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WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO BE SELFLESS? HĪNAYĀNIST VERSIONS, MAHĀYĀNIST VERSIONS AND DEREK PARFIT

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What would it be like to be selfless?[1] The term «selfless» in English usually refers to actions where one minimizes or even completely forgets one's own interests, i.e., one's own «selfish» interests. This is in fact not the sense of the word «selflessness» (=*nairātmya*) that concerns me primarily here, although being selfless in this sense is also a major virtue for the Buddhists. With the possible exception of some branches of the Vātsīputrīya school, Buddhists have all, in one way or another, considered it to be a fundamental principle of their religion that people are somehow without selves, i.e., they somehow ultimately lack an I, a real entity to which their mental and physical states can be ascribed. To be more precise, we think we have a self, are deeply attached to the idea of having a self, seek to protect it and so on and so forth, but actually we are wrong, and being wrong on that score our effort at self-preservation, self-aggrandizement, and indeed most of our emotional life, is actually very misguided, a painful labouring under an illusion. In other words – and this is the sense in which I will be using the term – we are speaking about actually not having a self, rather than just about the moral ideal of acting selflessly. Indeed, the moral ideal of selflessness, although obviously very important for a Buddhist, is subordinate to the other more metaphysical sense: what makes it possible and rational for someone to act completely selflessly is that he fully realizes that he in fact has no self.[2] This much is basic Buddhism, be it of the Great Vehicle (*mahāyāna*), i.e., the Buddhism

1 The present article is based on the Numata lecture which I gave at the University of Calgary in October 1995 entitled "What might it be like to be selfless?". I have profited significantly from M. Kapstein's 1986 review article on Steven Collins' *Selfless Persons* and Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, although my treatment of Parfit's ideas is rather different from that of Kapstein. It will also be apparent that I have a rather different take on Vasubandhu's position on *prajñapti* and hence «Reductionism» from that of Duerlinger (1993).

2 Some readers will note that in what follows I have dispensed with currently used constructions like «he / she» , «he (she)» and «he or she». I take it that this will be seen for what it is, a linguistic economy and no more.

of India, Tibet and the Far East, or of the so-called «Small Vehicle», the Hīnayāna, which we find in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. It is, as Buddhist themselves recognize, an idea which is quite disturbing the more one wrestles with it.[3]

Some would attenuate the impact of the doctrine of selflessness by arguing that the texts at most advocate a qualified version along the line of "There is no self which has properties X, Y and Z" ; they would then argue that while the *false* self cannot exist, the *true* self can. And often this true self is taken as being fundamentally identical with the Upaniṣadic *ātman*. The varieties of qualified denials as maintained by K. Bhattacharya, J. Pérez-Remón, and in one variant or another by earlier writers on Buddhism, like Mrs. C. Rhys Davids and Christmas Humphries, are so diametrically opposite to the Abhidharma-based later traditions' understanding of selflessness that it becomes virtually impossible to treat the two rival types of positions adequately in one and the same paper.[4] The closest thing which we find in the *Abhidharmakośa*, for example, to qualified selflessness is the position of the Vātsīputrīyas, who seem to have made a difference between the permanent *ātman* of Hindu philosophy (which they rejected) and an ineffable, but existent «person» (*pudgala*), which they endorsed.[5] Other schools do not make any such distinction between *ātman*

3 Āryadeva's *Catuḥśataka*, XII, 283: *trāso nārabhyate 'dṛṣṭe dṛṣṭe 'paiti sa sarvaśaḥ / niyamenaiva kiṃcijjñe tena trāso vidhīyate* // "When one has not seen it, fear does not arise, [and] when one has seen it, the [fear] completely vanishes. So therefore, certainly, it is when one understands [just] a little bit that fear will occur." See Tillemans (1990) p. 100 and 122-123 for Dharmapāla's and Candrakīrti's commentaries on k. 283.

4 See Bhattacharya (1973), Pérez-Remón (1980). Cf. the critique in Collins (1982) p. 7ff. of these positions and those of Mrs. Rhys-Davids, R. Zaehner and C. Humphries, classified under the rubric "those who refuse to believe that the «real» doctrine taught by the Buddha is what the canonical teaching of *anattā* appears to be. (Collins, p. 7)" . The idea of qualified and unqualified denials is developed in Oetke (1988), p. 61 et seq., with however some significantly different conclusions from my own.

