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Harris, S.E.; Davis, G.F.

Gordon F. Davis
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Carleton University
Ottawa, ON, Canada

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Chapter 11
Altruism in the Charnel Ground: Śāntideva and Parfit on Anātman, Reductionism and Benevolence

Stephen Harris

In the eighth chapter of his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or *Introduction to the Practices of Awakening* (hereafter, BCA), the eighth-century Indian Buddhist monk Śāntideva appeals to the nonexistence of any enduring self as a premise in his argument that we ought to commit to impartial benevolence. A striking feature of this argument is that it appears in a chapter that is otherwise comprised of meditations designed to develop disenchantment with samsara and increase compassion for others. Almost all of the verses preceding the argument, which begins at verse ninety and continues for about fifteen verses, focus on some unsatisfactory aspect of samsaric experience, like the unreliability of impermanent things like friendship and wealth. Particularly striking are a set of forty verses in which Śāntideva imagines himself in a charnel ground contemplating rotting corpses. It is rather jarring to find him transition from these graveside contemplations to an extended argument for benevolence.

In a past article, I argued that we can resolve this tension by treating the argument as a meditation designed to lessen selfishness (Harris 2011). Although this is one function of these verses, Garfield, Jenkins and Priest are right to point out that this is no reason to think the argument is not also meant to rationally convince (2016). In this essay, I reverse my former approach; rather than interpreting what appears to be an argument as an extended meditation, I show how the meditations of the first half of the chapter establish an important premise in the argument. Reading the text in this way shows how Śāntideva can respond to a potentially powerful objection which I develop by re-examining Śāntideva's premises through the lens of comparative philosophy. Like Śāntideva, Derek Parfit argues in his masterwork *Reasons and Persons* that if one accepts reductionism about personal identity, one ought to be less specially concerned about one's own future well-being, relative to that of others. In the first section below, I explain why the Buddhist rejection of

S. Harris (✉)
Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands
e-mail: s.e.harris@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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an enduring self is close enough to Parfit's reductionism to allow us to look at their arguments together. After discussing these arguments, I summarize a powerful response to Parfit by Susan Wolf that claims normative implications do not follow from Parfit's reductionism. This objection, I argue, also applies to Śāntideva. Although her argument is probably effective against Parfit, in the final section I explain how Buddhist claims about impermanence and suffering provide a response to Wolf. In other words, the verses of BCA's eighth chapter that develop these Buddhist themes also do philosophical work that strengthens the force of Śāntideva's argument.

11.1 Reductionism and Not-Self in Parfit and Buddhism

Parfit describes reductionism about personal identity as the view that "the fact of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts" and that "[t]hese facts can be described in an impersonal way" (Parfit 1984, 210). Likewise, for a reductionist, "each person's existence just involves the existence of a brain and a body, the doing of certain deeds, the thinking of certain thoughts, the occurrence of certain experiences, and so on" (Parfit 1984, 211). Parfit's own version of reductionism claims that the important facts in personal identity are primarily psychological connectedness and continuity.[1] Psychological connectedness "is the holding of particular direct psychological connections" such as memories, beliefs and desires (Parfit 1984, 206). When a sufficient number of psychological connections hold between persons at different times, they are said to be strongly psychologically connected. Psychological continuity "is the holding of overlapping chains of strong connectedness" (Parfit 1984, 206). Together, psychological connectedness and continuity make up what Parfit calls "Relation R" (Parfit 1984, 215). In ordinary situations, when persons at different times are psychologically continuous with one another, they are the same person.[2]

Buddhists claim that persons are comprised of five groups of momentary events, the aggregates (*skandhas*) of matter (*rūpa*), hedonic feeling (*vedanā*), recognition (*samjñā*), conscious awareness (*vijñāna*), and a category called *samskāra* that includes volition and karmic tendencies. One of the definitive Buddhist claims is that there is no enduring unitary self (*ātman*) aside from these groups of momentary constituents. They would, therefore, accept Parfit's central reductionist claim that persons are entirely reducible to their components and the causal relations between them. For Buddhists, the term "person" is a conventional designation (*prajñapti*) allowing us, for convenience, to refer together to discrete assemblages of causally related constituents. Likewise, they would claim that continuity of

[1] Parfit's argument for this position occupies much of part three of *Reasons and Persons*.

[2] Parfit also stipulates that identity must take a nonbranching form, but we can overlook this detail here. See Parfit 1984, 207.

identity over time involves nothing more than the occurrence of these causally related constituents.[3]

An important difference between Parfit's reductionism and the Buddhist rejection of the self (*ātman*) is that unlike Parfit, Buddhists are reductionists not just about persons, but about all partite objects. The classic example Buddhists give is of the chariot. The word "chariot" is simply a conventional designation (*prajñapti*) grouping together a causally related assemblage of chariot parts for convenience, since this configuration of parts allows us to access the function of speed. This difference will not affect my argument to come, however.

