that I am not a product of any psychological or physical properties, but option two is much more complicated.

Inherently, option two maintains that at some point, as the scientist flips the switches and destroys my body and mind, I cease to exist. At some point along the spectrum, the person in the chair would cease to be Garbo and would become GarboR. Therefore, there are three possibilities: this alteration could occur after 50 switches were flipped, at some number greater than 50, or at some number less than 50. If the correct

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

situation encompassed the first option, Shoemaker argues that an inconsistency would follow. For the argument to proceed, the non-reductionist will claim that when 50% of my physical and mental attributes have been destroyed and replaced, I will cease to exist and a new person will come into existence. In other words, Garbo would exist until 50 switches were flipped and afterwards GarboR would exist, but this interpretation is problematic for the non-reductionist because it would also be the case that GarboR would only maintain 50% of her mental and physical capacities. By the argument of the reductionist, this would imply that GarboR does not exist either. By flipping 50 switches, the mad scientist would have destroyed both Shoemaker and GarboR. Much in the same way, options two and three are dismissed as inconsistencies arise in the presentation of these scenarios, and hence the second option is incorrect. At this stage of Shoemaker's argument, he has shown the first two options to be incorrect, and so, this leaves us with option three; the identity of the person in the chair is indeterminate. It is here that Shoemaker's use of modus tollens is justified. Shoemaker's use of the combined spectrum from Parfit creates a question of personal identity that does not have a definite answer. Of course, this flies in direct conflict with the premise of the non-reductionist and reveals an inconsistency in the doctrines of non-reductionism. Reductionism wins by default, but more than that whether reductionism or non-reductionism could be correct, they do not constitute the no-self theory of personal identity and that creates the major problem for the doctrine of *anatta*. Hence, the real power of the reductionist/non-reductionist debate reveals itself here: by arguing against the non-reductionist account of personal identity, the reductionist lends credence to the no-self doctrine through agreement, but the doctrine further calls into question the no-self doctrine by not explicitly arguing against the

permanent and enduring self like the Buddha seemingly attempted in his presentation of Buddhist doctrine.

### Conclusions

In this chapter, we have raised what I consider are the most serious challenges to both the doctrines of Buddhism and the no-self theory. In that sense, there is certainly reason to doubt the consistency of the no-self theory and its companions. Can we save the no-self theory and create a consistent system within Buddhism? How is the reductionist account of personal identity able to survive in this modern climate and is it the best argument within personal identity theory? In chapter 3, we will answer these questions as I seek to assuage the doubt concerning Buddhism, reductionism, and personal identity theory. Though we have been presented with both reasons to doubt and reasons to believe, I believe that neither side is wholly correct.

## CHAPTER IV

### REASONS FOR RELATIVITY

*Yes, [life's] terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true, the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after.*<sup>42</sup>

#### The Buddha, Relatively Speaking

With ample evidence to support both sides of the debate over personal identity, one might believe that a refutation of one side in favor of another would become incredibly difficult, however my objective in this chapter is not to argue against one side but more to garner a middle ground between them. My aim for this chapter is to present a two fold argument; one that is meant to provide a basis for thought within the current debate of personal identity and one meant to reconcile Buddhist thought on the subject with the consistent teachings of the Buddha. Thus, I will first present the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity advocated by Peter Unger and defend that theory against a few of the more pressing critiques. Secondly, I will present the debate within Buddhism between those who feel The Buddha argued against a permanent and everlasting self and those who argue that The Buddha merely argued against the self for pragmatic and practical reasons because this strategy would be most beneficial to the Buddhist search for Nirvana. Finally, I will tie the two debates together, such that we can then garner a richer understanding of Buddhist teachings and more fully understand the question of the self with regards to the modern debate.

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<sup>42</sup> "Lie to Me" 2-7, Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

## Philosophical Relativity

The skeptic questions all of our knowledge, she casts doubt on the existence of the external world and everything we perceive as knowledge, and if the skeptic is correct we truly live in a vacuum where all knowledge is consumed by the skeptic's argument and where doubt is the only ideal we hold too. Pragmatically speaking however, skepticism is a wholly untenable position, one where philosophy is meaningless and one where the journey ends before it even begins. In that sense, I believe there are other doctrines of belief which provide us a tool to doubt that which we should, and yet are not wholly untenable positions. In his book *Philosophical Relativity*, Peter Unger argues for a relative look at some of the philosophical problems of today, a position that casts doubt upon the philosophical problems argued by philosophers but also provides a basis for further argument and debate as we search for truth. The questions of philosophy are truly questions that seek truth, they seek to bathe us in knowledge, but more than that, they provide us with the tools to scale the mountain with a map in hand. While the skeptic doubts that we can even climb the mountain, the relativist maintains that the mountain is traversable with multiple paths appropriate to the endeavor, and this distinction will provide us our end point. By understanding Unger's argument for philosophical relativity, we will provide one possible path towards a general understanding of the debate within personal identity philosophy and garner a richer understanding of the doctrine of *anatta* presented by The Buddha.