5 On the basic thesis of the Sammatīya branch of the Vātsīputrīya schools, see Bareau (1955) p. 123: "La personne (*puggala* [= *pudgala*]) est perçue (*upalabbhati*) comme une réalité évidente (*sacchikaṭṭhaparamaṭṭhena*). La personne (*pudgala*) n'est pas vraiment identique aux agrégats (*skandha*). Elle n'est pas dans les agrégats. Elle n'existe pas non plus hors des agrégats." See also L. de la Vallée Poussin's *Notes préliminaires* to his translation of *Abhidharmakośa*, chapter IX.

and *pudgala*, but even in the case of the Vātsīputrīyas, who were regarded as a school which came perilously close to holding non-Buddhist positions, there seems to have been no question of explicitly accepting an Upaniṣadic *ātman*. Whatever the position of early Buddhism (or for that matter, «original pre-canonical Buddhism») may have been, let me take it as at least a minimal given that there is a long-standing and richly developed traditional interpretation of unqualified denials of self in Buddhism, i.e., denials where there is nothing else – neither a Hindu *ātman*, nor a personal identity (*pudgala*), nor in fact any kind of a real «I» – which is supposed to remain when we understand our true mode of being. This unqualified denial is the basic position on selflessness that we find in Abhidharmic texts such as, for example, the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu, a position which continues throughout later Indian Buddhism and, as we shall see, Tibetan Buddhism too, as the standard view on what Hīnayānist selflessness is about – what is more, I think we can say, without diminishing results of investigations of early Buddhism, that it is also a natural reading of many important passages in the Pāli canon. Finally, it is a view which we have had for many years now, from the work of early researchers such as T. Stcherbatsky, T.W. Rhys Davids and Louis de la Vallée Poussin et al., up to and including that of Steven Collins in his 1982 study, *Selfless Persons*. Indeed, it is what many would consider fundamental Buddhist thought.

One point which needs to be stressed from the outset. When we ask "What would it be like?", we are not dealing only with the theoretical question of whether people do or do not lack a self in some sense, and what would be the absurdities or philosophical strong points of such and such a position described in Buddhist texts. We will also in fact be speculating on what kind of *Lebenswelt* the selfless person, who in some way experientially knows he is selfless, could possibly have. Readers will perhaps recognize in this version of the question "What would it be like?" an allusion to Thomas Nagel's idea that subjectivity and consciousness imply that there must always be «something» or some way in which it is like to be a particular kind of sentient being, whether we're speaking about humans or about animals radically different in sensory makeup from humans.[6] The allusion is deliberate. I think it is also germane to our investigation that we

6 See Thomas Nagel's article "What is it like to be a bat?", reprinted in Nagel (1979). See also Nagel (1986), p. 15-17.

imagine as best as possible the subjective states of such selfless people, people who would be radically different from us in that they, contrary to us, believe very strongly that they have no self, or even experience the world in an essentially impersonal way where selves have no place.

A. Hīnayānist and Mahāyānist theories summarized

I begin with a passage from a 15th century Tibetan writer, Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429-1489), which gives a concise, insightful description of the essential differences between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna on the understanding of selflessness. Go rams pa writes in his *lTa ba'i shan 'byed* (Critique of the views):

> "The point is thus as follows: With the exception of some Śrāvakas [of the Vātsīputrīya school] who accept a self which is indescribable, our realist [i.e., Hīnayāna] coreligionists and the [Mahāyānist] Madhyamakas are alike in holding that the self does not withstand logical analysis and that [the self] is a [linguistic and conceptual] designation and no more (*btags pa tsam* = *prajñaptimātra*). However, for the Madhyamaka tradition [this merely] designated self can be the agent of karma and the experiencer of [karmic] retribution, but for the realists this is impossible. Thus, the former [i.e., the Madhyamakas] hold that the self is the agent of karma and the experiencer of retribution, but the latter [i.e., the realists] hold that the mere selfless aggregates (*bdag med pa'i phung po tsam*) are the [agent and experiencer]. In the Madhyamaka tradition, the mere aggregates cannot be the agent of karma and the experiencer of karmic retribution. This is because when we examine them with logic, then both the self and the aggregates are the same in not being [agent nor experiencer], but conventionally the self appears to be the [agent and experiencer], while the aggregates do not appear to be the [agent and experiencer]. It seems that this point dawns on few [people]."[7]

