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Searching for Agency in a “selfless” Reality

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In the field of moral psychology, philosophers often take the idea of agency for granted. This assumption of agency as an action that people may initiate in any given situation may be due to our focus on the Western canon of philosophical thought as *the* primary way of viewing the world. Further, proponents of theories regarding our moral responses (like blame and forgiveness) focus on these psychological aspects by themselves. That is to say, they focus on how these emotional responses function and how they should be defined in terms of what they actually entail (their connection to morality). Discussions regarding moral psychology presuppose agency in their arguments. We have agency therefore we are able to be blamed and forgiven for our actions. The deservingness of moral retribution is justified because of our agency over our actions. It would also be best for me to clarify what I mean when I say "agency". I am referring to the concept of people being 'agents' or more specifically entities that have control over their actions,including a way to advocate for themselves when the actions of others are holding them back from accessing something particular. For example, imagine I have a frisbee that you really want. You have the agency to take it from me, but you also have the agency to decide not to take it. If you take the frisbee, my agency will take the frisbee back, or report you for stealing.. The void between compulsion and action is filled with agency. The key idea here is that people have agency because of their ability to think about something and then pursue the action. An example of something that lacks agency would be a bug. I would argue that by that definition a bug does not have agency because it is driven by biological factors rather than cognitive choices.

A skeptic of free will might deny the idea of agency all together, however this paper is far too short to discuss that debate. My main focus will be to discuss the idea of agency from a

Buddhist perspective. More clearly I want to ask the question: does the concept of Agency hold up in a Buddist perspective on Moral psychology?

Ideally I would use Buddhist philosophical ideas to unpack some of the concepts presented in arguments relevant to moral psychology. Unfortunately, this would take far too many pages to accomplish, so I will focus my analysis on the idea of agency and how it can be seen through an often overlooked lens— the philosophy of Buddhism. It is then an obvious caveat that I cannot perfectly analyze things through a "Buddhist" perspective because there is really no such thing. The Buddist canon of thought is split. This split occurs primarily between the Mahayana and Theravada schools of thought. This isn't even the start of the variety in Buddsit thought, but such as is the case in many philosophical topics we need to draw the line somewhere and simply start; rather than spending an eternity simply categorizing somewhat arbitrary things.[1] Luckily for us, it can be argued that despite the divides in Buddhist thought, there are still some core understandings about reality that seem to bridge the cultural gaps created by the spread of Buddhism over time. In this essay I will focus on utilizing these core metaphysical understandings as a basis for my argument and as a way to simplify my thoughts. I will refer to these thoughts as unifying concepts.

I will begin by breaking down some of the various concepts that are relevant to my argument in order to clarify my position as I begin to break down moral psychology from a Buddist perspective. The first unifying concept of Buddhist thought is *anatman* or "no self." To understand why Buddhists view the conception of the self as fiction, we need to first understand the *skandhas*. The *skandhas* refer to five parts that make up an individual. In his analysis,

[1] For a more in depth dive into Buddist philosophy I wholeheartedly recommend the multiple books I cite in this paper's source list.

Siderits refers to these parts as: *rupa*, feelings, perception, volition, and consciousness.[2] *Rupa* refers to our physical form. The idea of feeling in this context is understood as the sensations of satisfaction or lack thereof. Perception refers to our five senses of perception. Volition is understood as sensations in relation to our body. This would be the sensation of pain or pleasure that derives from the previous *skandha* of perception. Lastly, consciousness is our sense of self awareness. This is our ability to experience the other *skandhas*. It's important to note that this understanding refers to consciousness as this ability of experience rather than the idea of a self. Consciousness is sometimes conflated with the idea of self, but in this context it simply means being able to understand that you are experiencing something. Although as we will soon discover, there may not be a specific you that is experiencing things in the first place.

Once the idea of what makes up a person has been deconstructed, we can begin to understand why there is a lack of "self" in the Buddist understanding of reality. The common conception of a self is that of a fixed essence. It feels natural to think that we are the same person we were yesterday or the day before that. Although, through analysis of the skandhas it can be understood that there is a lack of permanence in all aspects which make up a person. This lack of "self" can also be understood through the idea of *Śūnyatā* or "emptiness" which I will cover later in the paper. We must first break down these unifying concepts and then their correlation will become more understandable.

Rupa changes with time. For example, a person cuts their toenails, but they inevitably grow back. It would then be logical to say that physical aspects of people are naturally impermanent. Feelings as defined earlier are also impermanent. Imagine a scenario where you strive to achieve some goal, but fail. You may feel temporarily dissatisfied. Eventually, you may

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[2] Siderits, Mark. Buddhism as Philosophy / Mark Siderits. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021.

achieve the goal and gain some temporary satisfaction. Both of these states are impermanent and subject to change based on factors one may not even be able to control. Our feelings of perception change all the time. For example, when we eat different foods, our perceptions of taste are altered. Volitions also seem to fluctuate throughout our day. An experience of pain may be negative, but after some time, our body may be healed and we may no longer experience those physical sensations. Lastly, the simple rhythm of our lives as we go to sleep and wake up the next day is an illustration of how we shift consciousness.

