

*Buddhist Ethics as a Path: A Defense of Normative Gradualism*¹

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Abstract: This essay defends a new interpretation of Buddhist ethics: normative gradualism.

According to normative gradualism, what we have normative reason to do depends on our stage along the Buddhist spiritual path. The essay shows how normative gradualism can justify distinctive features of Buddhist ethics and reconcile consequentialist and eudaimonistic interpretations of Buddhist moral thought.

1. Introduction

The Buddha presents his teachings as a path. First of all, the Buddha offers a diagnosis of a problem. This is the problem of unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*). We experience pervasive suffering in our lives. But the Buddha offers a message of hope. He suggests a solution to the problem of suffering. This solution is the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is a therapeutic regime that aims to transform our beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions. By walking the Eightfold Path, the aspirant can extinguish the ignorance and confusion that generates suffering. One of the most important sources of suffering and confusion is the belief that we are substantial selves that persist through changes in properties and experiences. The belief in the self causes us to identify objects and experiences as “me” or “mine” and leads us to form negative attachments, such as clinging and craving. The Eightfold Path consists, at least in part, in practices through which aspirants can internalize the view that there is no self and thereby attain enlightenment.² Furthermore, different traditions offer their own interpretations of the Buddhist path. For example, Mahāyāna Buddhism recommends the Bodhisattva path, which requires aspirants to strive for the awakening of all sentient beings.

Some philosophers suggest that the metaphor of the path helps us to articulate a distinctive Buddhist approach to ethics. Buddhist ethics focuses on the process through which the aspirant makes progress on the path to enlightenment. To advance along the path, aspirants must develop virtuous dispositions and capacities. Several authors argue that this emphasis on moral cultivation supports a virtue-theoretic interpretation of Buddhist ethics.³ According to this interpretation, Buddhism says that enlightenment or *nirvāṇa* is the highest good that aspirants seek to attain. Aspirants should cultivate virtues, such as compassion and equanimity, to attain *nirvāṇa*. In this way, the goal of *nirvāṇa* serves the same function in Buddhist ethics as eudaimonia does in Aristotelian virtue ethics.⁴ Other philosophers interpret the Buddhist path along consequentialist lines. These philosophers hold that Buddhist ethics requires us to promote the aggregate welfare of all sentient beings. Moral cultivation serves these consequentialist ends. Buddhist practices equip us with the psychological capacities and motivations that allow us to more effectively reduce suffering and maximize well-being.⁵

In this paper, I'll offer a different interpretation of Buddhist ethics as a path. I'll argue that we can interpret Buddhist ethics as a kind of normative gradualism. By "normative gradualism," I mean that what we have normative reasons to do depends on our stage along a spiritual path. So, normative gradualism holds that our reasons change as we make spiritual progress. My account relies on the distinction between subjective and objective reasons. Roughly speaking, subjective reasons are reasons that depend on an agent's beliefs, while objective reasons are facts that count in favor of actions or attitudes independently of an agent's beliefs. Almost all of us believe that selves and persons are real and we have subjective reasons that depend on this belief. But Buddhists deny that the self is real. When we jettison the belief in the self, we'll come to see that we have objective reasons for impartial benevolence for all sentient

beings. Yet there's a gap between our subjective reasons predicated on the existence of the self and our objective reasons. Buddhist practices bridge this gap. By walking the Buddhist path, aspirants can erode their belief in the self. This brings our subjective reasons into closer alignment with objective reasons.

I'll argue that normative gradualism has important theoretical and interpretative payoffs. According to some interpreters, Buddhism denies that everyone has the same fundamental obligations. Instead, certain obligations only apply to advanced spiritual practitioners. I'll show how my account can explain this feature of Buddhist ethics: the subjective reasons of advanced Buddhist practitioners differ from the subjective reasons of novices. Another advantage of normative gradualism is that it allows us to integrate virtue ethical and consequentialist interpretations of Buddhist ethics. At an early stage of the path, we have subjective, agent-relative reasons to take up Buddhist practices and cultivate certain virtues to reduce our suffering and promote our own flourishing. However, as we make spiritual progress, our reasons become more impartial and consequentialist in nature. Near the end of the Buddhist path, we have strongest subjective reason to maximize the welfare of all beings. So, conflicting interpretations of Buddhist ethics may actually be descriptions of our normative reasons along different stages of the path.

I've organized the paper as follows. In section 2, I'll clarify the distinction between objective and subjective reasons and I'll argue that some of our subjective reasons, such as our reasons for egoistic concern, are tied to the belief in the self. In section 3, I'll suggest that, if the belief in the self is false, then we have objective reasons for impartial benevolence. Section 4 contends that Buddhist practices may help us to bridge the gap between our subjective and objective reasons and I'll explain why normative gradualism helps us to better understand the

structure of Buddhist ethics. In section 5, I'll consider challenges to some of the assumptions that frame my argument. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. The Self and Subjective Reasons

Egoistic Concern and the Self

Many of us believe that we have a self. What's that mean? You likely think that there's a part of you that is what you really are. This thing is a mental substance. You're the mental substance that is the thinker of your thoughts, the feeler of your emotions, and the doer that acts. This mental substance also distinguishes you from other parts of the world. Your chair or apartment is not you. Rather, the thing that's doing the thinking and the feeling is you. This mental substance bears your personal identity. You survive as long as this mental substance continues to exist.