7 Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge *lTa ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer*, vol. 13 of *Sa skya pa'i bka' 'bum*, f. 23b2-5: *des na brjod du med pa'i bdag khas len pa'i nyan thos 'ga' zhig ma gtogs pa'i rang sde dngos por smra ba rnams dang / dbu ma pa rnams bdag rigs pas dpyad bzod du ma grub cing / btags pa tsam zhig khas len par 'dra yang / dbu ma pa'i lugs la / btags pa tsam la las byed pa po dang rnam smin myong ba po rung zhing / dngos smra ba la de mi rung bas / snga mas bdag las byed pa po dang / rnam smin myong ba por 'dod cing / phyi mas bdag med pa'i phung po tsam zhig der 'dod pa ni gnad kyi don no // dbu ma pa'i lugs la / phung po las byed pa po dang rnam smin myong ba por mi rung ste / rigs pas dpyad pa'i tshe bdag phung gnyis ka yang der ma grub par mtshungs shing / tha snyad du bdag der snang gi phung po der mi snang ba'i phyir ro // gnad 'di blo yul du shar ba nyung bar snang ngo //.*

On the Hīnayānist Abhidharmic version, then, there is really no self, but there are just collections (*samudāya*) or aggregates (*skandha*) of elements (*dharma*), these being, broadly speaking, ideas, representations, images, feelings, impressions, sense data, etc. These elements are momentary, in constant flux, but nonetheless absolutely and undeniably real, real in a way in which the self is not: for the typical Hīnayānist (who is thus termed by other Indian and Tibetan Buddhists a «realist» because he believes in real elements) the self reduces to the aggregates. The Mahāyānist, and especially the Madhyamaka or Middle Way philosopher, by contrast, makes no such asymmetry between self on the one hand and the elements on the other. Both are conventional, worldly, truths, and both are equally unreal if we analyze them. In other words, the self is not reducible to, or less fundamental than, the elements, a point which is expressed in an oft-cited principle of Madhyamaka schools that there are *no* differences to be made at all between the identitylessness/selflessness of persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*) and the identitylessness/selflessness of the elements (*dharma-nairātmya*).

The basic ideas in Go rams pa's formulation of the Hīnayāna versus Mahāyāna contrast turn on the recurring Indian ontological distinction between things which are said to be merely «designated existences» (*prajñaptisat*) and those which are substantial (*dravyasat*). As brought out in the passage from the *lTa ba'i shan 'byed*, Hīnayānist and Mahāyānist are similar in considering the self to be *prajñaptisat* – where they radically differ is on the necessity for there to be anything, like the elements, which is *dravyasat*.[8]

8 Cf. Vasubandhu's formulation in his long debate with the Vātsīputrīya (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* IX 463, 15-16 in ed. of P. Pradhān): *ato yathā rūpādīny eva kṣīram udakaṃ vā prajñapyate samastāny evaṃ skandhāḥ pudgala iti siddham* "Thus it is shown that just as it is only form and the like put together which we designate as milk or water, so too it is the aggregates which are the person." Cf. Louis de la Vallée Poussin's less literal translation on p. 239, tome V, of his *Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*: "La conclusion s'impose – on désigne métaphoriquement par «*Pudgala*» un complexe d'éléments, de même que la désignation «lait» s'entend d'une réunion de couleur, d'odeur, etc. Simples nominaux sans réalité." Yaśomitra's Sphutārthā comments (1196, 23-24): *yathā rūpādīny eva samastāni samuditāni kṣiram iti udakam iti vā prajñapyante tathā skandhā eva samastāḥ pudgala iti prajñapyanta iti siddham.*

The question is how we are to understand the term «designation» (*prajñapti*) here. Does the Hīnayānist mean that (a) the person *is* just the elements, and that the word «person», contrary to what one might think, actually designates the elements, or rather (b), that the term «person» is just in fact a figure of speech, does not actually designate a person at all, as what there really is can never be anything but the *impersonal* elements like colour, shape, feelings, etc.?[9] I think it is fairly clear that in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* what is at stake is more likely (b), and this understanding would also seem to be borne out by the quotation from Go rams pa who speaks about there being only the «mere selfless aggregates» (*bdag med pa'i phung po tsam*). Just as we would say that «bogeyman» or «ghost» do not refer to some supernatural entities, but, *when it comes down to things*, there is nothing but the wind whistling in the trees or the play of light effects, so too with the self: the word refers to nothing real, there are only aggregates. I take it that this is the point behind selves being *prajñaptimātra* («designations and no more»).[10]