The central issue Unger questions concerns the philosophic idea that all problems have some objective answer. In truth, Unger seeks not to argue that these objective answers do not exist (in fact he thinks this may be impossible); he seeks only to cast

doubt upon notions central to philosophy and whether these problems have objective solutions. In this way, Unger could be seen as a skeptic whose key aim is to cast doubt upon all knowledge, but this cannot be true because Unger advocates a relativistic understanding of philosophical problems derived from the doubts he produces. The crucial difference reveals itself when the skeptic advocates suspending judgment while the relativist advocates making a judgment based upon relative factors. So how does Unger advance his case? Clearly, disagreements exist between philosophers across the spectrum, whether they exist between contextualists and invariantists, no-self theorists and personal identity theorists, or reductionists and non-reductionists. For each philosophical issue we explore, there will, invariably, be two distinct sides taken as to the correct answer to the problem. Furthermore, each side believes that an objectively correct answer exists to the problem and that they are correct in holding to the solution they employ. For, why would you hold a belief if you did not think you were correct? Thus, the distinction lies with the answer to the problem and the disagreement which follows between each side. To settle the dispute, then, the objectively correct answer should be revealed to show one side incorrect and the other side correct. In other words, one side should convince the other side of their faults, yet this seems rarely to happen within philosophy. As Unger wonders, “why do these debates go on and on with so little in the way of results?<sup>43</sup>” With objective truths, shouldn’t we be able to come to certain answers about philosophical problems?

The answer, of course, is multi-faceted and requires much consideration. As Unger puzzles, maybe we simply do not have the mental capacity or tools to solve the problems we face as philosophers. Our limited and finite minds may not be equipped to

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<sup>43</sup> Unger, Peter. *Philosophical Relativity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 4.

handle the difficult and demanding problems of epistemology or metaphysics, for example. And even if we do possess the mental capacities needed to meet these challenges, maybe we are not privy to information required to come to the correct conclusion. It could be the case that our scientific or intellectual processes have not reached the level of information needed to solve philosophical problems. In other words, perhaps we are playing with only 40 cards out of a 52 card deck. Another answer, however, should be considered. Conceivably, if there were no objective answers, this would explain our inability to produce concrete answers to some of the most challenging problems we face. As Unger claims, “[f]or certain traditional problems, perhaps there really is no objective answer, neither positive nor negative, neither ‘commonsensical’ nor ‘skeptical’.”<sup>44</sup> This solution, then, could account for the staggering disagreement present in philosophy and among the many sides of any debate.

Now that we have set up our problem, we have to spell out the exact nature of the theory Unger advocates. If the answer to our question is that there are no objective answers, our answers to some philosophical problems must then be contingent upon other considerations or assumptions and not objective facts. While one set of assumptions will lead us to a certain answer, another set will lead us to a completely different answer. Moreover, these assumptions are arbitrary in scope because they do not depend on objective facts but upon what one holds to be true. When this situation occurs and no set of assumptions can be the deciding factor, this is the situation Unger explores. As Unger states:

One position on a philosophical problem is to be preferred only relative to assumptions involved in arriving at its answer to the problem; an opposed position is to be preferred only relative to alternative assumptions; there is nothing to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

determine the choice between the diverse assumptions and hence, between the opposed positions.<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, this is what Unger calls Philosophical Relativity. One might ask, now that we have defined our terms, how this situation could present itself within philosophy.

According to Unger, one way in which philosophical relativity manifests is when we consider semantic relations of words such 'know' or 'freedom'. Consider the situation where two epistemologists disagree over the meaning of the word 'know' and considerable disagreement follows from this distinction. As Unger states,

Suppose that there is no objectively right answer as to how a certain expression should be interpreted; no unique determinate meaning to be assigned. In such cases, if there really are any, we will have semantic relativity. One set of assumptions leads to one semantic interpretation; another set leads to another, and there is nothing to decide objectively in favor of either set<sup>46</sup>.

In this case, semantic relativity is a form of philosophical relativity because, if it is the case, there is no objective answer such that 'know' can be defined. Thus, the epistemologist will hold true what they do because of subjective assumptions they hold to be true, and these assumptions will lead to opposing sides of a debate neither can win.