In other words, we often attribute the following properties to the self:

- (A) The self is a constituent of the person. That is, the self is the part of a person whose existence is required for that person to continue to exist. The self bears relations of personal identity over time.⁶
- (B) The self is a unique and bounded entity. A self is ontologically distinct from all other things. There's a deep divide between the self and the world. The self is taken to be "me" while other selves and parts of the world are taken as "other."⁷
- (C) The self is a personal owner and subject. The self is the subject and owner of its thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Yet the self is also distinct from its thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

(D) The self is temporally extended. While a person's body and psychology may change, the self survives despite these changes.

(E) The self is an agent. It's the executive of the mind-body complex and directs its actions. The self evaluates aspects of the mind-body complex and can decide to change those aspects that it finds unsatisfactory.⁸

You can dispute parts of the list. For example, some philosophers deny that selves are temporally extended. Perhaps I've also omitted certain characteristics of the self. But I'll treat (A-E) as a rough understanding of what selves are. I'll assume that, if the self exists, it has the characteristics (A-E).

Most of us believe that we have properties (A-E) or that we're constituted by something that has these properties. According to Buddhists, a belief in the self has important consequences. Belief in the self underlies the I-conceit (*asmimāna*) and I-making (*ahaṅkāra*). The rough idea is this. Since we believe that we're bounded and unique entities with selves, we manifest partiality for our own lives, attachments, and interests. We're inclined to prioritize our own interests and attachments over those of other people. We also fear future pains and look forward to future pleasures in a way that's different from our attitudes to the future experiences of other people. I'll refer to the cluster of attitudes and dispositions as *egoistic concern*.

Here's an example to illustrate what I mean by egoistic concern. Imagine that you learn that someone in the world will be tortured and killed tomorrow at 5pm. How would you feel? You might feel sad or alarmed. Nonetheless, you'd likely go about your day as usual soon enough. After all, bad things happen in the world all of the time. There's little sense in letting this fact ruin your day. But suppose that you receive a new piece of information. You learn the identity of the person who will be tortured and killed tomorrow. It's you.⁹

This news would surely change your reaction. Why? *You* are now threatened with pain and destruction. This unique and separate entity—you—will cease to exist. And that’s utterly devastating. If you’re like most people, you’d be willing to do much more and bear far greater costs to prevent your future pain and destruction than you would to prevent the same fate from befalling someone else, such as especially a stranger. You also wouldn’t be reassured by the thought that there are other people similar to you around. Maybe there are people in the world who have psychologies or bodies that are remarkably similar to yours. That’s not good enough. It wouldn’t be good enough even if there were exact replicas of you sitting around, ready to take your place. You don’t just want your body, personality, or psychology to continue to exist. *You* want to continue on painlessly.

What explains why you might react in these ways? Here’s a hypothesis. Your reactions to this scenario reflect the belief that you’re a self. You think that you’re a unique and bounded entity and that the flourishing and preservation of this entity is profoundly important. If this hypothesis is right, then a belief in the self seems to underlie egoistic concern. We can describe this relationship in normative terms. The fact that we’re selves with properties (A-E) justifies or grounds egoistic concern. Here’s a gloss on this idea:

Egoistic Reasons. A person has intrinsic reasons for egoistic concern if and only if this person has a self.

By “intrinsic reasons,” I mean normative reasons that are not instrumental to some other goal or derivative from other reasons. Imagine that well-being is intrinsically valuable and that you should promote it. And assume that, out of all of your options, you can best promote well-being by promoting your own welfare. In that case, your reasons to promote your welfare are derivative from your reasons to promote well-being overall. In contrast, reasons to do or feel

something are intrinsic when they're reasons to do or feel these things irrespective of whether they facilitate some other end. So, if the self exists and Egoistic Reasons is true, then you have intrinsic reasons to be egocentrically concerned, even if this disposition fails to promote other values or goods.

Although classical Buddhist philosophers never formulated their views in these terms, Egoistic Reasons is a plausible reconstruction of a common Buddhist view about the relationship between egoism and the self. Nāgārjuna writes: "The self not existing, how will there be 'what belongs to the self'? There is no 'mine' and no 'I' because of the cessation of self and that which pertains to the self."¹⁰ Nāgārjuna's suggestion is that, if the self is unreal, then the distinction between "mine" and "yours" is unjustified. It seems to follow that we lack reasons for caring about our own well-being and futures in a way that's different from our reasons for caring about other people. Or consider the opening to the ninth book of Vasubandhu's

Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam:

Is there, then, no liberation elsewhere [outside of the teachings of the Buddha]?

There is not.

Why?

Because of grasping the false view of self. For [non-Buddhists] do not comprehend the convention "self" as just the continuum of aggregates.

What then?

They conceptually construct the self as a separate substance. And all of the afflictions have grasping after the self as their origin.¹¹

Vasubandhu connects “grasping after the self” with the false belief that the self is a separate substance. Once we eradicate this false belief, then self-grasping will cease. Here again there’s a link between the existence of the self and what we might broadly describe as egoistic concern.

But suppose that Buddhists rejected Egoistic Reasons. Imagine that Buddhist accepted that people have intrinsic and objective reasons for egoistic concern *if* they have selves with properties (A-E). Call this view: *Egoistic Reasons**. Egoistic Reasons* only specifies a sufficient condition for the existence of egoistic reasons. So, on Egoistic Reasons*, if we have selves, then we have intrinsic reasons for egoistic concern. But it would be hard to explain why the denial of selves should have soteriological consequences. Buddhists hold that the realization of no-self is liberating and central to the project of awakening. Yet, according to Egoistic Reasons*, it could be true that we have intrinsic reasons for egoistic concern even though selves are unreal. After all, there might be some other justification for egoistic concern besides the fact that we’re selves. This is why Buddhists should endorse Egoistic Reasons. Egoistic Reasons specifies a necessary as well as a sufficient condition for egocentric concern. So, if Egoistic Reasons is true, then the basis for egoistic concern collapses along with the refutation of the self.