There are also several important differences in the doctrine of the nonexistence of an enduring self developed in early Buddhism and the doctrine accepted by Śāntideva's own school of Madhyamaka Buddhism. Most significantly, early Buddhists claim that everything that exists is reducible, finally, to *dharmas*, momentary physical and mental events such as color, shape, sensations of pain, ideas, memories and so on. The wheels of the chariot, for instance, can themselves be analyzed into the color and shape of the wheel, but these *dharmas* cannot themselves be further analyzed. They are therefore real entities that exist independently of our concepts. The distinctive claim of Śāntideva's Madhyamaka school is that even *dharmas* are analyzable into their causal conditions, and therefore are only conceptual entities. Some interpretations of Śāntideva's argument for impartial benevolence interpret him as provisionally accepting the early Buddhist view that pain is a *dharma* and is therefore real (Siderits 2003, Harris 2011). In this essay, I will construe Śāntideva's argument in a way that does not depend on this claim. Therefore, we can ignore this difference in what follows.

For both Parfit and Buddhists, being a reductionist about persons means rejecting the existence of what Parfit calls a "further fact", a "separately existing entit[y]" that is the person (Parfit 1984, 210). Like an immortal soul or Cartesian thinking substance, the self (*ātman*) rejected by the Buddhists is an example of a further fact. Since according to Parfit, facts about psychological connectedness and continuity account for continuity of identity, and since connectedness and continuity are a matter of degree, Parfit claims that there are times when personal identity can be unproblematically indeterminate. Parfit refers to the question of continuity of identity in such cases as "empty." To explain what an empty question is, he offers the example of a club that ceases to meet, then several years later reorganizes with many of the same original members. Is the second club numerically identical, that is the very same club, as the first? Parfit calls this an empty question, meaning that although we know all the facts, these do not give us an answer (Parfit 1984, 213–214).

[3] It is worth noting that Parfit was aware of Buddhist ideas about selflessness when he wrote *Reasons and Persons*, and interpreted these ideas as expressing a reductionism about persons (p. 273). I think his interpretation is correct, although below I will also suggest a couple of ways in which Buddhist reductionism differs from that of Parfit. See also *Reasons and Persons*, Appendix J (pp. 502–503), in which Parfit cites several Buddhist passages about the nonexistence of an enduring self. My concern, however, is about the conceptual relationship between Buddhist views about the nonexistence of an enduring self and Parfit's reductionism about persons, as well as the moral consequences each deduces from their respective positions.

Likewise, there are times when the identity of persons is indeterminate. Parfit's most famous example of this is his branch line teletransportation case. Imagine that humans invent transportation devices that copy our body's patterns, including the brain. The machines then destroy the original body, but beam the physical patterns to other planets, where they are used to recreate qualitatively identical bodies that preserve psychological continuity. One day, when I am teletransported to Mars in this way, my old body is not destroyed. There are now two physically and psychologically qualitatively identical versions of myself.[4] In cases like these, Parfit claims that there is no determinate answer as to which, if either, of the persons is numerically identical to the one who entered the teletransportation machine. Once we reject the existence of a further fact, it is unproblematic in cases like this to claim that questions about continuity of identity are empty.

The example of the teletransporter is somewhat reminiscent of the way Buddhists treat rebirth. When a person dies, all physical continuity ceases, but the stream of causally connected mental moments are united to a new body in the mother's womb. Some psychological continuity, such as habitual patterns of behavior, continues, but memories from the previous life are forgotten. A traditional Buddhist answer to the question of whether the person who is reborn is the same as the one who has died is that they are neither the same nor different (Rhys Davids 63). Buddhists would claim that cases like these provide examples of empty questions. Since psychological continuity comes in degrees, and since much of that continuity has been lost, there is no longer a determinate answer as to whether the reborn person is identical to the one who died.[5]

11.2 Śāntideva's Argument for Impartial Benevolence[6]

Śāntideva's argument for impartial benevolence spans about sixteen verses in the eighth chapter of his BCA. Below, I quote the parts that let us understand his appeal to selflessness. The early verses establish a *prima facie* reason to remove suffering, no matter to whom it belongs:

> One should first earnestly meditate on the equality of oneself
> and others in this way: "All equally experience suffering and
> happiness, and I must protect them as I do myself." (BCA 8:90)[7]
>
> I should eliminate the suffering of others
> because it is suffering, just like my own

[4] See Parfit 1984 pps. 199–202 for his account of the teletransporter thought experiment.