What are we to make of all this? First of all, I think that the Hīnayānist Abhidharma-inspired position which Go rams pa describes cannot but make us think of David Hume who, when he introspectively searched for a personal entity, saw only fleeting impressions and ideas in perpetual

9 Duerlinger (1993), p. 88-89, fails to adequately make this distinction and his account of «Reductionism» suffers.

10 The point is admittedly somewhat tricky, because Buddhists generally do speak of words, even words for nonexistent things, as having an *abhidheya* or *vācya*, a significatum, something expressed. From our point of view, we might want to consider this as more like a restatement of the ordinary fact that we do speak about fictional things/persons, such as unicorns, Hamlet and Ophelia, and use the words «Hamlet», etc. to do so - we would probably not want to assert that «Hamlet» actually refers to anything, such as a quasi-entity Hamlet. That said, it is, alas, not clear whether the Buddhists would agree with us or not, and whether they are speaking about not really referring to selves or about referring to unreal selves. Cf. Williams (1980), p. 5: "The word «I» has a non-ultimate referent and is not used in ultimate contexts." Warder (1971), however, takes it that «self» lacks a referent. In Tillemans (1992) I argued for the use of substitutional quantification as a way to understand contexts dealing with *prajñapti* as being like fictional language and not involving reference to entities.

flux.[11] Stcherbatsky had insisted upon this similarity, citing the Pāli canon's *Saṃyutta* iii, 46 as being "even in terms very nearly approaching Hume's statment":

> "All Brahmanas or śramanas who attentively consider the soul, which so variously has been described to them, find either the five groups of phenomena (physical, feelings, ideas, volitions, or pure sensation) or one of them."[12]

I think he was right to stress similarity with Hume. Much of the intuitive attraction of the Hīnayānist theory is no doubt what also attracted Hume to his position, i.e., the seemingly empirical evidence: one «looks» for the self and comes up with only elements, or fleeting impressions and ideas which one then takes to be all there really is. For the Mahāyānist, this pseudo-evidence is a type of trap, leading one to reify elements which are no more real than the self. But if this is a trap, it is undeniable that *prima facie* it is seductive.

Stcherbatsky was certainly not the only one to notice this similarity with Hume. The Humean position, and variants upon it, is what in Western thought comes to be known as the «no-ownership» or «reductionist» position. Something like it has recently been defended by the Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit, who, in his book *Reasons and Persons*, calls his position «Reductionism» and, significantly enough, claims that it is not only the true view of things, but that it is also what the Buddha taught. Indeed he even adds a little appendix with some well-known Buddhist quotes to substantiate his statement: "Buddha would have agreed."[13]

11 *Treatise*, p. 251-252: "There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. ... Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain'd. ... But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."

12 Stcherbatsky (1922/1994), p. 27, n. 3. The translation is also that of Stcherbatsky.

13 Parfit (1984/1991), p. 273.

B. Parfit's version of selflessness

Parfit makes it clear that he invoked the Buddha in order to counter partially the objection that "even if the Reductionist view is true, it is psychologically impossible for us to believe this."[14] The objection came from Thomas Nagel, and here is how Parfit concluded:

> "Nagel once claimed that it is psychologically impossible to believe the Reductionist View. Buddha claimed that, though this is very hard, it is possible. I find Buddha's claim to be true. After reviewing my arguments, I find that, at the reflective or intellectual level, though it is very hard to believe the Reductionist View, this is possible. My remaining doubts or fears seem to me irrational. Since I can believe this view, I assume that others can do so too. We can believe the truth about ourselves."[15]

Let us look at some of the details and potential problems of Parfit's Buddhist theory of selflessness. Parfit's essential principle is that the self exists as an entity but that it *also* reduces to components.