Subjective and Objective Reasons

The next step in my argument is the claim that most of us have certain subjective reasons. I’ll argue that, since most of us believe that the self is real, we have subjective reasons for egoistic concern as well as other agent-relative reasons. My argument relies on a distinction between objective and subjective reasons. So, I’ll first explain this distinction.

Consider a famous case from Bernard Williams.¹² Imagine that Sam wants a gin and tonic and there’s a glass filled with liquid in front of him. Sam believes that the liquid is gin and tonic.

In fact, though, the liquid is petrol, which Sam prefers not to drink. What does Sam have reason to do? In one sense, Sam lacks a reason to drink the liquid. After all, it's petrol. But, in another sense, Sam does have a reason to drink the liquid since Sam wants a gin and tonic and believes that's what's in the glass. This case suggests that there are two kinds of reasons. First, there are reasons that are relative to what people believe. Second, there are reasons that people have if their beliefs are true. These two distinct senses of reason correspond to the difference between subjective and objective reasons. Sam has a subjective reason to drink the petrol, given his beliefs. Yet Sam lacks an objective reason to drink it, given the facts about what's in the glass. We can also describe this distinction in terms of the distinction between the ought of rationality and ought of advisability. We might say that Sam rationally ought to drink the liquid. But we can also say that an advisor who knew all the facts would tell Sam to refrain from drinking it.

It's hard to precisely describe the distinction between subjective and objective reasons. To describe this distinction, I'm going to draw on a prominent account of this distinction that Mark Schroeder and other philosophers have defended.¹³ This account understands subjective reasons in terms of objective reasons. It goes like this:

The Counterfactual Account. You have a subjective reason r to X if and only if you have some beliefs B which have the property, if they are true, of making it the case that you have an objective reason to X .

To see the appeal of the counterfactual account, let's apply it to Sam's situation. Sam has a subjective reason to drink the petrol. Why? Sam believes that the liquid is gin and tonic. If this belief were true, then Sam would have an objective reason to drink the liquid. Yet Sam's belief is false. So, Sam lacks an objective reason to drink it. In this way, the counterfactual account tracks our intuitions about Sam's reasons.

The counterfactual account is an analysis of subjective reasons. To make this account complete, we also need an account of objective reasons. What are those? Opinions differ. Some philosophers offer a naturalistic, reductionist account of reasons. They think that we can reduce normative reasons to attitudes or other psychological states.¹⁴ Yet these reductionists can retain the subjective-objective distinction. To do this, reductionists often rely on idealization. They say that you have an objective reason to A if an idealized version of yourself would judge that you have a reason to A. Other philosophers reject attitude-dependent accounts of reasons. These “non-naturalists” claim that normative reasons are independent from our psychologies. Reasons are instead irreducible properties of the world.¹⁵ Truths about reasons are a bit like truths about mathematics. It’s plausible that truths about mathematics that obtain regardless of what anyone thinks, believes, or feels about them. According to non-naturalists, the same goes for reasons. In this respect, non-naturalism preserves a robust kind of attitude-independence.

So, reductionists and non-reductionists have different explanations of objective reasons. I’ll remain agnostic about which account is right. The important thing for my argument is that we can make sense of both objective and subjective reasons and the counterfactual account identifies what counts as subjective reasons.

With these distinctions on the table, I can make the following argument:

1. You have a subjective reason r to X if and only if you have some beliefs B which have the property, if they are true, of making it the case that you have an objective reason to X.
2. We believe that there are selves with properties (A-E).
3. People have objective intrinsic reasons for egocentric concern if and only if there are selves with properties (A-E).
4. So, we have subjective intrinsic reasons for egocentric concern.

Premise 1 is the counterfactual account of subjective reasons. Premise 2 is the empirical observation that most of us believe in the self. So, we have subjective reasons if our belief in the self has a property of making it the case that we have objective reasons. Premise 3 is Egoistic Concern, which I claim is a plausible reconstruction of a common Buddhist view. It follows that we have subjective reasons for egoistic concern. What does this matter? If this argument is sound, then it's rational for us to manifest egoistic concern. We should promote our own interests and display a special concern for our own futures and lives. Partiality for oneself is subjectively justified.

We can extend this argument to other kinds of reasons besides the reasons for egoistic concern. Consider partiality for others. Buddhists argue that self-love and self-grasping are unjustified because these attitudes depend on an entity that's unreal. Yet that's also true of partiality for others. Most of us think that we have reason to be partial to our friends and family members. These reasons depend on the assumption that our friends and family members exist. If that assumption is false, then special obligations fail to apply to anything. At least, it's unclear how we can have obligations to non-existent entities. The same goes for most of the obligations that commonsense morality recognizes, such as promissory obligations, reparative duties, and so on. All of these obligations are conditional on the existence of people.