#### Philosophical Relativity and Personal Identity

One of the central reasons Unger's theory is effective is because he seeks not to prove the absence of objective answers to philosophical problems, but more to create doubt and provide a differing perspective to the problems we undertake as philosophers. In that sense, when we look at the question of personal identity within the field of philosophy, we get the sense that Unger may be on to something. In chapter one, I argued positions which opposed the metaphysical conceptions of self, and I provided reasons to believe that these positions were faulty. In chapter two, I argued positions which opposed

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

this ideal, positions which showed the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* to be inconsistent, and I further provided reasons to believe that these positions were faulty as well. So which are we to believe? The answer to this important question, according to Unger, will differ relative to a certain set of assumptions we each maintain. For those who argue the existence of a pure and everlasting self, the assumptions employed may include those found in religion, in a loyalty to Descartes, in a common-sense understanding of the idea, or belief in assumptions that build to their natural conclusion in favor of a metaphysical self. On the other hand, those who argue in favor of the no-self doctrine may find their assumptions in Buddhism, in the teachings of the Buddha after he found enlightenment, through experiences garnered from insight meditation, or from arguments wholly independent from Buddhism itself. The purpose of chapters one and two thus becomes clear, each side within the personal identity debate maintain logical and passionate defenses for their side, and yet each are beset with problems of consistency and powerful critiques not easily brushed aside. What also becomes clear is that there is incredible reason to doubt whether anything is readily available to accurately determine the correct position, but more than that Unger sought to accomplish this very goal when he compared the positions of contextualism and invariantism. In this case, it seems to promote the notion that a person's beliefs concerning personal identity are relative to the assumptions each brings to the argument itself. For instance, the debate between the reductionist and the non-reductionist seems to present the perfect case for the semantic relativity Unger advocates. On one hand, the reductionist maintains that the self is really a product of the correct causal relation (Parfit calls this relation R), a sum of its parts, and thus the definition of the term "self" is shown through this connection. On the other hand,

the non-reductionist will maintain that there is an everlasting, permanent, and basic thing which we call the self. As seen in chapters one and two, each position holds to powerful and logical assumptions which drive the theories and critiques of each side, but the real disagreement between these two camps concerns the very nature of the term “self”. The term is interpreted in one fashion by the reductionist and in another by the non-reductionist, and hence one set of assumptions will lead each group to differing interpretations of the semantic meaning inherent to language. And while each group is allied with arguments in favor of their interpretation, doubt exists as to the true nature of an objective truth to the matter because no unique and determinate definition may exist. As we have seen, the cases brought forth by both sides of the debate have merit, and though we seek not to prove that there is no objectively true nature to the question of the self, chapters’ one and two provide ample evidence to doubt the efficacy of an objective truth within the debate.

#### A Problem of Inconsistency

With these tools in hand, we must now show the efficacy of the theory of Philosophical Relativity itself; for if it is to work and cast doubt on the objective nature of the self, it must be a theory with enough merit to warrant serious discussion and provide enough force to effectively bring the objective nature of the self into the light of doubt. One criticism Unger, and any relativist in general, faces is the objection that the theory of relativism is self-defeating. Never more apparent than in the *Protagoras*, when Socrates questions Protagoras concerning his claim of relativism his focus is on the self-defeating nature of relativism. To Protagoras, all truth is relative, but Socrates maintains that if he were to claim that “all truth is absolute”, this would create an inconsistency between the

two statements. In the same manner, Unger faces the same charge: if his theory of relativism is applied to itself, it is self-defeating because it would create an inconsistency on par with that of other arguments from relativism. For instance, take Socrates and Protagoras from above. Protagoras would hold the theory of philosophical relativity and maintain its veracity, but Socrates would claim that it cannot be true. Clearly, these statements together are inconsistent but how are we to tell which one is false and which is true? According to Unger, we could not tell which would be correct because there would be no objective truth of the matter, and therefore, his argument falls to the same charge of other theories of relativity.

However, we should consider one defense that I feel saves Unger from the trap Socrates has laid. Suppose that there are two logicians: Tom Riddle and Thomas Anderson. Mr. Anderson and Mr. Riddle are sitting in a bar one night when a moral relativist friend, Smith, walks into the bar. After a few beers, the relativist lays out his theory of moral relativity, and Mr. Riddle protests. What about the scenario where someone says “X is right” and another says “X is wrong”? (Together, these two sentences are inconsistent and follow the same nature as the objection I have raised for Unger.) Mr. Riddle, being a good logician, raises this objection and wonders how the relativist would handle such a position. Without flinching, Smith tells a story about Zeno’s paradox. According to Smith, Zeno’s paradox is not meant to show that motion is impossible; it is only meant to show that there is a flaw with our logic and math skills which prevent us from dealing with the paradox correctly. In the same fashion, the objection Mr. Riddle raises simply does not have the force he hoped it would. The critique raised by Mr. Riddle, only shows that we are unable, from a logical and semantic