> "On the Reductionist View that I defend, persons exist. And a person is distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences. But persons are not separately existing entities."[16]

He maintains the compatibility between two seemingly opposed theses, viz. that a person's existence «consists» (the word is Parfit's) in the existence of brain, body and a series of psycho-physical events, and that there is a person who is *distinct* (the italics are those of Parfit) from a brain, body and the series of psycho-physical events. Let me quote Parfit in full:

> "While a state must be a state *of* some entity, this is not true of an event. Given this extended use of the word «event», all Reductionists would accept
> (3) A person's existence just consists in the existence of a brain and body , and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events.
> Some Reductionists claim
> (4) A person *just* is a particular brain and body, and such a series of interrelated events.
> Other Reductionists claim

14 Ibid. p. 274.

15 Ibid. p. 280.

16 Ibid. p. 275.

> (5) A person is an entity that is *distinct* from a brain and body, and such a series of events.
> On this version of the Reductionist View, a person is not merely a composite object, with these various components. A person is an entity that *has* particular thoughts, desires, and so on. But, though (5) is true, a person is not a *separately existing* entity. Though (5) is true, (3) is also true."[17]

Parfit then goes on to argue that people are like nations and associations, which exist but which also reduce to the citizens and members respectively. To be more precise, some nations (like France) do undeniably exist, while others are mere fictions (like Ruritania), but when it exists "a nation is not an entity that exists separately, apart from its citizens and its territory."[18]

The inescapable impression is that things become much too vague when we get to Parfit's thesis (5) and its supposed compatibility with (3). The part-whole examples and the explanations in terms of wholes «consisting in» or «just involving the existence of» the parts beg the issue and prove little. It is ironic that almost every major player in traditional Indian philosophy had talked at length about wholes and parts as one of *the* most important problems, and had offered rival and often quite precise solutions as to the ontological status and the connections of wholes and parts, aggregates and constituents, nations and citizens, forests and trees, armies and soldiers, sentences and words and so on and so forth – surely, Parfit cannot offer *these* examples in the context of an East-West discussion and expect that the desired «Aha!-effect» will ensue. *What* these things are is precisely the question. Moreover, the image of nations and so forth, and the rapprochement between the self / aggregates and wholes and parts, is Abhidharmic, but the Abhidharma would not maintain that both the whole and the parts are distinct entities (*vastu, bhāva*?). After all, a distinct entity (*bhāvāntara*?), on a natural understanding for a Buddhist, is something, like the elements, which is substantial and real in a way in which the self is not – "distinct entity", if we understand it at all, sounds like *bhāvāntara*, which is another way, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, of saying substantial

17 Ibid. p. 211.

18 Ibid. p. 211.

existence (*dravyasat*).[19] The result is that, on a Buddhist reading of Parfit, we basically don't know what his distinct entities are.

About the only Abhidharmic defense of (5)'s distinct entity provision that I can think of would be to invoke the idea of *(citta)viprayuktasaṃskāra* «non-associated conditioning factors». This is a kind of *ad hoc* category in the *Abhidharmakośa* II (k. 35-36) which includes such diverse things as «acquisition» *(prāpti)*, «non-acquisition» (*aprāpti*), «the vital faculty» *(jīvita),* the «collection of names» *(nāmakāya),* etc. *(ādi).* And interestingly enough, some commentators gloss *ādi* as also including the conventional person (*gang zag* = *pudgala*).[20] This stratagem would, however, be a very strained way to ground scholastically thesis (5): it doesn't look at all as though the point behind *viprayuktasaṃskāra* was the justification of a distinct entity clause like Parfit's (5). Besides which, Buddhists don't agree on these points: the category of *viprayuktasaṃskāra* is only accepted by the Vaibhāṣika; it is roundly rejected by several other schools.

In fact, Parfit is rather easily read as advocating a type of qualified selflessness, along the lines of "There is no self which has Cartesian-like properties, but there is a self which is distinct and real, the owner of mind and body, etc." This would be a bad reading of the Abhidharmic position, but I'm not at all sure that it is a bad reading of Parfit. Ironically, the self being a distinct but not a separate entity might even come uncomfortably close to the Vātsīputrīya position of qualified selflessness: no separate *ātman*, but some (indeterminate) type of real *pudgala*.[21]

Parfit does share with the Ābhidhārmika the basic problem that he somehow has to specify in just what sense "persons are not, as we mistakenly believe, *fundamental* (his italics)"[22], i.e., not as fundamental as the psycho-physical things to which they supposedly reduce. Why should these psycho-physical things actually be better candidates for a type of substantial reality? Equally, why should wholes be somehow worse off than parts?