So, much of commonsense morality seems to depend on the existence of persons with selves. In fact, I suspect that all directed duties rely on the existence of selves and persons. Directed duties are duties that one person owes to another person who would be wronged if these duties were violated.¹⁶ From a Buddhist perspective, the problem with directed duties is that they require the existence of things that are in fact unreal—persons who can be wronged. Buddhists do sometimes talk as if persons with selves exist for the sake of convenience. We can give the

term “person” a convenient designation (*prajñāpti*) for pragmatic reasons. Using convenience designators like “person” makes it easier to communicate and navigate in the world. But, at the level of ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya*), persons with selves are unreal. The concept “person” is a conceptual imputation on a causal series of impermanent psychophysical elements. At this level, it’s hard to see how there can be directed duties. Yet most of us believe that persons are real entities. If persons are real, then it’s plausible that we can have directed duties. When we pair the belief that persons are real with the counterfactual account, we can infer that we have subjective directed duties.

Thus, we may have subjective directed duties because we believe in the self. Along with our reasons for egoistic concern, we have subjective reasons to be partial to our friends and family, keep our promises, repair our debts, and so on. But what do we have objective reasons to do from a Buddhist perspective? I’ll now sketch an answer to this question.

3. Objective Reasons and the Self

Buddhists think that our belief in the self is mistaken and the self is unreal. Why? Buddhists give different arguments for why the self is unreal. Let’s briefly touch on a few of them.

Buddhists point out that the self is a composite entity. If the self exists, it’s made up of psychophysical elements, such as feeling, thoughts, and consciousness. Buddhists refer to these psychophysical elements as the *skandhas* or aggregates. Yet none of the *skandhas* are suitable candidates for the self. The problem is that self is thought to be a stable and enduring entity. But the *skandhas* that make up the self are in constant flux. If the aggregates that constitute the self are impermanent, then it’s hard to see how there could be an enduring self. Consider your

thoughts or emotions. Your thoughts and emotions come and go. We should doubt whether thoughts and emotions could be an enduring substantial self, as they flicker in and out of existence. And the same goes for every other candidate for the self. Even the body is impermanent and everchanging, despite its appearance of stability. As we can find no self among the *skandhas*, we should conclude that the self is unreal.

Vasubandhu developed another argument against the self.¹⁷ If the self exists, then we can either perceive the self or infer its existence from other phenomena. But we can't perceive the self. When we observe the contents of consciousness, we only observe fleeting thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Yet we fail to perceive a self in experience. Moreover, we're also unable to infer the existence of the self. Members of the Nyāya school of Indian philosophers argued that the best explanation of mental phenomena such as memory is the existence of a self. The self bears memory across time and explains why I can remember what I experienced in the past. Buddhists counter that there's another hypothesis that can explain memory. This is the hypothesis that we're aggregates of psychophysical elements and past aggregates transfer information to future aggregates through causal interaction. According to Vasubandhu, the hypothesis that we're a causal series of psychophysical elements explains our mental lives just as well, if not better, than the hypothesis that we're selves. Thus, we're unable to infer the existence of a self from mental phenomena. Since the self is neither perceived nor inferred, we should doubt it exists.

Buddhists have other interesting arguments against the self.¹⁸ I'll put those to one side for now. I'll assume that one of these arguments is sound and that the self is unreal. We can now make the following argument. First, people have objective intrinsic reasons for egocentric concern if and only if there are selves with properties (A-E). That's Egoistic Reasons again.

Second, there are no selves with properties (A-E). Thus, we lack objective intrinsic reasons for egocentric concern. In other words, if the self is unreal, then egoism is a mistake. Partiality for oneself is irrational without the self.

But, if we lack objective reasons for egoistic concern, what objective reasons do we have? Buddhists suggest that the denial of the self opens the way to boundless compassion. We should care for the welfare of all sentient beings. Śāntideva develops the connection between no-self and impersonal benevolence in his *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (BCA). The BCA outlines the path of the bodhisattva, one who seeks to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of sentient beings. A bodhisattva refrains from attaining *nirvāṇa* and instead chooses to stay trapped in cyclic existence in order to liberate other sentient beings.

In the BCA, Śāntideva writes:

The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army and such, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong?

Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?

If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone.¹⁹

Scholars disagree about how to interpret these passages. But here's one prominent interpretation. Śāntideva is arguing for the conclusion that, if persons and selves lack ultimate existence, then we should reduce suffering irrespective of its location.

How does the argument go? Śāntideva observes that most of us think that we have prudential reasons. We believe that we should minimize our own suffering. But, if persons are

unreal, then we lack grounds for caring only about your own suffering. After all, “you” are a fiction. And it would be strange to prioritize the suffering of something that’s unreal. This would be like worrying about a character in a novel. You might get wrapped up in the novel and feel concerned for a character in it. But it’s only a novel. You’d be making a mistake if you prioritized the interests of your favorite character over the interests of beings that can experience suffering and well-being. Similarly, while you might become invested in the existence of persons and selves, you should accept that these concepts are merely convenient ways of describing a causal series of psychophysical elements. There’s thus no reason to give yourself priority over the welfare of others.

On the other hand, suffering is real. Moreover, this suffering happens to be spread out across the series of psychophysical elements that we conventionally call persons. What should we do about this suffering? Remember that we should reduce suffering in our own lives. If we should reduce our own suffering and we lack any reason for prioritizing our own interests, then we should reduce suffering across all beings. This gets us to the conclusion that we’re required to minimize suffering everywhere irrespective of its location. Some suffering occurs in me and some occurs in others. But all suffering has the same status—it is to be prevented.