perspective, to truly understand and express the idea behind moral relativism. Still, Mr. Riddle finds this explanation unsatisfactory because we have not dealt with the apparent inconsistency, only dodged it for now. At this point, Mr. Anderson interjects and argues that the distinction here can be seen two ways: there is either a problem with our logic and the argument presented by Smith is correct or Smith is wrong and the objection of Mr. Riddle really does show the flaws of moral relativism. Mr. Anderson, being a relativist on the side, argues for Smith and the veracity of the claim because he differs with Mr. Riddle over minute details of logic. Now we are faced with two camps: the first camp consists of Mr. Anderson and Smith who argue that the objection raised by Riddle is simply weaker than he hoped it would be. On the other hand, Riddle argues that this defense is weak and does not address the problem. Sitting at another table, Morpheus, a professor and retired skeptic, listens intently and when our group gets to the end of their discussion, he interjects his idea. In essence, the two logicians in our camps, Anderson and Riddle, disagree about the force of the term 'inconsistency' and its power to show theories to be false. For Thomas Anderson, there are times when an apparent inconsistency can simply be a prescription for a better logical system, and for Tom Riddle, this cannot be true. While sitting at another table, Morpheus explains to the friends his theory of philosophical relativity and shows how this disagreement is a perfect example of semantic relativity. Accordingly, there is doubt that an objectively correct way to determine which interpretation of the logical phrase is correct.

In many ways, Mr. Anderson is a skeptic of language and logic, he joins the Taoist philosopher Chuang-Tzu and others who wonder whether our logical and interpretative systems are truly equipped to handle the complexities of the world, but

more than that, when we look at words such as indescribable or unique we are faced with problems our language seems unable to handle. As a defense for the semantic relativity inherent to the problems faced by Mr. Anderson and Mr. Riddle, consider the word indescribable. If we claim that thing X is indescribable, then we have inherently described X as indescribable thus creating an inconsistency within the usage of the word, and what's more consider the word unique. If we claim that two or more people are unique, for example, then those people are no longer unique because they share one thing in common. It is in this manner that the word inconsistent works within the example; Mr. Anderson and Mr. Riddle may be faced with a situation where no objective truth exists because of the semantic relativity advanced by Unger and because of the apparent flaws within our logical and interpretative systems. At the least, doubt exists as to the true nature, but even in this case, Philosophical Relativity seems to win the day.

Of course, this does us little good if we cannot do the same thing for Unger's philosophical relativity thesis, but I think we can. If we were to change the scenario above from moral relativism to philosophical relativism, Unger's theory could escape the trap laid out by Socrates. Let me explain: again, there are two camps; the first camp consists of those who hold a loose interpretation of the logical idea of 'inconsistency' and the second camp espouses the view of Tom Riddle. If we apply Unger's argument, this becomes a case of philosophical relativity and both ideas are true based only on arbitrary conditions or assumptions. How does this save Unger's argument, though? The critique levied against Unger attempts to show that his theory is self-defeating and inconsistent, but I have shown that his theory would take that objection and nullify its efficacy. Thus, the objection simply does not have the force or potential originally thought. To state this

more clearly, think of the defense this way: the apparent inconsistency formed because of the critique by both Tom Riddle and Socrates is in direct contradiction with the defense that Smith presents and that Anderson takes further. How so? Simply put, the two groups disagree about the semantic meaning of the word 'inconsistency'. Naturally, we want to know which position is correct, but, because we applied the theory of philosophical relativity here, we cannot ascertain which position is correct. Thus, the objection has no weight because it cannot overcome the defense! What I am claiming is that any critique of the doctrine must be free of its implications or risk the same fate a critique of skepticism would. For instance, if we are dreaming, then any objection we raise against this skeptical argument must be levied outside the dream world or risk falling prey to the skeptical charge itself. In the same manner, the doctrine of philosophical relativity is free of the critiques of Socrates and Tom Riddle because the critiques fall prey to the theory itself.

#### A Further Defense

While the argument I present now is inductive in nature and meant only to provide good reason to believe the theory of philosophical relativity, I feel it works on par with arguments such as those presented by Plantinga and Alston in defense of Christianity. Neither of these philosophers sought to defend Christian doctrine per se, they sought only to show that belief in Christianity was rational and warranted. Analogously, I seek to do the same with the theory Unger presents by providing an inductive argument. It would be difficult, if not disingenuous, to try and provide an absolute proof for Unger's theory, so I seek only to show that it is rational to believe in such a theory.

