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1

# Who Do You Think You Are?

## WHAT A SELF IS AND WHY YOU THINK YOU HAVE ONE

### What We Mean by *Self*

In a memorable passage from chapter 6 of *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra*), Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE) introduces us to the target of any critique of the idea of the self. He argues that it is important to keep that target clearly in view, and that it is important not to confuse it with other ideas in the conceptual neighborhood. Candrakīrti tells the story of a man who is afraid that a poisonous snake has taken up residence in one of the walls of his house. In order to alleviate his fear, the man searches the house for an elephant, and satisfies himself that there is none there. He then rests at ease. [6.141]<sup>1</sup>

What is the moral of this odd Indian tale? Candrakīrti's idea is that even once we recognize that a conception or a commitment is causing us problems, it is often easier and more tempting to confuse it with another idea, to refute that other idea, and to leave the problematic conception in place. This is particularly true when we suffer from an irresistible compulsion to adhere

to the initial problematic commitment, despite the difficulties it raises. The serpent in this analogy is the self. Candrakīrti thinks that even a little philosophical reflection will convince us that there is something amiss in our thinking that we are *selves*.

Candrakīrti also thinks that the self illusion undermines any attempt to understand who and what we are, and that this failure to understand the nature of our own existence and identity can be devastating to our moral lives. I agree. For this reason, although the majority of this book is concerned with investigating the illusion of the self and defending the idea that we are selfless persons, in the end it is really a book about ethics. I ask the reader to bear this in mind, and I promise that even though I may lead you through some thorny philosophical patches, the payoff will come when we return to ethical reflection in chapters 6–9.

Candrakīrti argues that, despite our ability to understand the incoherence of the idea of the self, we have an innate tendency to think of ourselves as selves. For this reason, he takes it that it is easier to respond to the philosophical unease arising from the self idea by rejecting some other position—such as that the self is the body, or the mind, or even the mind-body complex—than to reject the self entirely. When we do this, we may reassure ourselves that none of these elephants are around, but we leave the serpent in place in our conceptual scheme. So, he argues, the first thing we must do is identify what this self is supposed to be. We thereby ensure that our analyses are directed at the correct target.<sup>2</sup>

I agree. Candrakīrti was writing in an Indian context. So, the view of the self that he took as the object of negation in his argument (an argument we will explore in chapter 2) is the view that to be a sentient being is to be an *ātman*. This term is usually and appropriately translated into English as *self* or *soul*. The idea that

the *ātman* lies at the core of our being is ubiquitous in orthodox Indian philosophy, and it was a principal target of Buddhist critique. In the Vedas, and in particular, the Upaniṣads—the texts that ground many of the orthodox Indian philosophical schools—it is characterized as unitary, as the witness of all that we perceive, as the agent of our actions, and as the enjoyer of our aesthetic experience. It is regarded as that which is always the subject, never the object; and as that which persists through life despite changes in body and mind, and which even persists beyond death and in transmigration.<sup>3</sup>

The Indian classic *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Song of the Lord*) characterizes the relation between the self and the embodied person as akin to that between you and your wardrobe. Each day you might put on a new set of clothes, but you are still you, the bearer of those clothes; you are not in any sense identical to them, and you are the same individual who put on different clothes yesterday and who may put on new ones tomorrow. Just so, according to the *Gītā*, you, the *ātman*, put on a new mind and body in each life, but are never identical to any mind or body; instead, you are the *bearer* of that mind and body, which are just as much objects to your subjectivity as any external phenomenon. [2.22]<sup>4</sup> Your mind and body are instruments by means of which you know and act on the world, and they are therefore distinct from that self that makes use of those instruments.

Later Indian philosophers such as Uddyotakara (c. sixth century CE) and Śaṅkara (c. eighth century CE) present more systematic accounts of and arguments for the reality of the *ātman*. They argue that it is necessary in order to explain sensory integration, as in seeing the various colors in a butterfly's wings as constituting its variegation, or in assigning sounds, colors, smells, and other such properties to the same object. Without a self, they argue, these would simply be independent

sensory experiences, with no common subject, and so could not be assigned to any common object.