19 Cf. e.g. *Abhidharmakośa* IX (ed. Pradhān) p. 462.12-13: *kiṃ cedaṃ dravyata iti kiṃ vā prajñaptitaḥ / rūpādivat bhāvāntaraṃ cet dravyataḥ / kṣīrādivat samudāyaś cet prajñaptitaḥ /.*

20 See Tillemans (1993) p. 5, n. 6; see also Lopez (1987) p. 93.

21 See n. 5 above.

22 Parfit op. cit. p. 445.

The Mahāyānist, fortunately, doesn't have to bother with those conundrums: no metaphysical category has any claim to being more fundamental than any other. Undoubtedly, the Mahāyānist has other problems in making his world of exclusively *prajñaptisat* sound convincing, but at the very least he has the considerable advantage of not playing the game of the Reductionist with all the difficulties which that position entails about what is fundamental and what isn't. There is no reason for him to propose anything more real which would then replace the «mistaken» ordinary notion of self. Indeed, there's no reason for him to propose anything out of the ordinary at all.

How accurate and faithful to Buddhist thought (if not to the letter, at least to the spirit) is Parfit's explanation of selflessness? The question is not meant in the spirit of an inquisitor pursuing a heresiarch, but rather to see how far Parfit succeeds in his own task of making the Buddha heard in a seemingly East-West debate. In fact, Parfit couldn't have reasonably claimed much more by "Buddha would have agreed", than that quite a number of Buddhists, i.e., the ones belonging to the dominant Hīnayānist schools which were constituted centuries after Parinirvāṇa, agreed. And much of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* is a very penetrating interpretation of these Abhidharmic principles. What is, however, a regrettable feature of Parfit's approach is that he speaks as if the Mahāyāna never existed. And not only did it exist, but arguably it may well have about as much (or perhaps rather as little) right to claim that it represents the historical Buddha on the question of selflessness.

C. A selfless *Lebenswelt?*

In Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* the ethical and psychological consequences of his Reductionist version of selflessness loom very large – indeed the major part of the book is devoted to sophisticated ethical arguments, the details of which cannot be developed here. Probably, conviction or belief in the truth of the Hīnayānist or Mahāyānist positions would provide a degree of «metaphysical solace» about the sufferings of life and death, as Parfit maintains.[23] And both the Hīnayānist and Mahāyānist versions might

23 Cf. Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* I, 26: *nāsmy ahaṃ na bhaviṣyāmi na me 'sti na bhaviṣyati / iti bālasya saṃtrāsaḥ paṇḍitasya bhayakṣayaḥ* // "The infantile person is

be seen to support many of the ethical positions that Parfit develops on specific issues.

Interestingly enough, however, Parfit maintains that his version of selflessness, which denies that there are Cartesian egos, would entail that *I* would not reincarnate and experience anything after my death.[24] If true, this would give consolation, but alas it should be obvious that the Buddhist would not agree that it is true: for the Buddhist, reincarnation, with all its suffering, remains compatible with selflessness. However, the Buddhist's own philosophical elaboration of the issue is fraught with difficulties. Some Vaibhāṣika schools have quite complicated *ad hoc* solutions to resolve the apparent contradiction between selflessness and the experience of karmic retribution, such as postulating a special entity, «that which is not destroyed» (*avināśa*), solutions which we cannot go into here. It seems to me that, as Louis de la Vallée Poussin had argued long ago, the usual Hīnayānist appeal to a link between lives due to a stream or continuum (*saṃtāna*) of elements does not lead to anything much like *personal transmigration*, but rather to a series of births where one can hardly say whether it is me or not.[25] Understandably, Parfit is little worried about such a type of «reincarnation», and frankly I would tend to think he's right not to be. It is worth mentioning, though, that Madhyamakas, who do not in fact have much use for the continuum in matters of personal identity, may have a more promising tack to preserve some semblance of personal reincarnation. They speak of the hypostatized construct of an I (*ahaṃkāra*) as being so deep-seated as to be sufficient, in itself, to be able to act and experience, all the while being only a *prajñaptisat* – this was what Go rams pa brought out in saying "for the Madhyamaka tradition [this merely] designated self can be the agent of karma and the experiencer of [karmic]

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afraid when he thinks 'I am not, I shall not be, I have nothing and shall have nothing.' For someone learned, this destroys fear."