Consider, the cases born out by personal identity theorists, the reductionist and the non-reductionist, the holder of the Buddhist *anatman* doctrine and the holder of the Hindu doctrine of *atman* is *Brahman*, and consider the breadth of knowledge of defense each side employs. As we look at each case, whether we take the ideas of chapter one or the defenses of chapter two, there is clearly a great divide between these theories. So why are we so divided on this issue? Whether its disagreement over the semantic nature of the term “self”, whether differing assumptions brought to the table to begin with alter our belief on the subject, or whether we believe the Buddhist or the Hindu is correct, one thing is clear. Our agreement is only in the disagreement, and Philosophical Relativity brings this doubt forward into a worthwhile theory concerning the objective nature of that disagreement. Of course, neither disagreement or agreement breed objective answers for it’s clear that we could universally agree that P where not P is correct, but what is clear is that the disagreement present within the philosophy we attempt today gives us reason to doubt whether there are absolute truths and whether we maintain the tools necessary to achieve this lofty goal. For 2000 years, we have argued, studied, and been taught by the brightest minds of our times. We have had Hume, Kant, Plato, Socrates, Locke, Hobbes, and other philosophers whose intellects were astounding. Yet, not one of the theories argued for by any of these philosophers is completely accepted by the philosophical community, and though this is certainly not definitive proof of the absence of absolutes when it comes to certain philosophical problems, it does create doubt within some theories of philosophy that absolutes exist and that we can attain them. With this doubt in hand, wouldn’t it be reasonable to believe that there are some philosophical problems

which are absent the absolute answer that has been so elusive? Wouldn't it be reasonable to doubt the efficacy of the absolute with regard to some philosophical problems?

Obviously, these arguments have only inductive force because of their very nature, but they do work by calling into question the thing which undercuts Unger's theory. I think we have presented ample evidence to show that, at the least, it is reasonable to believe the claim that there are no objective truths for some problems within philosophy, including those questions of personal identity. At most, we have shown that doubt truly exists about objective facts, in general, and that it is possible that there are no objective facts at all<sup>47</sup>.

### Buddhism and Unger

What I seek to accomplish now is provide an interpretation of the teachings of The Buddha which reconciles three key positions within Buddhism, reveal the inherent connection between the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity and Buddhism, and argue against at least one possible criticism of the interpretation I advocate. By doing so, I hope to reveal how the doctrine of *anatta* is one that is rational to invoke within Buddhism and that the teachings of the Buddha provide a stable foundation for the Buddhist. In that sense, my argument will run like any interpretation of a foundational text, I will assume my position is correct and disclose how this interpretation solves many of the problems other interpretations face.

The first crucial piece of our puzzle is the two level doctrine held by many Buddhists as a means to fully understand the teachings of The Buddha. One of the most interesting facets of the teachings of the Buddha is the seeming contradiction between

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<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting that some of this defense and presentation were drawn from an earlier paper on Philosophical Relativity.

The Buddha's use of personal pronouns such as "I" or "me" and his teachings on the idea of the self. In the earliest texts of the Pali Canon (around 500 B.C.E) The Buddha drew a distinction between two sets of discourse, the *nitattha* (plain or clear meaning which represent teachings of direct meaning) and *neyartha* (those discourses which require additional understanding and represent teachings of indirect meaning) and the *samuti* (convention) and *paramattha* (ultimate). The initial set includes the *nitattha* and the *neyartha*, where the *nitattha* refers to discourses (suttas or other teachings) which require no explanation and stand on their own and where the *neyartha* refers to discourses which require explanation or are dependent on other suttas regarded as *nitattha*. In other words, the Buddha separated his teachings into categories where meaning was discerned through a careful reading, a precise understanding, and the ability to correctly place a teaching into the proper category. Of course, misinterpretations occur:

There are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata [The Buddha]. Which two? He who represents a Sutta of indirect meaning as a Sutta of direct meaning and he who represents a Sutta of direct meaning as a Sutta of indirect meaning.<sup>48</sup>

The latter set includes the *samuti* and the *paramattha*, words employed to distinguish between common-sense or pragmatic uses of language and discourses meant to supply an ultimate and direct understanding of absolute truths of Buddhism<sup>49</sup>. These distinctions led commentators on the Pali Canon to suggest that the Buddha argued on two distinct levels of meaning; a lower commonsense level of meaning where pragmaticism and convention play large roles in the speech offered by The Buddha and an ultimate or

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<sup>48</sup> McCagney, Nancy. *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997. p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> For a more in depth discussion see: McCagney, Nancy. *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997.

higher level of discourse designed to reveal absolute or ultimate truths of the world. The Theravadin tradition of Buddhism offered this analyzation:

The Awakened One, the best of teachers, spoke of two truths, conventional and higher; no third is ascertained; a conventional statement is true because of convention and a higher statement is true as disclosing the true characteristics of events.<sup>50</sup>

The two level doctrine of meaning is useful in discerning the manner in which The Buddha could employ personal pronouns within his teachings and yet teach the doctrine of *anatta*. Though the Buddha held that no everlasting and permanent self existed, linguistic convention and pragmatic considerations on the common-sense or lower level of meaning ascribed to the Buddha a manner in which to reveal his teachings.