Once we understand the impermanence of the *skandhas* we can understand why the Buddists view what we think of as a "self" to only be a convenient designation. As much as we try we cannot pin down the "self" in any one of these aspects of ourselves. These aspects together make up a person, so maybe the combination of them is the "self"? This might be a response to the argument, but it is slightly flawed. When looking for a "self" we want to look for something concrete that cannot be broken down into further parts. Would a form of self truly be a self if it can be broken down into parts? I believe this would be an unsatisfying answer. We want the "self" to be some sort of constant form which is tied to us directly. Unfortunately, this is simply not the case. In his analysis, Siderits describes a convenient designator as a "useful fiction"[3] This means that a convenient designator refers to a concept which is conventionally true, but is not really true. It is simply a useful word for describing something more complex. For example, a book is a collection of pages, but it would be odd for someone to say "Hand me that collection of pages over there." In our day to day experiences we often need simple words to refer to complex collections of parts. Things that are convenient designators may indeed be helpful, but they don't really describe the metaphysical reality of things.

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[3] Siderits, Mark. Buddhism as Philosophy / Mark Siderits. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021.

I think there are a few ways in which we can find parts of agency still viable within the unifying concept of *anatman.* This may either seem surprising or not at all depending on your perspective on Buddhism. Some people view the annihilation of the self as somehow reductionist or nihilistic, but I think these viewpoints ignore the underlying issues that Buddist philosophy is trying to solve (the cessation of suffering). The idea that I want to posit is that agency does not require an "anchor" of a "self" It simply requires that consciousness is able to make premeditated decisions. Although this does disrupt the definition I initially posited at the onset of the paper. I described that agency was associated with "entities" or in our case maybe "people" is a better word. But to a Buddist these are simply convenient designations used to navigate our world. Despite this we still feel like we can make decisions. But maybe that's what got us mixed up! There is no "we" making decisions. But there are still decisions being made. The idea of *anatman* doesn't change the fact that we (i'm using "we" as a convenient designator) have the ability to alter reality with our actions. In fact, as I will discuss later the noble eightfold path encourages us to shape our reality for the better. This would be a pointless doctrine if Buddhism lacked some sort of underlying understanding that we have control over our own actions.

Another key unifying concept which I find to be relevant is the idea of *Śūnyatā* or emptiness. Emptiness can be understood as a lack of form. When I use the word form in this context I refer to the Platonic version of the concept. Plato's forms are essentially the natures or substances of various things in reality. What makes a dog a dog? To Plato that would be the form of dogness which describes all the qualities we associate with dogs. Buddhism totally rejects this idea. From a Buddist perspective by labeling something you have already moved into error. The dog is empty of form. It simply exists at this moment and even shifts overtime. There isn't a specific quality that defines it. Rather we as humans have given it a convenient designation of

"Dog" which labels it and helps us understand it through our senses, but there isn't anything inherently special or "doglike" about dogs. They simply are.

So if everything is "empty", without labels for common understanding and there is no self… how can we have agency? To some it may still seem impossible. Despite these ideas there is another part of Buddhist practice that stands in defense of agency even with the lack of a "self" in a traditional Western sense of the word. That is the Buddist idea of *Nirvana* through praxis. The noble eightfold path. The noble eightfold path is the way in which people can progress through reality to *Nirvana*. Essentially it breaks down the moral ideology of Buddhism. How you can be a better person and lead yourself out of suffering.

The key point I am trying to gleam from analyzing the noble eightfold path is not the moral implications of the unifying concept, but instead the implications that it has on the idea of agency. As I mentioned earlier praxis seems to imply that something is doing the practice. Maybe this something could be consciousness? Despite a lack of "self" our consciousness is still an aspect of the *skandhas.* After all it seems plausible to say that consciousness is what allows us to have agency. Without a conscious awareness of ourselves and others it would be impossible to begin to blame others or forgive their actions. So it seems safe to imply that this consciousness is also necessary as a basis for why we find moral psychology to be an important aspect of reality to analyze both philosophically and through the lens of traditional psychology. This also feels like the time to discuss why I am melding the Buddhist practices with their philosophy when discussing these concepts. It would simply be remiss to attempt to understand the philosophy of Buddhism without understanding the practice to a degree. In fact, I would posit that most Buddist's would actually agree with me in the fact that practice precedes understanding. One can only understand these unifying concepts through discussion alone to a certain level. I am not

saying that you cannot conceptualize these concepts without going out to a garden and meditating! In fact, this might even be a bit counterproductive to an understanding. The point I wish to illustrate is that praxis and philosophy are undeniably linked in Buddhism. The philosophy of Buddhism is built off the practice of Buddhism.