24 See Parfit op. cit. p. 227-228, 274-280. Cf. M.Kapstein op.cit. p. 297.

25 La Vallée Poussin (1917) p. 50ff. See his marvelous p. 51: "... there is no annihilation, cutting off (*uccheda*), because – it was soon ascertained – if the being who revives is not the same as the old one, it is not, on the other hand, different from the old one. That seems a queer statement, but, in the words of the Brahman when explaining intricate mysteries to his wife, 'we are not to be perplexed at this statement, it is really very simple.' In any case, it is quite Buddhist."

retribution, but for the realists this is impossible." The closest parallel I can think of – you must allow me a brief excursion into the «Twilight Zone» of odd concepts – is some sort of counterpart to phantom limbs, which *aren't there* either, but which are the locus for all sorts of sensations (although unfortunately mostly painful) and which do determine the amputee's image of his own body and hence condition his behaviour, astonishingly much in the same way as do real limbs. At any rate, already in Nāgārjuna, it is just the deep-seated illusion of an I, and no more, which is the vehicle and driving force for personal reincarnation, as if it were a kind of «phantom soul», which did not actually exist, but was so integral to our thinking that our personal reincarnation continued just as if we had a substantial Cartesian ego to reincarnate.[26] What the exact philosophical implications of this «phantom soul» theory would be is very far from clear to me, but at least the idea would, if coherent, provide an intriguing alternative to the close link which Parfit sees between reincarnation and Cartesian egos, as well as enabling the Buddhist to abandon the rather unpromising Hīnayānist stratagem of trying to justify reincarnation by talk about continua of elements.

I will leave the debates on the specific ethical issues open. Parfit consecrates a chapter to the question "Is the true view believable?", and it is obviously an important issue for him. So, let us return, in our own way, to Nagel's objection: is it psychologically possible to believe in selflessness, or even in some sense live with this point of view?

Could we remain consistent in our beliefs? We could, of course, remain consistent by invoking the usual Buddhist theoretical solution of there being two levels of truth, the conventional truth of selves and their possessions as contrasted with the absolute truth of selflessness. In fact, I don't think that Buddhists do remain consistent, but neither do I think that this is in itself a problem: indeed there is an intriguing tension in Buddhist cultures, a tension which in part comes from engaging in a kind of double discourse where, for example in daily life situations, Buddhists will speak in the usual fashion of themselves, as if Buddhist selflessness were temporarily bracketed out, only to switch to the more theoretical discourse

26 See e.g. Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* I, 35cd: *ahaṃkāre sati punaḥ karma janma tataḥ punaḥ* "When there is a construct of an I (*ahaṃkāra*), then there is again karma, and from that again birth."

of selflessness when discussing ultimate matters like nirvāṇa and liberation. Steven Collins, in his recent article "What are Buddhists *doing* when they deny the self?", has explored how this double discourse works amongst Theravāda Buddhists, be they monks or lay people: I think that his findings would also by and large apply to Mahāyānists who believe that they are selfless.[27]

It would seem psychologically possible to believe in selflessness (with perhaps the occasional nagging doubts Parfit describes), if such a belief remained only a relatively theoretical affair and did not entail that we also accepted that people could experience selflessness or live this way. Would it also be possible to believe in this doctrine, if belief meant that one accepted the possibility of actually seeing things just as they are, i.e., in their impersonal mode described in the Abhidharma's and Parfit's theories? Let us imagine, for a moment, what it might be like to have a prolonged experience of selflessness in that Hīnayāna way where the self was supposedly reduced to or replaced by constantly fleeting elements more or less *à la* David Hume. Of course, our imagining can be a type of thought experiment (as it so often is on philosophical questions), but in fact I think that we can do better. After all, there actually are people who seem to be in subjective states very similar to this Hīnayānist selflessness, and these people are not yogis or saints: they are people who suffer from various pathologies. Oliver Sacks has given many extraordinary case histories of individuals who seem to be, in their subjective experience of the world, very much like the selfless beings of which Hume and the Ābhidhārmikas speak, in that they *only* have fleeting sensations and impressions, but no self. They are, in Sack's words, «Humean beings».[28] The conclusion to be