Though we have already discussed our second and final pieces of the puzzle, a quick summary is appropriate for the purposes at hand. Our second piece of the puzzle lies in the debate between those who argue The Buddha did intend to argue against a permanent metaphysical self and those who claim that The Buddha's arguments against the self constitute a pragmatic strategy for attainment of enlightenment. On one hand, Thanissaro Bhikkhu presents a passionate defense for his theory that the Buddha simply meant to provide the path towards enlightenment, and by employing the Vacchagotta Sutta, Bhikku's defense stems from the inaction of The Buddha when asked directly whether the self exists. On the other hand, Buddhist philosophers alike point to the numerous arguments put forth by The Buddha as proof that The Buddha intended his doctrine of *anatta* as a metaphysical truth, and thus we are not to look upon The Buddha's teaching of *anatta* as simply a practical strategy but as a truth of the world. In fact, another reading of the Ananda Sutta seems to bore this conclusion out further.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

Countless times throughout the Pali Canon the Buddha maintained that he would only say true and useful things, but more importantly failing to answer the question posed to him by Vacchagotta does not necessarily imply that The Buddha advocated the doctrine of *anatta* as a pragmatic strategy. True to his word of only claiming true and useful things, another reading of the Ananda Sutta implies that The Buddha simply felt that his answer to Vacchagotta would be useless on his path towards enlightenment, but this does not mean that the Buddha believed his doctrine of *anatta* to be false. The real difference between these camps lie in the interpretations each harbor with regards to the Suttas and teachings of The Buddha in question, and this difference will provide us with a solid foundation for the rest of this paper.

Our final piece of the puzzle lies in the distinction The Buddha drew between the types of questions one might be asked and how each question should be answered. As stated before, The Buddha divided the nature of questions into four distinct categories: those that deserve a straightforward or categorical answer, those questions that deserve to be analyzed and clarified for further explanation, those that deserve a Socratic questioning where the question is turned on the inquisitor, and those questions which have no merit on the path towards nirvana and should be brushed aside. Now that our essential pieces of the puzzle are in place, what I will answer in the next part of this paper is the interpretation I believe correct for Buddhism and how that interpretation takes each of these crucial elements of Buddhism and shines a new light upon them.

#### Interpretations and Consistency

One might wonder how two rational and intelligent people could look upon a few paragraphs of the Buddha's words and leave with entirely different interpretations of the

teaching in question. However, it's not uncommon at all for two people to see the same event, painting, or stanza of text in much different lights. For example, when two different, rational, and intelligent people view a traumatic event such as a car accident, it's quite plausible that one person can view the events differently than someone whose perspective was nearly similar. What usually causes this difference in perspectives are the assumptions, experiences, and biases which each person brings to the table as they testify to the true nature of the accident. Analogously, when viewing the Ananda Sutta, it's quite plausible that two separate Buddhist philosophers will read the teaching much differently because of preconceived assumptions concerning the self, the doctrine's consistency with other Buddhist doctrine, or disagreement over the vast amount of teachings espoused by The Buddha. So how are we to make sense of this disagreement and can we find a middle ground that will both be true to The Buddha's intent and the logical assumptions of those who seek to extract meaning from Buddhist teachings? To answer this question we must first consider a familiar quote from the Ananda Sutta:

Ananda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those priests and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those priests & contemplatives who are exponents of annihilationism. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self, were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?<sup>51</sup>

A third, possibly better, interpretation of this stanza involves the supposed link I would like to draw between the teachings of The Buddha and the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity espoused by Peter Unger. It is clear that The Buddha argued against the notion of a permanent entity known as the self but it is also clear that The Buddha failed to

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<sup>51</sup> Samyutta Nikaya XLIV.10.

answer that very question in response to those seeking the true path to enlightenment. However, if the Buddha would somehow endorse Unger's claims about philosophical truths and maintain that the notion of the self was only relatively true, then we could explain not only the disagreement inherent to the Ananda Sutta but also the wealth of Buddhist understanding on the subject. It is my contention that the Buddha would do just that, The Buddha would endorse the doubt created by the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity, but more than that this reading of his teachings would stay true to foundational Buddhist beliefs and provide a middle ground for those who disagree over the true nature of his teachings. To further my argument, let me first show how this interpretation of Buddhist text would fit with the three crucial pieces of the puzzle I have already mentioned.

### Three Answers

The first piece of the puzzle we shall deal with is the disagreement between Thanissaro Bhikkhu and other Buddhist philosophers concerning the true intentions of The Buddha. Let us assume that the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity provides us a firm basis for debate (figuratively speaking) and that The Buddha would endorse this belief as right view both of his teachings and his own beliefs. If this be the case, then The Buddha argued against the idea of a permanent self in relative terms, such that his arguments against a permanent entity known as self would only be relatively true. What's more, The Buddha's endorsement of Philosophical Relativity means that he would not believe that there is an objective truth to the question, only relative truth with respect to other Buddhist doctrines and the path he lays out for the cessation of suffering. On one hand, The Buddha's arguments in favor of *anatta* would then be seen as relative