[5] See Harris (forthcoming) for a development of these ideas about continuity of identity and rebirth in Buddhist texts.

[6] See Garfield, Jenkins and Priest 2016 for a helpful summary of the range of interpretive possibilities of this argument.

[7] Translations are by Wallace and Wallace in Śāntideva 1997. I indicate any places where I have modified the translation.

suffering. I should take care of others
because they are sentient beings, just as I
am a sentient being. (BCA 8: 94)[8]

When happiness is equally dear to others and
myself, then what is so special [*viśeṣa*] about me that I strive after
happiness for myself alone? (BCA 8:95, my insertion of brackets)

When fear and suffering are equally abhorrent
to others and myself, then what is so special [*viśeṣa*] about
me that I protect myself but not others? (BCA 8:96, my insertion of brackets)

Śāntideva begins the argument by asking us to contemplate the way suffering and happiness feel. Our immediate reaction, when we experience pain, is to want to remove it. These four verses then remind us that the suffering of others feels just as bad to them as ours does to us. Since the badness of the suffering we and others feel is alike, Śāntideva concludes that we have a prima facie reason to remove any suffering, no matter to whom it belongs. The same holds true for the promotion of happiness.

In verses 90 and 94, then, Śāntideva establishes both that others abhor suffering and desire happiness as much as we do, and claims that this provides at least some reason to remove their suffering and promote their well-being. The argument continues in verses 95 and 96 by asking what distinction (*viśeṣa*) justifies my prioritizing my own welfare? If two persons were in agony and we could rescue only one of them, we should be able to provide some justification for our choice as to which one to help, such as the fact that one caused his own suffering through unethical behavior. Śāntideva, likewise, is asking whether we can provide some kind of rational justification for prioritizing our own well-being over the well-being of others.

These verses, then, provide Śāntideva's initial argument that we ought to commit to impartially removing everyone's suffering. First, we have a reason to remove suffering, no matter to whom it belongs, because of the badness of that suffering. Second, if we are going to prioritize removing our own suffering, we should be able to provide some kind of relevant distinction about ourselves that justifies this prioritization. For the remainder of the argument, Śāntideva considers and dismisses as irrelevant several potential distinctions that might justify prioritizing my well-being. Verses 95 and 96 also rule out one possible justification. Since suffering and happiness are equally dear to myself and others, it isn't the case that there is anything particularly repugnant about my own suffering that warrants its prioritization.

Śāntideva's appeal to the truth of not-self comes in verses 101–103, when he considers what is probably the most powerful distinction the opponent can appeal to as rationally justifying special concern for his own well-being. The opponent can claim that he is more concerned about his future suffering because it belongs to him. In reply, Śāntideva invokes the Buddhist doctrine of the nonexistence of an enduring self:

The continuum of consciousness, like a series, and the
aggregation of constituents, like an army and such, are
unreal. Since one who experiences suffering does not exist,

[8] "Sentient being" here translates "*sattva*," which in Buddhist thought refers to anything possessing consciousness.

to whom will that suffering belong? (BCA 8:101)

All sufferings are without an owner without exception.
They should be warded off simply because they are suffering.
Why is any restriction made in this case? (BCA 8: 102, translation modified)[9]

Why should suffering be prevented? Because everyone
agrees. If it must be warded off, then all of it must be warded
off; and if not, then this goes for oneself as it does for
everyone else. (BCA 8: 103)

In the first verse, Śāntideva reminds his opponent that the Buddhist commitment to the unreality of partite objects entails that the self, which is composed of causally connected mental and physical moments, is unreal. As a result, suffering is not owned by anyone. The second verse goes on to claim that since all moments of suffering are ownerless, it is their intrinsically negative feel alone that should motivate us to remove them. The last verse considers the possible objection that if there are no selves, we have no reason to remove anyone's pain. Śāntideva replies that since no one claims that pain should not be removed, we need not consider this objection. Arguments must end somewhere, and the premise that we ought to remove suffering because it is bad is as deep as we can or need to go. He concludes that since there is no good reason to prioritize our own welfare, if we are to be rationally consistent we must commit to removing everyone's pain, or care about none of it, our own included. This last option has already been dismissed by his claim that everyone agrees pain should be removed. Thereby a commitment to impartial benevolence, which for Śāntideva would mean committing to the bodhisattva path as the way of most quickly liberating sentient beings, seems to follow.