We can understand the conclusion of Śāntideva’s argument in terms of subjective and objective reasons. If Śāntideva’s argument is right, then we have objective reasons to reduce suffering overall. An attitude-dependent interpretation of this claim might hold that an agent with perfect reasoning, consistent beliefs, and access to all of the facts would affirm the proposition that we should minimize suffering in the world. An agent of this kind would realize that the self is unreal and would affirm that there are reasons for impersonal benevolence. A non-naturalist interpretation says that it’s an irreducible normative truth that suffering is bad and to-be-

prevented everywhere. If selves and persons lack reality, then it would be arbitrary to only minimize suffering in one psychophysical series. On both interpretations, we have objective reasons to reduce suffering if selves lack reality. Furthermore, we also lack objective reasons for egoistic concern. For sure, we still have good reasons to be prudent. Yet this is because your prudence will minimize suffering overall. As Mark Siderits notes, you should still brush your teeth, as tooth decay causes suffering. But it's false that you should brush your teeth because it will minimize suffering for *you*. Rather, you should brush your teeth since doing so reduces suffering period.²⁰

So where does this leave us? I've defended three key claims. First, we have subjective reasons for egoistic concern because we believe that we're selves. Second, we lack objective reasons for egoistic concern because the self is unreal. Third, we have objective reasons for impartial benevolence. I'll now suggest that bridging the gap between our subjective reasons for egoistic concern and our objective reasons for impartial benevolence requires us to walk the Buddhist path.

4. The Buddhist Path

The belief in the self is no ordinary belief. It permeates our experience. In an insightful paper, Miri Albahari suggests that the belief in a self is a framework belief, a belief that is axiomatic and that plays a foundational role in belief formation.²¹ She notes that we take framework beliefs for granted and assume them in justifying other beliefs. It's plausible that belief in the self is a framework belief, as we unreflectively assume it when interpreting our experience. Albahari also points out that belief in the self is recalcitrant. By this, she means that we maintain a belief in the self even if we're convinced that selves are unreal on an intellectual

level. Suppose you inspect Buddhist arguments against the self and you agree that they're sound. In all likelihood, you'll still viscerally believe that you're a self despite the fact that you affirm the proposition that selves are unreal.

Yet we might be able to weaken our belief in the self over time. One possibility is that Buddhist practices can help us to realize no-self. Let's start with meditative practices.²² Most of us identify with our cognitive processes. We think that we are our thoughts, feelings, and stories. Meditation counteracts this tendency. When engaging in mindfulness meditation, the meditator observes her thoughts and feelings come and go. The meditator refrains from identifying with thoughts and feelings or weaving them together into a narrative. A meditator can train herself to see mental events as just that—passing events. In this way, meditation encourages disidentification from our thoughts and feelings. As the Buddha advised, we can say of our thoughts and feelings: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”²³ Through long practice, meditators can begin to see themselves as assemblages of psychophysical processes. Adept meditators can realize in their bones that they lack selves.

Other meditative practices counteract self-clinging as well. One of these is loving-kindness meditation. Loving-kindness meditation asks you to wish for good things for sentient beings, including yourself. The meditator extends a feeling of kindness and friendliness to loved ones, neutral people, people whom you dislike, and eventually all beings. One goal of this practice is to replace reactive attitudes like anger, hatred, and resentment with attitudes of friendliness and kindness.

What does loving-kindness have to do with the realization of no-self? Emotions like anger, hatred, resentment, and envy reinforce our belief in a self. When we feel anger, we often think: “someone else has wronged *me*.” When we feel envy or jealousy, we may think: “someone

else has gotten something that *I* deserve.” These emotions lead to self-grasping. But suppose that we can replace reactive emotions with loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is a feeling of benevolence and friendliness. Loving-kindness meditation seeks to cultivate this feeling for all beings without distinction. So, loving-kindness avoids reinforcing self-grasping and may undermine the self-involvement that accompanies the belief that we are persons. If we can uproot this belief, then we can increase our concern for the suffering of others. This increased concern motivates us to fulfill the demands of impartial benevolence.

Other aspects of the Buddhist path erode the belief in the self. Some aspects of the Eightfold path govern our behavior, such as right conduct, right livelihood, and right speech. These aspects of the Eightfold path require us to refrain from harming others through speech and action. Among other requirements, we should avoid taking life, engaging in theft, and lying. These injunctions counteract the mental afflictions (*kleshas*) of greed, hatred, and delusion. Take greed. Greed can give rise to the desire to steal from others. Yet greed is premised on the false belief that there’s an “I” who can be made better off through theft. And, if you act from greed, then you reinforce the delusion that you have a self. In turn, this delusion may amplify your greed. But you may be able to prevent this self-perpetuating process from occurring by adhering to right conduct.²⁴ If you practice right conduct and internalize virtues such as generosity, honesty, and loving-kindness, then you can restrain the mental afflictions. Counteracting the mental afflictions lays the groundwork for the realization of no-self.

My point is this: it’s possible that Buddhist practices can erode our belief in the self.²⁵ What’s the upshot? Remember that I assumed this account of subjective reasons:

Counterfactual Account. You have a subjective reason r to X if and only if you have some beliefs B which have the property, if they are true, of making it the case that you have an objective reason to X .

The next step in my argument is to claim:

Weight. Everything else being equal, your subjective reason r to X is weaker to the extent that your beliefs B are weaker and r is stronger to the extent that B are stronger.

To motivate *Weight*, let's return to the case of Sam and the petrol.