arguments, ones that are still meant to be believed but with the caveat that he recognizes that no objective truth exists. In that sense, The Buddha would be arguing for one to believe his side of the debate because he believes The Buddha is correct. This would be in keeping with the position of many Buddhist philosophers who claim that The Buddha did intend to argue against a permanent self, but the difference would be quite important. Instead of an absolute truth to the matter, The Buddha would be arguing relative truth, he would be presenting his side of the matter, he would be supplying reasons to believe his point of view, and thus The Buddha would be arguing in favor of the doctrine of *anatta*. According to The Buddha, one should believe the doctrine of *anatta* not only as a practical strategy but as a doctrine that is as true as it could possibly be. Of course, my interlocutor might wonder whether The Buddha's claim of only saying true and useful things would place this interpretation in danger of presenting an inconsistency for this view. I don't believe, however, that this would be the case because The Buddha's argument would be both useful and true, however only relatively true in case of the latter. On the other hand, this interpretation of *anatta* provides a basis for those represented by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, those who claim that The Buddha advocated a pragmatic strategy, because if The Buddha endorsed a relative approach to *anatta*, then his arguments cannot be taken as absolute. If that were the case, those who ascribe to the views of Thanissaro Bhikkhu would be appeased because the underlying assumptions employed by The Buddha would lend themselves to the practical strategy they endorse. For instance, when the Buddha argues against a permanent metaphysical self in the Pali Canon, his underlying assumptions about the doctrine provide the Buddha a basis from which to argue his side of the debate, and while he seeks to convince others of the necessity and

relative truth of his *anatta* doctrine, his recognition of no absolute or ultimate nature of the self gives cause to a belief that he argues this view because it is a practical strategy. In that sense, both camps would then be appeased because The Buddha did argue against the self, if only in a relative fashion, and did so because of prior assumptions which consist of the greatest strategy for others to attain what he has achieved. In other words, The Buddha did truly believe the doctrine of *anatta* and did truly argue its efficacy, but did so because he not only needed to show what he feels is right view on the subject but also because *anatta* provided the greatest and truest path for one to attain enlightenment. Such are the consequences of an endorsement of Philosophical Relativity and a belief in the relative nature of the questions of personal identity theory. Hence, it is my contention that the Buddha argued the doctrine of *anatta* as to provide reasons to believe his overall teachings and to promote his notion of right view, while also recognizing the truly relative nature of his argument and knowing that his instruction provided the most practical and effective strategy for a follower to achieve enlightenment.

The second piece of our puzzle we shall deal with is the distinction The Buddha drew between four types of questions. Again, let's assume that my interpretation of the Buddha is correct, such that we will now deal with this piece with this knowledge in hand. In the Ananda Sutta, Vacchagotta straightforwardly asks the Buddha whether the self exists but the Buddha answers with only silence. In this case, the Buddha considered Vacchagotta's question to be misguided, and thus failed to answer. On other occasions, however, the Buddha did answer the question and either provided reasons for the *anatta* doctrine or defended his view against critiques meant to defeat this right view. Though this distinction provides interesting reasons to believe the camp led by Thanissaro

Bhikkhu, it also reveals an inherent piece of evidence essential to belief in my interpretation. The Buddha treated each question asked to him in a relative nature, he considered the person who asked the question and the circumstances each person brought with them, and then decided to answer the question in one of his four prescribed ways. Even similar questions were treated in this fashion, especially questions concerning the self, and therefore what this reveals to us is the truly relative nature of many of the Buddha's teachings. More importantly, it reveals to us the consistency in accepting my interpretation of the Buddha with the manner in which the Buddha answered questions and taught his disciples. For if the Buddha answered questions in a relative fashion, then it is certainly consistent to believe that the Buddha felt the pull of a relative truth in accordance with his doctrine of *anatta*. I believe it is reasonable to claim that if the Buddha held the answering of questions to be relative, then the Buddha would also hold to the relative nature of the no-self doctrine as evidenced by his answer to Vacchagotta in the Ananda Sutta.

The final piece of our puzzle we shall deal with is the two level doctrine explained earlier, and once again for arguments sake, let's assume that my interpretation of the Buddha's teachings is correct. The two level doctrine of truth holds that the Buddha argued on two distinct levels of meaning, the lower or conventional level where pragmaticism and convention are the driving force and an upper or ultimate level where the absolutely true resides. If we assume that my interpretation is correct, what are the consequences for this doctrine? To properly represent the Buddha's doubt in an objective answer to the question of the self, the two level doctrine would change dramatically. Within the ultimate level of meaning, the question of the self would not exist because