It is important to be clear about how much work the Buddhist rejection of an enduring self is doing in this argument. Śāntideva is not arguing that because no self exists, we are somehow metaphysically entangled in a way that prevents special concern for our own future. Rather, he accepts that physically and psychologically causally related streams can be conceptually distinguished and identified as particular persons. Instead, his basic argument has two steps. First, we have independent reasons to remove suffering, no matter to whom it belongs. Śāntideva argues for this in verses 90, 94 and 95 by appealing to the similar nature of pain and happiness for all beings, and in 103 by appealing to the universal acceptance of the need to remove pain. Second, the best potential justification for giving one's own well-being priority is blocked. Since we are not enduring selves, we cannot appeal to this fact as rationally justifying self-interested action. A commitment to impartial benevolence seems to follows. We are committed to removing everyone's pain, since it is bad, but are blocked from prioritizing our own, since we have no good reason to justify this prioritization.

[9] … asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāṇyevāviśeṣataḥ| duḥkhatvādeva vāryāṇi niyamastatra kiṁkṛtaḥ (Śāntideva 2001, 190). Wallace and Wallace translate "aviśeṣataḥ" as an ablative of reason, "because they are not different." It is unclear, however, why Śāntideva would be claiming that suffering is ownerless because it is not different. Instead, I translate "aviśeṣataḥ" adverbially, as "without exception."

11.3 Parfit, Reductionism and Morality

Although Parfit does not incorporate the nonexistence of a further fact into an argument for impartial benevolence, he argues that several important normative conclusions follow from reductionist premises.[10] Reductionism about persons entails that persons have no metaphysical depth; what really exists are a plurality of causally related physical and mental events, which are conceptually unified under the concept of "person."[11] Therefore, any normative positions that depend upon a thickness to the separation between persons become less plausible. In particular, the objection that it is unfair to redistribute wealth and resources loses much of its force.[12] Since what really exists are psychological events, it matters less to whom these events belong. As Parfit says, for reductionists "[i]t becomes more plausible, when thinking morally, to focus less upon the person, the subject of experiences, and instead to focus more upon the experiences themselves(341).[13]

We saw above that Śāntideva claims that accepting selflessness entails that we have no good reason to give any special concern to our own future well-being. Parfit calls this position the extreme claim, and suggests that it is one of two plausible attitudes that a reductionist can rationally hold towards his future. The other, which gives some importance to psychological connectedness and continuity, he calls the moderate claim.

> Extreme Claim: If reductionism is true, we have no reason to be specially concerned about our own futures. (307)

> Moderate Claim: Relation R [psychological connection and continuity] alone gives us a reason for special concern. (311)

Although Śāntideva would accept the extreme claim, it alone does not commit one to impartial benevolence. One might, instead, claim that if persons do not exist, we have no reason to care about anyone's future, our own included.[14] As Śāntideva himself claims, I must strive to remove all suffering, or none of it. (BCA 8:103) If we combine the extreme claim with a baseline commitment to removing everyone's suffering, however, impartial benevolence seems to follow.[15]

Parfit himself is neutral as to whether we should accept the extreme or the moderate claims (312). But even accepting the moderate claim would bring the

[10] Goodman 2009 argues that Śāntideva anticipates Parfit in this respect. See especially Goodman's fifth chapter (2009).

[11] This way of phrasing Parfit's reductionism about persons as unification of more basic elements under a concept is influenced by Korsgaard 1989, 103–104.

[12] See *Reasons and Persons* sections 111–117 for Parfit's full development of this view.

[13] See Goodman 2016 for an application of this point to Śāntideva.

[14] See Harris 2011 for a development of this possibility.

[15] One would, of course, have to rule out the possibility that we might have good reasons to prioritize the well-being of certain others, such as our friends, before impartial benevolence would be established. But the non-existence of any deep metaphysical fact of identity could be appealed to again in respect to these persons.

reductionist closer to impartial benevolence. The psychological continuity and connectedness to which relation R refers comes in degrees. I am less psychologically connected to myself ten years from now than I am ten weeks from now. If I accept the moderate claim, then I should vary the degree of my special concern depending on the strength of these psychological connections. This means that the reductionist will have far less special concern for his life overall; he will treat his distant future self more like another person. Special concern for his own future will decrease the further out that future is.[16]

One way to respond to Parfit's and Śāntideva's arguments is to reject reductionism about persons and personal identity. Many of the Buddhists' traditional opponents, including the philosophical school of Nyāya, took this approach. An alternative response, that I am interested in here, is to accept (at least provisionally) Parfit's reductionism, but reject his claims about its moral implications. Below, I examine one such argument, given by Susan Wolf in her defense of the importance of persons. Wolf's argument applies to Śāntideva as well, and before turning to it, I illustrate what I take to be her central point by reference to the Buddhist example of the chariot.