Recall that Sam believes that the glass in front of him contains gin and tonic, while in fact it contains petrol. What does Sam have reason to do? And how *strong* is this reason? To answer these questions, let's first note that there are degrees of belief. We can hold beliefs with more or less confidence. Suppose that Sam's belief that the liquid in the glass is gin and tonic is strong. If Sam had to bet, he'd say that there's a 99% chance the liquid is gin and tonic. Call this: case 1. In case 2, Sam only weakly believes that the liquid contains petrol. If Sam had to bet, he'd say that it's only 51% likely that the glass contains gin and tonic and 49% likely that it contains petrol. It's plausible that Sam's subjective reason to drink the liquid in case 1 is stronger than the reason to drink the liquid in case 2. *Weight* explains how this is possible. So, if we can generalize from these cases, then we should endorse *Weight*.

Belief in the self comes in degrees too. Your belief that you have a self can be weaker or stronger. Suppose that your belief in the self is weak. So, your subjective reasons that depend on this belief will be weaker than they would have been if your belief in the self were strong. Buddhists contend that patterns of egoistic concern rest on a belief in the self. Assume that Buddhists are right about this. Thus, if your belief in the self is weak, then your subjective reasons for egoistic concern will be weak too. As we've seen, Śāntideva and other Buddhist

philosophers draw a connection between no-self and impartial benevolence. They hold that, if the self is unreal, then it follows that we should minimize suffering irrespective of its location. If that's true and your belief in the self is weak, then you have stronger subjective reasons to minimize suffering without distinction.

The Buddhist path takes us from egoistic concern to impartial benevolence. At the beginning of the path, the spiritual aspirant firmly believes in the self. So, this aspirant has comparatively weighty subjective reasons for egoistic concern and other subjective agent-relative reasons. The aspirant then walks the Buddhist path. Through meditation, ethical discipline, and other practices, the aspirant gradually weakens her belief in the self. As a result, the weight of her subjective reasons for egoistic concern decreases and the weight of her subjective reasons for boundless altruism increases. There comes a stage on the path where the practitioner has extinguished her belief in the self. At this stage, the practitioner's subjective reasons and her objective reasons align.²⁶ The only thing left is unbounded compassion. Vasubandhu describes the psychology of the bodhisattvas like this: bodhisattvas "take delight in doing actions for the welfare of others, since they lack all concern about themselves, because of repeatedly feeling compassion.... [Bodhisattvas], after eliminating attachment towards the self arising from these [erroneously grasped selfless elements], through the power of repeated practice, increase concern for others and endure suffering on account of them."²⁷

This completes the sketch of my account. What's the payoff from understanding Buddhist ethics in this way? One benefit is that it can make sense of the idea that Buddhist ethics is gradualist. Several authors observe that Buddhists deny that everyone has the same moral obligations. Charles Goodman notes that Buddhist texts in the Mahāyāna tradition lack any word or phrase for "moral obligation." Why is this term absent? Goodman suggests that, for

Buddhists, there's no moral obligation that's binding on everyone. Only spiritual practitioners who accept moral discipline have obligations.²⁸ In a similar vein, Peter Harvey writes:

A key aspect of Western ethical systems is that moral prescriptions should be universally applicable to all people who can understand them. Buddhism, though, is generally gradualist in approach, so while it has ethical norms which all should follow from a sense of sympathy with fellow beings (such as not killing living beings), others only apply to those who are ready for them, as their commitment to moral and spiritual training deepens.²⁹

On Harvey's description, Buddhists believe that whether certain ethical norms apply to you depend on your spiritual progress.

My account justifies a gradualist approach to ethics. While the objective reasons for impartial benevolence always obtain, what we have subjective reasons to do depends on our stage along a spiritual path. Here the phrase "spiritual path" refers to a process of inner transformation. We begin in a state of self-grasping and confusion and, with luck and practice, we can cultivate the mental qualities and traits of character that allow us to fully believe the truth of no-self. At any early stage on the path, we have relatively strong reasons to care for our own interests and pursue our own projects. The demands of benevolence are muted. Yet your subjective reasons shift as your belief in the self is eroded. As we make progress along the path, the weight of our reasons for impersonal benevolence grows until there's nothing left. This is in keeping with Śāntideva's advice that we should start by giving away "only vegetables and the like at first." But, once we've traversed the bodhisattva path, we can give up even our own flesh.³⁰

Another payoff from my account is that it allows us to synthesize different theories of Buddhist ethics. Philosophers disagree about the structure of Buddhist ethics. Perhaps the two most prominent views are that Buddhist ethics is a kind of virtue ethics or a kind of consequentialism. Some authors, such as Damien Keown, argue that Buddhism is committed to virtue ethics.³¹ Keown compares the structure of Buddhist ethics to Aristotelian virtue ethics. On his view, Buddhist ethics is similar to the eudaimonistic ethics found in Aristotle, except that Buddhists replace eudaimonia with enlightenment. Other philosophers, such as Siderits and Goodman, argue that Buddhist commitments support a consequentialist moral theory.³² They appeal to Śāntideva's argument for impartial benevolence in order to justify an obligation to minimize suffering for all sentient beings. Virtues are good insofar as they promote this outcome.

Which interpretation of Buddhist ethics is correct—the virtue ethics or consequentialist one? Perhaps both of them are right. Start with eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Eudaimonistic ethics holds that we have agent-relative reasons to seek *eudaimonia* or flourishing for ourselves as the ultimate end. The subjective reasons of aspirants at the beginning stages of the Buddhist path may have a similar structure. At an early stage of the path, aspirants are justified in manifesting special concern for their own welfare and flourishing. For one thing, aspirants have subjective egoistic reasons to reduce their own suffering. Buddhist practices help alleviate suffering. Through meditation, aspirants can reduce their dispositions to cling to their experiences and possessions. They can also weaken their destructive emotions and begin to replace them with loving-kindness and equanimity. So, aspirants subjectively ought to take up Buddhist practices in part because these practices promote their own flourishing. Our subjective reasons at this stage along the Buddhist path are similar to those described by eudaimonistic virtue ethics.