The noble eightfold path is divided into parts by Gethin in his book breaking down the fundamentals of Buddhism in religious, cultural and philosophical terms. He breaks the path into three sections which lead one towards *nirvana* through practice. "A hierarchical progression of practice, beginning with generosity (*dāna)*, moving on to good conduct (*sīla*), and ending with meditation (*bhāvanā*)" These break down further into an even more specific set of concepts. *Dāna* becomes "right view" and "right intention". *Sīla* becomes "right speech", "right action", and "right livelihood". Finally, *bhāvanā* breaks down into "right effort", "right mindfulness" and "right concentration". So is this path something that needs to be followed in order? Yes and no. On the one hand, Buddhism often starts with practice, but as I break down the noble eightfold path into its eight parts it makes sense that the path is clearly a journey that cannot be followed in a straight line. As we take on the moral challenges the path asks of us, we must carve out our own journey. We learn the importance of these moral ideas at our own pace and in our own order. It's understood that we may take many lifetimes to fully break through to *nirvana*.

Again for the sake of efficiency I will not elaborate on all the aspects of the noble eightfold path but instead encourage you to read Gethin's book which is cited in my sources if you are invested in a more whole understanding of the concepts mentioned. The parts of the path I think are most relevant to this discussion are "right speech" and "right action". These unifying concepts refer to the moral framework of Buddhism. "Right speech" involves a multitude of things like refraining from harmful speech, false speech, idle chatter, false speech and divisive

speech. “Right action” involves refraining from harming living beings, taking what is not given and sexual misconduct.[4] So if Buddhism includes a moral code of conduct the obvious conclusion is that people are still responsible for their actions. In fact not only are they responsible, but they will be constrained to their suffering if they stray from the path. Now one could doubt the legitimacy of these moral principles, but that is not really the point I'm trying to illustrate by discussing the noble eightfold path. Morality itself is a fickle subject in philosophy. Many people try to justify or reject its existence, but despite all these arguments we seem to be living in a world of morals. Would arguments against morality really hold true if we keep practicing it anyways? It would seem to me that most people have some sort of moral lens that they see the world through. One can raise the obvious exception cases like psychopathy, but these are exceptions for a reason. They are not how people generally operate.

I am arguing that it is possible, despite the lack of reality in the idea of “self”, that we can still have a sense of agency within our little pocket of reality. After all, it sure does feel like we experience a sense of agency. Although this might not be enough for some skeptics, I think this may relate to another very famous argument regarding moral psychology. In his paper *Freedom and Resentment* Peter Strawson beautifully boils down the arguments regarding determinism and how moral psychology is affected. He refers to these two camps as optimists and pessimists and breaks down how these seemingly opposite perspectives could possibly be reconciled. An important aspect to this argument is the idea of psychological responses which relate to moral concepts being a production of our relationship with other people.[5] Essentially, our reactions to other people are what drive our moral psychology. We seem to react to people based on a

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[4] Gethin, Rupert. The Foundations of Buddhism / Rupert Gethin. Oxford University Press, 1998.

[5] Strawson, P. F. Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays / P. F. Strawson. Methuen [distributed in the USA by Harper & Row, Barnes & Noble Import Division], 1974.

perceived “amount” of blameworthiness. We also suspend our moral reactions based on the quality of their will. If someone accidentally causes us harm then we will be more likely to forgo normal moral responses. This is the key! These responses are “normal” ; they are ingrained in us by the fact we are not alone in this world!

I believe that despite the fact that at first glance we find the concept of “agency” in a weird place in relation to Buddist thought; through the lens of Buddhism we can still find the importance of relationships with other humans. Despite there not being a true “self” we still find that reality involves interaction. We form relationships with people and this is even understood through the Buddhist practices of the noble eightfold path. These relationships give rise to the moral responses and behaviors which we have dubbed moral psychology.

To us the idea of agency being the ability to act seems to necessitate the “self” or the person that is acting. But this may not be the case. Clearly we need agency to reach Nirvana, as seen in the noble eightfold path. And it also appears there may be room for the concept of agency within *anatman.* At this point a skeptic might argue that Buddist thought has simply left the idea of agency up to interpretation or ignored it completely. And you might be somewhat right. The truth of the matter is that understanding whether or not we have agency will not lead us away from *Dukkha* (suffering) Despite this, our lived reality still continues, emergent principles make up what the Buddists think of as real. It seems that we have control over this in some sense as we make decisions so maybe it’s not so much of a stretch that the self is a fallacy yet agency still persists in our reality.

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