Remember that according to Buddhists, the conventional designation (*prajñapti*) "chariot" is a name used to group together a discrete collection of elements. Moreover, this unification under a concept has both a spatial and a temporal element. I could have used the name "chariot" to refer to an alternate spatial arrangement of the parts, for instance with the chariot wheels on top of the carriage. Instead, I restrict its use to the usual arrangement since it provides a useful function—quick speed. Likewise, the name "chariot" could have been used to refer to any temporal duration of the assembled chariot parts. We could have marked out ten second temporal slices of the chariot arrangement with the term, for instance. But instead we adopt the usual practice since it fits better into our conventions of ownership and possession.

What this means is that, although not dictated by any metaphysically unified object, our practices of spatially and temporally grouping chariot parts together are far from arbitrary. Although not constrained by metaphysical facts, our naming practices are constrained by practical facts. Thinking of this spatio-temporal plurality of chariot parts together lets us access the function of speed and fit these useful collections smoothly into our lives. Even though it is a conceptual construction, the chariot configuration has a kind of thickness, grounded in its being embedded within our practices and needs. So even if we are reductionists about chariots, we should still believe that chariots—as spatially and temporally extended causally configured collections of discrete parts-- are important.

The heart of Susan Wolf's critique of Parfit comes when she makes a similar claim about the importance of persons. Here is how she makes this point:

> [P]ersons live, or have the potential to live, richer lives than other beings. Persons are capable of aspiring to and achieving a diversity of Ideals, of developing physical and intellectual skills, of creating artistic

[16] See Parfit 1984, 312–314.

> masterpieces and scientific theories. Perhaps more important, persons. are capable of developing deep and rewarding interpersonal relationships of exhibiting and appreciating moral virtue, and of understanding and committing themselves to moral laws. (Wolf 1986, 708–9)

As Wolf points out, being a reductionist about persons does not settle the question of which arrangement of basic person parts should be important to us. We could care about temporal slices of person configurations, or, as in Parfit's Moderate claim, we could care about relation R, psychological connectedness and continuity. With Wolf, we can refer to a strongly psychologically connected being as an R-related being (Wolf, 710). A third possibility, defended by Wolf, is that even after becoming reductionists, persons as traditionally understood should continue to be our objects of concern. Wolf in the argument above provides good reasons for caring about temporally extended configurations of person constituents. Ten second persons slices cannot develop nurturing relationships, commit to long term projects and so on. Moreover, the desirability of ordinary person-formations over ten second persons has nothing to do with the truth of reductionism. Switching concern from persons to ten second person slices would not be a metaphysical mistake, but a practical one.

Unlike ten second person slices, R-related beings are capable of developing relationships, nurturing projects etc. But Wolf points out that there is a depth of value to our ordinary person conventions that would be lacking if we switched to caring about R-related beings. If we did this, then our concern for our own and other people's future would be contingent on their maintaining a strong level of psychological connectedness. One unwanted consequences of this is that parents of young children would have no great concern for the adult persons those children would become. Likewise, my commitment to my spouse and friends would be contingent on their retaining psychological connectedness with their present selves. But part of the richness of lifelong commitments, like marriage and parenthood, depends on the way its members care about each other throughout massive periods of psychological growth (Wolf 710–12).

A central point of Wolf's response to Parfit is that there is an integrity and coherence that human lives can achieve that goes beyond mere psychological continuity, and that this does not depend on metaphysical unity.[17] My commitments may outlast the reasons for which I take them on; I may marry for passion, but remain faithful out of deep and lasting love. I might start a support group to deal with my own trauma, but remain involved to nurture others. Such continuity of commitment is aided by thinking of long stretches of my life as one unified narrative in which growth, and even disintegration are seen as the transformation of a single person.

What Wolf's argument establishes, contra Parfit, is that our convention of treating persons as enduring (more or less) from the birth until the death of the body has a pragmatic value that cannot be matched by temporally shortened objects of concern. The unification of a human life has more value for us than that of R-related beings, 10 second person formations and so on. Persons matter, not for metaphysical

[17] My comments here are also influenced by Korsgaard 1989.

but for practical reasons.[18] Wolf's argument also suggests that we should reject the moral implications of reductionism suggested by Parfit.[19] For instance, our strong practical reasons for thinking of human lives as discrete unities entail concerns about the fairness of redistribution arising from the separateness of persons will have similar force for a reductionist as for one who accepts the existence of a further fact.