But things change as our belief in the self crumbles. Our subjective reasons become more consequentialist. Our reasons to care for our own flourishing weaken and the strength of our reasons to promote the welfare of others increases. Near the end of the path, our subjective reasons are thoroughly consequentialist in nature. Our only reasons are those that count in favor of increasing the happiness and relieving the suffering of sentient beings. As Śāntideva claims in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, one who is destined to become a bodhisattva must make “a sincere, unwavering effort in thought, word, and deed to stop all the present and future pain and suffering of all sentient beings, and to bring about all present and future pleasure and happiness....”³³ In this way, both the virtue ethics and consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics may be correct. At one stage, we should seek to perfect our nature and promote our own flourishing. At another stage, we should strive solely for the greatest possible happiness of all beings. Virtue ethics and consequentialism can both be true descriptions of our normative reasons along different stages of the Buddhist path.

5. A Comment on Two Controversial Assumptions

In developing my argument, I’ve made some controversial assumptions along the way. Here are two of them. First, my description of the Buddhist path is in its broad contours a description of the career of the bodhisattva, a saint in Mahāyāna traditions of Buddhism. Yet that’s a controversial interpretation of the Buddhist path. Some Buddhist traditions accept a different ideal of enlightenment. For example, Theravāda Buddhism upholds the aspiration to become an *arhat*. The arhat follows the teachings of the Buddha, achieves enlightenment, and escapes the cycle of death and rebirth. In contrast, the bodhisattva chooses to be reborn in order to help other beings achieve enlightenment out of compassion for them. Another controversial

assumption that I've made is that our objective reasons are consequentialist in nature. I've endorsed Śāntideva's argument for impartial benevolence and claimed that we lack objective reasons for egoistic concern and to satisfy the directed duties that commonsense morality recognizes. But many would dispute these assumptions. Quite a few philosophers contend that Śāntideva's argument fails and deny that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist even from the objective point of view.³⁴

What happens if we relax these controversial assumptions? Can my argument still work? I think so. The fundamental structure of my argument goes like this. There's a distinction between our subjective reasons and objective reasons. Many of our subjective reasons depend on our belief in the self. Yet this belief is false. If we can discard this false belief and acquire true ones, we can better align our subjective reasons with our objective ones. Furthermore, Buddhist spiritual practices can help us to overcome our belief in the self. Notice that, at this level of description, the basic structure of this argument avoids relying on the two controversial assumptions that I highlighted. Let me explain this point in a bit more detail.

Let's start with the goal of Buddhist practice. Suppose that we aspire to become an arhat, not a bodhisattva. To become an arhat, a practitioner must still overcome her belief in the self. And the beliefs and attitudes of an unenlightened being are going to differ substantially from the beliefs and attitudes of an arhat. For instance, an arhat would refuse to kill sentient beings under any circumstances. Some Theravāda texts also indicate that, like the bodhisattva, the arhat is motivated by compassion for all sentient beings.³⁵ In fact, since the arhat has overcome her attachments and belief in the self, she will likely want to devote the remainder of her existence to benefiting others. This suggests that, even if our ideal is arhathood, there's a large gap between our subjective reasons that are premised on the existence of a self and our objective reasons. So,

I doubt that replacing the ideal of the bodhisattva with that of the arhat makes much of a difference to my argument.

Let's turn to my second controversial assumption, the assumption that our objective reasons are consequentialist in nature. In truth, I do believe that the most plausible reconstruction of Buddhist ethics is a kind of consequentialism. Yet my argument can survive the rejection of this assumption too. Here's how. Let's first consider what it means for a reason to be objective. To illustrate, I'll focus on what a Humean about reasons might say about objective reasons. Some Humeans, such as Sharon Street, claim that objective reasons are just those reasons that an idealized agent would endorse. An idealized version of Sam who knew all of the relevant facts and had perfect powers of reasoning would recommend that Sam refrain from drinking the petrol. Thus, Sam has an objective reason to avoid drinking the petrol.

Now, imagine that Sam is an unenlightened being who firmly believes in the existence of the self. Sam likely has a variety of other beliefs, such as moral beliefs, that depend on his belief that selves and persons are real. I'll call this set of beliefs: M1. Next, let's consider things from the perspective of an idealized version of Sam who has perfect powers of reasoning, entirely coherent beliefs, and knows all of the relevant facts. This idealized version of Sam would discard his false belief in the self and he'd probably affirm moral reasons and beliefs that unenlightened Sam would reject. Moreover, idealized Sam would affirm certain moral reasons and beliefs at least in part *because* he disavows a belief in the self. Call this set of moral reasons: M2.

You can plug in your favorite interpretation of Buddhist ethics into M2. As long as there's a significant difference between M1 and M2, the structure of my argument remains intact. Perhaps idealized Sam would endorse consequentialism. Or maybe he'd accept virtue ethics or moral particularism. Here's the important point: to move from M1 to M2, Sam needs to adopt

Buddhist practices to erode his belief in the self and bring his subjective reasons into alignment with his objective ones. If you reject consequentialism as an interpretation of Buddhist ethics, then you can insert whichever interpretation you prefer. Buddhist ethics will retain the gradualist structure that I've laid out.