They also argue that the self is necessary in order to explain the possibility of memory: my remembering today what I did yesterday requires that the subject of the remembered experience and the subject of the memory are identical. Moreover, they argue that it is necessary in order to account for moral desert, since the one who is to be praised or blamed for any action must be identical to the agent of that action. Our minds and bodies, they concede, change from day to day, violating the condition of identity. So, neither mind nor body, they conclude, is a candidate for the self; the self must be something that stands behind both mind and body as the locus of our identity. We will return to these arguments in more detail in chapter 4.

It is against the existence of this *ātman* that Candrakīrti's arguments are directed. And so, as we shall see when we turn to those arguments, the Buddhist position, and indeed any no-self position, must assume the burden of explaining both the apparent integration of consciousness at each moment and our perceived identity over time in the absence of a unitary subject and agent. In order to be successful, these no-self positions must show both that the idea of the self is incoherent and that everything that the self is meant to explain can be explained in its absence. That is, the proponent of the no-self view must show that everything that the self is meant to explain can actually be accomplished by a *person*, a socially embedded human being with no self.

The *ātman* reemerges in another guise in a Christian context as the *psyche*, another term usually translated as *soul*. In this context as well, the soul is held to be enduring, and to endure even after death (although in the Christian tradition, not through reincarnation, but instead through eternal reward in Heaven or

damnation in Hell). The *psyche*, like the *ātman*, is held to be distinct from and to be the possessor of the mind and body; the subject of knowledge; the agent of action; the object of moral approbation or disapprobation; and the enjoyer or sufferer of reward and punishment. Once again, philosophers worked assiduously to develop arguments for the existence and nature of this thing deemed so necessary by religious figures, defending its immortality, its simplicity, and its function as the unitary focus of experience and action. St. Augustine (354–430) also argues that it is immediately available to us in introspection and that it has the distinctive property of *freedom*, of exemption from causation in its active role, a property he deems necessary for moral responsibility.

Those, like Hume and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976),<sup>5</sup> who argue in the Western tradition against the existence of the self, have this Christian version in mind as their target. For our purposes, the Indian *ātman* and the Christian *psyche* are close enough in content, and are defended on similar enough grounds, that we can often treat them as manifestations of the same broad idea. I would add that the difference between a religious view according to which we are reborn and one in which the afterlife is in Heaven or Hell is incidental, and indeed that the entire question of post-mortem existence is irrelevant to the debate about the existence of the self, despite the religious context in which that debate is often prosecuted, and despite the fact that anxiety about post-mortem existence may motivate our belief in the self.

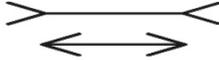
As we will see, this debate can be, and often is, pursued in an entirely secular register. You might think the fact that the idea that our existence involves the reality of a self emerges in diverse traditions is evidence for its correctness. I hope instead to show you that this ubiquity is in fact evidence for a kind of

innate tendency to succumb to a particular cognitive illusion. I hope also to show you that philosophical arguments for the reality of the self are only ways to ramify that illusion into explicit doctrine. And throughout this study, I will use the word *self* only to refer to this kind of self, reserving the word *person* to denote the complex, constructed, socially embedded psychophysical complexes in which I will argue we really consist. This is important: sometimes people use the word *self* indifferently to refer to a self or to a person. If we are careful about the use of these terms, we can avoid confusion as well as the tendency to confuse merely verbal differences with real disagreements.<sup>6</sup>

The efflorescence in the West of systematic argument for the existence of the self and of reflection on its nature (as well as for critique of that idea, to which we return in chapter 2) was the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century period known as the Early Modern period of Western philosophy. Descartes (1596–1650) famously argues in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* that we can be certain of our existence as *res cogitans*, or as *thinking things*, identical not with our bodies, or our perceptual faculties, but with our faculty of abstract reason. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), defending a position very much like that of many of the orthodox Indian schools, argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the self is a *noumenon*, a transcendental object existing outside of space and time, a pure subject or perceptual, conceptual, and aesthetic experience and agent of action, transcendently free of the causal order.