Wolf's remarks may also be adapted into an argument against what Parfit calls the 'Extreme Claim'. The Extreme Claim says that without the existence of a metaphysically real further fact, we have no good reason for special concern about our future well-being. Wolf can reply that the pragmatic importance of personal identity can rationally ground such concern. If continuity of identity based upon a metaphysical fact can justify special concern, then why not continuity of identity based upon practical considerations? A reductionist has good reason to view her future self's goals, aspirations, commitments and well-being as belonging to herself. These relationships I currently participate in will stretch out into my future. The valuable projects I have begun are ones that my future self can complete. Others have valuable relationships and projects of their own, but these projects are not mine. I have good reasons to identify with the entirety of my life that do not depend upon its metaphysical unity.

Of course, one can deny that the pragmatic unity of a life rationally justifies special concern for our future self. One might claim with Śāntideva that since all persons equally experience happiness and suffering, we have no reason to prioritize the well-being of our pragmatically unified self. But a parallel argument can be made against the non-reductionist. For since all persons equally experience happiness and suffering, what difference does it make that I am metaphysically identical to my future self?[20] What this suggests is that the truth of reductionism has little to do with whether we ought to commit to impartial benevolence. If metaphysical unity justi-

[18] In a reply to Wolf's article, Parfit agrees that we have practical reasons to care about persons, but claims such concern remains irrational since it is arises from the metaphysically mistaken belief in a further fact (Parfit 1986, 832–833). Most Buddhists, however, accept that persons do exist in the conventional sense, as conceptually unified synchronic and diachronic aggregations of mental and physical events, and so this critique would not apply to them. I do not think it applies to Wolf either, since I take her point to be that we have good practical reasons for extending our concern beyond the boundaries of strong psychological continuity stressed by Parfit. To put this in Buddhist terms, I have practical reasons to conceptually unify the aggregates (*skandhas*) from birth to death, regardless of partial psychological discontinuity within this time period. Wolf's claim is that I choose this stretch of mental and physical activity to care about because of the pragmatic value of doing so. This is not, however, irrational, in the sense of being a metaphysical mistake, since these mental and physical events do exist. Still, metaphysics may have nothing to do with my concern for persons, in the sense that the existence or nonexistence of a unified enduring further fact is irrelevant to why I care about them. Thanks to Oren Hanner for suggesting I engage with Parfit's reply.

[19] Wolf does not explicitly draw this conclusion, although Korsgaard 1989, whose argument partially overlaps with Wolf, does. See Goodman 2009, chapter eleven for a treatment of Korsgaard's argument in relation to Buddhism.

[20] See Martin 2009 for a development of this challenge.

fies special concern for my future, then so should pragmatic unity. The existence or absence of a further fact does little to settle the issue.

11.4 Siderits' Interpretation of Śāntideva's Argument

In my interpretation, Śāntideva's argument has two parts. First, the badness of pain provides good impersonal reasons to remove it, regardless to whom it belongs. Second, we have no good justification for prioritizing our own well-being. Since everyone's pain feels equally bad, the badness of my pain alone does not provide the needed justification. If the identity between my future and present self was a metaphysically deep fact, this might justify special concern. Because no such self exists, however, the fact of identity has no metaphysical depth.

Wolf shows what is wrong with Śāntideva's argument, when it is understood in this way. Persons do not have metaphysical depth, but they have pragmatic depth. I have good reasons to be concerned about persons, because there is a richness to living that would be lost if we took shorter identity configurations as our objects of concern. Special concern for my own future can be justified by the fact that my temporally extended identity is part of an unfolding set of developing relationships and projects. The fact that my current and future self are part of the same life is no less significant if I accept it on practical rather than metaphysical grounds.

Mark Siderits provides a stronger interpretation of Śāntideva's argument which, if successful, would answer Wolf's objection. As in my interpretation above, Siderits claims that Śāntideva argues that the impersonal badness of pain provides an impersonal reason to remove it. Like Wolf, Siderits next goes on to stress that we adopt the convention of treating causally related mental and physical moments as temporally extended persons for practical purposes. Unlike Wolf, however, Siderits does not claim this is because it allows us to enjoy particularly rich human forms of experience. Rather, we adopt the person convention because it helps us effectively lessen pain. Here is how Siderits puts the core of his argument:

> We commonly think that our reason to floss has to do with the fact that that future person will be me, that I am preventing my own future pain. The enlightened person knows that is false. It so happens that each of us is quite commonly in a position to prevent future pain in one particular causal series. That is why it was useful that we learn to think of that causal series as a person, me. That is why it was useful that we learn to identify with and appropriate future states in that causal series. Because that turns out to be a very efficient way of preventing a great deal of future pain. But that means that my reason to prevent what I think of as my future pain does not derive from the fact that it is mine; it stems from the fact that it is pain, which is bad, and the fact that I am usually better situated than others to prevent it. Adopting the personhood theory is a maximizing strategy. (Siderits 2007, 288–89)