there would be no ultimate answer to the question, and the no-self theorist and the personal identity theorist would argue within the conventional level of meaning because this level represents the relative nature of the debate. To believe in the doctrine of *anatta* or to argue for its veracity at a relative level is to maintain that the side one takes concerning the philosophical problem in question is both rational and well defended, and though there may not be an objective truth in the matter, one's belief is justified based on the arguments they hold to be true and sound. In that sense, the two level doctrine would apply to both the truth and meaning of the Buddha's teachings, there would be an absolute and relative distinction drawn with respect to truth and there would be an ultimate and conventional distinction drawn with respect to meaning, but more than that our analyzation of the Buddha's teachings would revolve around clearly understanding this feature of the two level doctrine. When we apply the two level doctrine to the truth of the Buddha's teachings, we should understand that at times the Buddha argues for truth that is absolute and at other times the Buddha argues for truth that is relative in accordance with the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity. When we employ the two level doctrine to the meaning of the Buddha's teachings, we should understand that at times the Buddha must be able to employ pragmatism and convention in order to properly articulate his vision and at other times the Buddha ultimately means to argue for his views. With respect to the two level doctrine and Buddhism, isn't it conceivable that the Buddha's argument against the self is meant to have this effect? As stated above, Thanissaro Bhikkhu and those within his camp contend that the Buddha argued against the self not as a metaphysical doctrine but more as a practical strategy for enlightenment, and as I revealed my interpretation seeks to bring together these two camps. Thus, if the

Buddha's real goal was to show the doctrine of *anatta* as a position that is both rational and well-defended and as one that is only relatively true, then not only does the argument work to bring together these two camps but it also works to create a consistent belief structure with regards to the two level doctrine and Buddhist belief of the relative. In other words, the argument would run in this fashion: the Buddha would argue against the self, recognize the inherent relativity of his position, and fully realize the pragmatic and practical nature of his argument. In that sense, the Buddha's position can be wholly explained by the two level doctrine as well, but more than that we can still maintain the defense the two level doctrine is meant to accomplish. The Buddha employs personal pronouns at a conventional level, for conventions sake, because the self resides within this level, and though the doctrine of *anatta* resides within this level as well, this does not present a problem. Though the Buddha believes the doctrine of *anatta* as opposed to a permanent self, he does so with the knowledge that his belief is relative to assumptions and doctrines he knows to be true, and this distinction is important because it explains how the Buddha can employ personal pronouns. Think of the distinction this way: the Buddha believes that his position on the self is more rational and better defended, but he still needs the convention and linguistic convenience of personal pronouns to properly express his beliefs because he wants to properly be able to inform his followers of the correct path. Thus, the Buddha holds *anatta* to be relative, the self to be conventional or pragmatic, there to be no absolute answer to the question of the self, and ultimately means to argue against the self in a relative fashion. In this way, we are able to show the consistency of a belief in my interpretation and in a belief in the two level doctrine, and this is crucial to the efficacy of my interpretation because we want to be able to adopt

those doctrines of Buddhism we feel are correct and also take my interpretation as one that does not destroy these doctrines.

My defense and presentation of the interpretation I promote regarding the Buddha's teachings is now complete. By showing how my interpretation works within three well-established Buddhist principles, I feel I have provided ample evidence for the relative truth of my conclusions, but more than that I feel I have provided a middle ground for debate that rages within the Buddhist philosophical community. Inherently, a relative approach to Buddhist doctrine and the question of personal identity may seem far-fetched, but through argument I have shown not that my interpretation is absolutely true but that it is not irrational or inconsistent to maintain this position.

### Conclusions

Three important ideas will end our journey and provide a much needed final look at a final understanding of the question of personal identity and its relation to Buddhism. First, what I have sought to show is that it is reasonable (not absolute) to believe the conclusions garnered from the doctrine of Philosophical Relativity, that my interpretation of Buddhist doctrine with regards to Unger's argument is, at the least, plausible, and that my interpretation works because it is able to solve some of the debate between Buddhist philosophers and is both charitable to and supported by the teachings of the Buddha. Second, I feel it would be disingenuous to both doctrines supported here to claim that my interpretation is absolutely correct. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the worth of this particular path up the mountain, to show that if one undertakes this journey and that journey ends with my interpretation in hand that there is good reason to believe in the rationality and consistency of this position. And third, I feel I have provided a manner in

which the Buddhist is now more than able to defend her position and belief in the doctrines of Buddhism from her interlocutor, but more than that I feel I have done so in a way that the Buddha would endorse. One of the most basic and truest doctrines of Buddhism is the notion that attachment to this world must be broken away from in order for the Buddhist to reach her goal of enlightenment, and in that sense my interpretation of the Buddha's teachings is meant to discard many of the attachments that an absolutist view of personal identity and the Buddha's teachings would entail. In the end, I hope that my interpretation is well-founded and rational to believe, and though relativism seems to be a dirty word within certain philosophical circles, I hope that through a better understanding of Buddhism and Philosophical Relativity that this path up the mountain is embraced as one potential path among many. After all, the journey and not the destination is what matters.

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