The arguments and views of each of these philosophers have been addressed in detail by many scholars, and it is not my purpose here either to articulate or to criticize them (although we will return to them in chapter 4), but only to use them to get a fix on the object of negation, to identify the self the existence of which will be the target of the arguments to come. And the

first thing to say is that, like the white whale, belief in the self is ubiquitous: it seems to crop up in some form in every major religious and philosophical tradition. We seem to be wired to experience ourselves *as selves* just as we are wired to see the two lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as unequal in length, even when we know them to be equal.



## That You Really Believe That You Have Such a Self

“But wait,” you might say, “long-dead religious philosophers might have thought that there was such a thing as a self, but I am a modern person. I think no such thing. I take myself to be nothing more than a psychophysical complex, what you, Garfield, want to call a *person*.” This is a common reaction, and if it were correct, I would indeed be attacking a straw man. So, I now want to convince you that you, just like the orthodox Indian philosophers, just like the Church Fathers, and just like Descartes and Kant, understand your own identity as that of a *self*. I will do that by means of an easy thought experiment.

One nice thing about imagination and desire is that we can imagine or desire anything, including that which is impossible. When I was very young, I wanted to count to the highest number, but of course there is none; the natural numbers just keep going on and on. The great mathematician David Hilbert (1862–1943) wanted to prove the completeness and consistency of arithmetic, something Kurt Gödel (1906–1978) showed to be impossible. We might wish to live in the universes depicted by the artist of the impossible M. C. Escher (1898–1972). And

so on. I say this, because I am going to invite you to imagine, and even to desire, something that might be impossible, and I do not want your sense that it is impossible to lead you to balk in following me in this thought experiment.

The experiment proceeds in two parts. First, think of somebody whose body you would like to inhabit, maybe for a long time, maybe only for a short while. I won't ask you for the details, or for what motivates your choice. Some things are better left private. But just to get the imaginative ball rolling, I will tell you whose body I would like to have: Usain Bolt's (in his racing prime). I only want it for 9.6 seconds. I want to feel what it is like to run that fast. Now, in developing this desire, I do not want to *be* Usain Bolt. Usain Bolt has already achieved that, and it does me no good. I want to be *me, Jay*, with Usain Bolt's body, so that I can enjoy what Usain Bolt experiences.

The very fact that I can formulate this desire or take this leap of the imagination shows me that, deep down—whether correctly or incorrectly—I do not consider myself to be identical to my body, but rather to be something that *has* this body, and that could in principle have another one. Once again, the possible incoherence of this desire or leap of imagination is beside the point: we know that we are capable of desiring, and even imagining, impossible things. In the present argument, I do not take it that it follows from these desires or imaginations that I *am* distinct from my body, any more than I think that my childish desire to count to the highest number demonstrated that there *is* a highest number. Instead, I take the possibility of my forming this desire to show that I *take myself*, at least pre-reflectively, to be a self that is distinct from my body, just as my childish desire showed that *then* I took there to be a highest number.

Now for the second part: we can perform the same exercise with respect to our minds. Imagine somebody whose mind you

would like to have, just for a little bit. Once again, whether this desire or act of imagination is coherent or not is beside the point. I'll reveal my desire again. I would love to have Stephen Hawking's mind for long enough to understand general relativity and quantum gravity, but once again, this is not a desire to *be* Stephen Hawking, but to be *me*, enjoying his mind. When you develop this desire, you do not wish to become that other person. Somebody else was already that other person, and that does nothing for you. You want to be *you*, with their mind. And, just as in the case of the body, the very possibility of formulating this desire, or imagining this situation shows that—correctly or incorrectly—you do not consider yourself to *be* your mind, but rather to be something that *has* that mind.

The point of these exercises is neither to argue that there *is* a self nor to argue that there is *not* one. No thought experiment could settle that question; that will be the burden of the subsequent chapters. Instead, I remind you, it is to do two very specific things. First, it allows us to identify what we mean when we talk about a *self*, to identify what will be my object of negation in this study. Second, it is meant to convince you that the view that there is a self is no straw man. That is, I hope that it shows you that you, like nearly everyone, are convinced, deep down, that there is a self, and that this is true even if you, like me, ultimately think that this conviction is false or even incoherent.