Once we accept that the person convention is adopted merely to eliminate pain, Siderits claims, this entails a commitment to impartial benevolence. Since we adopt the personhood convention only to minimize impersonal pain, we should depart from this convention whenever doing so would result in a net loss of pain. If remov-

ing impersonal moments of pain was the only justification for adopting the person convention, then Siderits' argument would be effective. Moments of pain, taken in isolation, are qualitatively identical feelings of badness. Taken in isolation, why would the location of momentary pain have any importance?

As Wolf argues, however, our reasons to care about persons seem to go beyond the removal of pain. Considering my current and future self as being the same person helps me floss effectively, but it also helps me develop my musical talent and nurture lifelong relationships. There is a richness to human experience that cannot be achieved without treating persons as temporally extended beings. Moreover, my current and future self are involved in this same set of projects and relationships. This seems to provide justification for giving special concern to the well-being of the temporally extended person of whom my present self is a part. Contra Siderits, therefore, we have reasons for caring about persons other than the impersonal maximization of pain, based upon which it would seem to be rational to prioritize our own well-being.

11.5 Suffering and Impermanence in Chapter 8 of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

Together with impermanence (*anitya*) and unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*), the Buddhist doctrine of not-self (*anātman*), appealed to by Śāntideva in his argument, is one of the three marks (*trilakṣaṇa*) characterizing almost everything that exists.[21] An interesting feature of BCA chapter 8 is that many of the ninety verses preceding Śāntideva's argument focus on one or both of the other two marks. Buddhists texts claim that there is a close relationship between these three universal characteristics. In the early Pali canon, for instance, it is often claimed that the fact that objects and experiences are impermanent and unsatisfactory entails that we should not take them to belong to, or be part of an enduring entity (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 232: M i 139.) Likewise, one of the deeper forms of unsatisfactoriness, the suffering of change (*viparinama duḥkha*) refers to the fact that pleasant sensations are impermanent, and will cause pain when they end.[22]

One of the themes repeatedly emphasized early in BCA chapter 8 is the inability of impermanent relationships to provide lasting satisfaction:

> For what impermanent person, who will not see his loved ones again in thousands of births, is it appropriate to be attached to impermanent beings? (BCA 8:5)
>
> Failing to see them, one does not find joy nor does one abide in meditative concentration. Even upon seeing them, one does not become satisfied but is tormented by strong desire, just as before. (BCA 8:6)

[21] Nirvana is held to be selfless, but is not impermanent or unsatisfactory.

[22] See for instance Vasubandhu 905.

Both verses illustrate a facet of the connection between impermanence and dissatisfaction. In the first verse, Śāntideva draws our attention to the inevitable pain of impermanent relationships. The second verse emphasizes that even when I am with those I love, as long as my mind is still afflicted with craving, my longing will simply increase.

Other parts of the text emphasize how ordinary pursuits, such as wealth and honor, also bring no lasting satisfaction. Once more, the unsatisfying nature of samsaric pursuits is linked to impermanence in the form of death:

> A mortal who thinks, "I am rich and respected, and many like me," experiences fear of approaching death. (BCA 8:17)

> Many have become wealthy and many have become famous, but no one knows where they have gone with their wealth and fame. (BCA 8:20)

Perhaps the most striking set of verses in chapter eight provide an extended meditation in which Śāntideva imagines visiting a charnel ground and contemplating the rotting corpses strewn about. He begins this section by reminding himself that this will also be his fate:

> When shall I go to the local charnel grounds and compare my own body, which has the nature of decay, with other corpses? (BCA 8:30)

> For this body of mine will also become so putrid that even the jackals will not come near it because of its stench. (BCA 8:31)

> A person is born alone and also dies alone. No one else has a share in one's agony. What is the use of loved ones who create hindrances? (BCA 8;33)

His attention soon turns from his own radical impermanence to the inevitable destruction of those whom he loves.

> If the co-emergent pieces of bones of this single body will fall apart, how much more so another person whom one holds dear? (BCA 8:32)

In some of these verses, Śāntideva mocks his reader with an unnerving grim humor about how we hide the fact of death from ourselves.