6. Conclusion

Buddhists often invoke the metaphor of the path to describe the process of spiritual cultivation. We begin in a state of confusion. Our minds are pervaded by egoism, grasping, and aversion. These tendencies lead to suffering. And we suffer because we're deluded about the nature of reality. Among other confusions, we reify impermanent mental and physical events into enduring and stable entities and treat those entities as if they were real. But it's possible through Buddhist practice to eradicate our delusions and achieve awakening. If my argument in this paper is right, then the transition from delusion to awakening brings about a transformation in our normative reasons. The gradualist understanding of Buddhist ethics that I've sketched says that the content of our reasons changes as we make progress along the path. In our initial state of delusion, we have reasons to grasp and appropriate our experiences and to treat each other as separate and bounded selves. But, once we have thoroughly uprooted self-cherishing and smashed the belief in the self, we'll see clearly that the only reasons left are those in favor of unending compassion for all sentient beings.

¹ I'd like to thank Jonathan Gold, an audience at Princeton University, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper. The paper is much improved as a result of their feedback.

² In this paper, I'll use the terms "enlightenment" and "awakening" synonymously, and I'll say that to become enlightened is to enter a state of *nirvāṇa*. Buddhists disagree about how to spell out the concepts of enlightenment and *nirvāṇa*. But I'll assume that, at a minimum, an enlightened person has fully discarded her belief in the self. For an analysis of enlightenment and *nirvāṇa* that emphasizes the realization of no-self, see: Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), chapter 4.

³ For another account of the Buddhist path that emphasizes the phenomenology of the Bodhisattva, see: Jay Garfield, "What Is It like to Be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 1–2 (2011): 333–57.

⁴ Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

⁵ Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), pp. 32–5.

⁷ For a discussion of these aspects of the self, see: Miri Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), chapter. 3

⁸ Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self*, pp. 96–7.

⁹ I adapt this example from: Jim Stone, "Parfit and the Buddha: Why There Are No People," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48, no. March (1988): 519–32.

¹⁰ Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, *Nagarjuna's Middle Way: Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), pp. 292–3.

¹¹ Translated in: Jonathan C. Gold, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 99. The parentheticals are mine.

¹² Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Rational Action*, ed. Ross Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 101–113.

¹³ Mark Schroeder, "Means-End Coherence, Stringency, and Subjective Reasons," *Philosophical Studies* 143, no. 2 (2009): 223–248; Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–66; Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*.

¹⁵ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Vol. 1* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ I take this definition from: Simon Cabulea May, "Directed Duties," *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (2015): 523–532.

¹⁷ For a translation of the relevant text and discussion, see: Matthew Kapstein, *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Sommerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), pp. 91-6.

¹⁸ See: Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, 2 edition (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁹ Santideva, *The Bodhicaryavatara*, ed. Paul Williams, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 97.

²⁰ Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, pp. 76-7.

²¹ Miri Albahari, "Insight Knowledge of No Self in Buddhism: An Epistemic Analysis," *Philosopher's Imprint* 14, no. 21 (2014): 1–30.

²² My discussion here has benefited from ideas presented in: Charles Goodman, “Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 555–71.

²³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 616.

²⁴ My discussion here draws on: Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, pp. 78-80.

²⁵ More precisely, Buddhists claim that their practices erode the belief in the self. But is this true? There’s some suggestive evidence that meditation does have this effect. For instance, some studies indicate that experienced meditators can active a “selfless” mode of awareness. For instance, see: Yair Dor-Ziderman et al., “Mindfulness-Induced Selflessness: A MEG Neurophenomenological Study,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (2013): 582–582.

²⁶ Here’s a question: would an enlightened person have normative reasons at all? Consider the fact that an enlightened being, such as arhat, has discarded her belief in the self. And, we might suppose, that an arhat also extinguishes her sense of agency along with this belief. If the self is completely discarded, then there’s no sense in which the arhat is an agent. If the enlightened being is not an agent, then this being can no longer have reasons for action since reasons for action only apply to agents. This is a difficult topic, but here are some tentative thoughts on this issue. First, it’s not entirely clear to me that normative reasons fail to apply to an arhat. We might adopt something like the following picture: while the arhat realizes that she doesn’t ultimately exist, she can still acknowledge that there are reasons for the skandhas that conventionally make up the arhat to cause things to happen. Perhaps she might think: “there are reasons for this collection of skandhas to play a part in a causal sequence that reduces suffering.” Second, even if it’s true that an enlightened being lacks normative reasons, my account can nonetheless apply to

Buddhist practitioners up to the point that they attain full enlightenment. These practitioners still conceive of themselves as agents, if only in an attenuated sense. I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising these concerns.

²⁷ Here I'm using the translation in: Stephen E. Harris, "Demandingness, Well-Being and the Bodhisattva Path," *Sophia* 54, no. 2 (2015): 201–216 at 208.

²⁸ Charles Goodman, *The Training Anthology of Santideva: A Translation of the Siksasamuccaya* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA, 2016), p. xl.

²⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 51.

³⁰ Santideva, *The Bodhicaryavatara*, p. 69.

³¹ Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*.

³² Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*; Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, chapter 5.

³³ Goodman, *The Training Anthology of Santideva*, p. 17.

³⁴ Paul Williams, *Altruism and Reality* (Routledge, 2015), chapter 5.

³⁵ Charles Goodman argues that the difference between an arhat and a bodhisattva is less significant than often assumed. See: Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*, p. 185.