Moreover, the very fact that you were able to follow me in this thought experiment shows that, at least before you think hard about it, you take yourself to be distinct from both your mind and your body, to be the thing that *has* your mind and your body, but that, without losing its identity, could take on another mind, another body, just like changing your clothes. The philosopher Jonardon Ganeri correctly emphasizes that when we deny that there is a self in this sense, we are *not*

re-identifying the self with the body and the mind (there is no self; just a body, or just a mind); nor are we saying that the self really is the mind-body complex. We are denying that *anything* answers to the definition of a self.<sup>7</sup>

## Why We Think We Have a Self

Before we go any further, we might well ask why most of us have this primal conviction that we are selves. Is this conviction the result of careful reflection, or is its origin more primitive than that?

The Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) points out that while some people are convinced of this position philosophically, philosophy cannot be the origin of this belief for two reasons. First, he notes, most people are not philosophers, and have never even reflected on this question. Nonetheless, they still believe that they are selves in the deep sense illuminated by our thought experiments of a moment ago.<sup>8</sup> Even if they do not entertain this idea explicitly, it operates as a background self-understanding that informs their lives. It therefore appears that philosophical conceptions of the self arise from, rather than give rise to, the sense of self.

The second reason that philosophy can't be the origin of the belief in the self, Tsongkhapa argues, is that even philosophers who are convinced through philosophical argument that there is no self—as I am, and as I hope that you will soon be—do not escape this atavistic sense of being a self. And it is worth emphasizing that our instinctive sense of self that enables us to imagine having another body or another mind and these philosophical defenses of the reality of the self address one and the same self. Philosophy, in this case, is trying to make sense of our intuitions, not substituting a “philosophical” self for an “intuitive” one.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, I suspect that the explanation of the self illusion is not cognitive, but is instead emotional, or even simply biological. There may be good evolutionary explanations of its origin, just as there are almost certainly good evolutionary explanations of how our visual system evolved to succumb to the Müller-Lyer illusion. Each of these may be, as the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould called them, spandrels, or byproducts, of traits that have real survival value, even if being duped by these illusions has no survival value in itself. But such speculations are well beyond the scope of this book. I would guess that the self illusion arises from a confluence of biological and social causes, but its origin is less important than what motivates our present belief in the self.

The ninth-century Indian philosopher Śāntideva argues in *How to Lead an Awakened Life (Bodhicāryāvātāra)* that our conviction that we are selves arises from a primal fear of death, and that we construct the idea of a self as a bulwark against that fear.<sup>10</sup> Śāntideva also argues that the idea that we are selves arises primarily in emotionally charged situations, as when we perceive that we have been harmed, or when pride is aroused. It is then that we think not of our minds or bodies, but of we who possess those minds and bodies. David Hume adopts a similar view. He argues that the thought that we are selves is a product of the passions—that we posit the self as the object of pride and humility, and then reify it in thought.<sup>11</sup> If anything like these analyses is right, the idea of self is grounded not in reason or perception, but in affect.

I find the view that affect is the origin of our sense of self plausible, though perhaps not directly demonstrable. This idea in turn suggests that the universal or near universal drive to posit a self is instinctive, built into our nature as human beings. That fact—if indeed it is a fact—would be an *explanation*, but

not a *justification* of the view that we are selves. It would be, like the explanations of why we are susceptible to perceptual illusions, an explanation of our tendency to error, not a proof that what we think we see is real. But, once again, to explain the origin of the psychological processes that generate this illusion, and to explain how those processes actually give rise to the conviction that we are selves, we would have to turn to psychology, to biology, and to the social sciences.

In the next few chapters, I will present reasons to think that we are not selves. I take this task to be important, and not simply an abstract metaphysical inquiry. This is because the self illusion *matters*. It matters in part because it obscures our own identities from us, leading to a profound misunderstanding of who and what we are, and of the degree to which our own identities and existence are bound up with those of others. And it matters because it generates a perverse moral vision that engenders an instinctive attitude of self-interest and egoism that none of us can rationally endorse, and from which we would happily free ourselves.

In chapters 6–10 of this book, we will address these important consequences of the self illusion, and we will consider what it would be like to experience ourselves, others, and our world free of that illusion and of its pernicious consequences. I hope that by coming to liberate ourselves from the self illusion, we can lead better, happier lives, and I undertake this investigation guided by that hope.

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