> Either you have seen that bashfully lowered face before as being lifted up with effort, or you have not seen it as it was covered by a veil. (BCA 8:44)

> Now, that face is revealed by vultures as if they are unable to bear your anxiousness. Look at it! Why are you fleeing away now? (BCA 8:45)

Since we longed to see our lover's face when she hid it with a veil, Śāntideva urges, we should be ecstatic now that even the bones are revealed by the vultures. Śāntideva goes on to generalize these remarks to everyone we know:

> You fear a skeleton that has been seen like this, even though it does not move. Why do you not fear it when it moves as if

> set in motion by some ghost? (BCA 8:48)
>
> Seeing a few corpses in a charnel ground, you are repelled,
> yet you delight in a village which is a charnel ground
> crowded with moving corpses. (BCA 8:70)

All human goals, relationships and achievements are radically vulnerable to gradual decay or immediate destruction. The threat and actuality of death brings with it multilayered physical and emotional suffering. Moreover, even while we possess or enjoy these objects and experiences of supposed value, Śāntideva claims that the insatiable nature of desire, as well as our repressed fear of death makes any deep enjoyment impossible. Consider again the central point made by Susan Wolf in her defense of the importance of persons:

> [P]ersons live, or have the potential to live, richer lives than other beings. Persons are capable of aspiring to and achieving a diversity of Ideals, of developing physical and intellectual skills, of creating artistic masterpieces and scientific theories. Perhaps more important, persons are capable of developing deep and rewarding interpersonal relationships, of exhibiting and appreciating moral virtue, and of understanding and committing themselves to moral laws.

But these early sections of BCA chapter eight suggest the Buddhist response to Wolf's critique. Persons in samsara are not capable of living rich lives, because our deluded cognitive systems that superimpose permanence and satisfactoriness on a radically unstable and unsatisfying universe cannot achieve any lasting satisfaction. The development of ordinary physical and intellectual skills, as well as aesthetic achievement, is only a brief distraction from the coming of death.[23] Relationships, except those supporting a commitment to liberation, are snares that set the stage for deep emotional anguish. Regarding moral commitments, Śāntideva can respond that the commitment to ending impersonal pain is the only one we need commit ourselves to, and this can be motivated by the intrinsic badness of pain itself.

11.6 Conclusion

One reason to read Parfit and Śāntideva alongside each other is that drawing upon the sophisticated contemporary responses to Parfit's claims can also help us assess the reasonableness of Śāntideva's argument. As Susan Wolf forcefully argues, the lack of metaphysical unity alone does not settle the question of the value of persons. If we accept, with Wolf, that persons matter because of the way they let us access the richness of human experience, then it is a small step to say that I have reasonable

[23] Śāntideva does place great value on developing a subset of intellectual knowledge that is relevant to one's development on the Buddhist path. This is shown most clearly by his explanation and defense of Buddhist philosophical positions about selflessness and emptiness in the ninth chapter of the BCA. See Keown 2001 for an exploration of the moral significance of certain kinds of intellectual development in the Buddhist tradition. See Harris 2014 for a study of Buddhist positions on the pervasion of ordinary experience by suffering (*duḥkha*).

grounds to prioritize the well-being of my future self with whose projects and relationships I am already deeply entwined.

Incorporating the meditations on impermanence and suffering from the first half of BCA chapter eight into Śāntideva's argument blocks Wolf's critique. If we accept, with the Buddhist, that human lives cycle through various levels of emotional and physical distress, then it will no longer seem plausible that the person convention is justified by the richness of human experience. Nevertheless, as Siderits points out, the human convention does have value in removing impersonal pain. Therefore, if we accept the Buddhist understanding of impermanence and suffering, then Śāntideva's argument becomes more plausible. The nonexistence of any deep metaphysical unity between my current and future self blocks the egoist's most obvious justification for special concern for her future. The pragmatic response developed out of Wolf's critique is blocked by the unsatisfactory nature of human lives. The remaining justification for adopting the person convention is to remove impersonally bad pain. But if this is our reason for adopting this convention, then as Siderits argues, we should depart from it whenever doing so will remove pain more effectively. It no longer matters to whom pain belongs, but only how successfully we remove it.

What this suggests, on the one hand, is that the Buddhist conception of ordinary experience being saturated by various forms of suffering does a good deal of philosophical work, even when it is not explicitly invoked in the form of an argument. Just as importantly, I hope to have helped demonstrate the value of looking at the context and background in which analytically framed arguments appear. Above, I have argued that it matters that Śāntideva's argument takes place in a chapter largely devoted to exploring the dissatisfactions of samsaric life. By resisting the philosophical urge to abstract, and by placing Śāntideva's argument back into the charnel ground, I hope to have helped show how it functions, not merely as an isolated fragment of reasoning, but as a deeply embedded part of an interconnected web of beliefs, assumptions and arguments designed to lead the practitioner from concern for himself alone to concern for everyone.

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