27 Collins (1994).

28 One of Sacks' recurrent interests is the «Touretter», and «Super-Touretter», those who have, in varying degrees of severity, the condition known as Tourette's syndrome (after the 19th century French neurologist Gilles de la Tourette). In milder versions it seems to be quite manageable, apart from leading to some weird tics. See "A Surgeon's Life" in O. Sacks (1995). In more severe forms the patient has a flood of constantly changing impressions and ideas that so overwhelms him that he loses his sense of self. This is the «Humean condition», one which, incidentally, is also cited by Sacks in connection with other syndromes. In his now justly famous collection of case histories entitled *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and*

drawn seems to be the following: to the degree that the «liberation from self» which Parfit advocates is only a type of intellectual conviction about a metaphysical principle, we will avoid the Sacks scenario of what happens when we really live and see things without having any notion of our self. If however belief in selflessness implies believing in the possibility and desirability of the profound change that supposedly comes about when we arrive at the «path of seeing» (*darśanamārga*), where we have a direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) of the aggregates alone, then Sacks' panoply of case histories will be hard to avoid. *The consequences of actually having a prolonged experience of one's self being «reduced away» to elements in the way which the Hīnayānist advocates might well be such that it would be difficult to see any advantage in leading such a life.*[29]

Other Clinical Tales, Sacks gives us an amazing description of what the Touretter experiences:
"Lacking the normal, protective barriers of inhibition, the normal, organically determined boundaries of self, the Touretter's ego is subject to a lifelong bombardment. He is beguiled, assailed, by impulses from within and without ... There is a physiological, an existential, almost a theological pressure upon the soul of the Touretter - whether it can be held whole and sovereign, or whether it will be taken over, possessed and dispossessed, by every immediacy and impulse. Hume, as we have noted, wrote: 'I venture to affirm ... that [we] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different sensations, succeeding one another with inconceivable rapidity, and in a perpetual flux and movement.' Thus, for Hume, personal identity is a fiction - we do not exist, we are but a consecution of sensations, or perceptions. This is clearly not the case with a normal human being, because he *owns* his own perceptions. They are not a mere flux, but *his* own, united by an abiding individuality or self. But what Hume describes may be precisely the case for a being as unstable as a super-Touretter, whose life is, to some extent, a consecution of random or convulsive perceptions and motions, a phantasmagoric fluttering with no centre or sense. To this extent he *is* a 'Humean' rather than a human being." (Sacks 1990 p. 124.)

29 When it comes to imagining a relatively prolonged experience of selflessness, there are probably reasons to prefer the Mahāyānist scenario. I think that the Mahāyānist Madhyamaka scenario, which, as we saw in the quote from Go rams pa, does not make an asymmetry between the ontological status of self and elements, is at least *not* going to entail that the more we live selflessness the more we become Humean beings. Whatever we realize about the self - its unreality, its being a product of ignorance, etc. etc. - we will also realize about the elements, so that we will avoid the situation of an illusory self being reduced to real but fleeting impressions, ideas and elements. There are, of course, numerous different Mahāyānist descriptions of

Finally, some might try to short-circuit the debate by wondering whether the fact that one could not actually live Reductionism in a vivid experiential way constitutes a major defect in a Reductionist position. Indeed, it could be argued that with typical Hume-inspired positions (causality, self, induction, etc.) it generally is necessary that people continue to have notions which don't withstand reason and that *a fortiori* people should not try to experience and live the truth of the matter.[30] But, although Parfit could conceivably avail himself of this defense in responding to the objection of selflessness being psychologically unbelievable, I think it is important to see that the Abhidharmic Buddhist can't. *And the result is that it is even less clear what Parfit could mean by invoking Buddhism.* That people could not live the truth of selflessness and Reductionism without unacceptable psychological consequences would clearly be a *fatal* defect for a Buddhist theory: it would be tantamount to having a Buddhism which did not recognize the possibility, or even the desirability, of experiencing nirvāṇa.

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what it is like to experience the world in a selfless way, but it is obviously not possible to go into details of the different schools' positions. In our time, no doubt some of the best descriptions of the Mahāyānist, and especially the «Yogācāra approach», have been given by Gadjin Nagao. What would it be like to be selfless according to a broadly speaking Yogācāra model? It would certainly not involve seeing the elements alone, nor, following Yogācāra at least, would it mean that the self (i.e. the person) would somehow vanish completely or that the world would remain strangely blank. It would be to see both the self and the world as pure «conditioned things» (*paratantra*), appearances in all their richness and diversity, but free from all traces of reification or hypostatization of entities.

30 Compare Hume's own well-known course of action: when the philosophical theorizing became too depressing to handle, he generally went out for a good meal and a bit of backgammon.

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