The No-Self View and the Meaning of Life

Baptiste Le Bihan

Department of philosophy, University of Geneva

Baptiste.LeBihan@unige.ch

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I. Introduction

Several philosophers, both in Buddhist philosophy (see e.g. Zahavi, Thompson, and Siderits 2011) and Western philosophy (Unger 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, Stone 2005) have claimed that the self does not exist. Such a claim may immediately be rejected because of the *incredulous stares* and the *existential threatening* it triggers. One might think that it is *obvious* that the self exists since one feels as though one does have a very direct access to one's self. Or, alternatively, one may claim that if the self were to fail to exist then life would be meaningless–thereby perceiving the eliminativist claim as an existential threat. A lot has already been written about incredulous stares and the roles of experience-based intuitions in metaphysics (see for instance Korman 2009 and Benovsky 2015) so, within the scope of the paper, I shall only concern myself–so to speak–with the latter resistance, which has received far less attention. The no-self view (also called "eliminativism about the self") might, intuitively, *threaten* not only our existence as a subject but also the very *meaning of our lives*. Or at least, to put it with more care, the no-self view, at first glance, provides us with a reason to believe that life is meaningless. In the present article, after introducing the two debates over the reality of selves and the nature of the meaning of life (respectively in section II and III), I will argue that eliminativism about the self does not entail that life is meaningless. Eliminativism is consistent with many explanations of the meaningfulness of our lives (sections IV

and V). I will then close by examining how the no-self view relates to practical matters in Buddhism, arguing that eliminativism may even be construed further as *partially grounding* a naturalist account of the meaning of life (section VI).

But before getting started, I would like to clarify two dialectical points. First, there is something wrong in the idea that a metaphysical view should be rejected for practical reasons. Existential threatening, one may argue, should never count as a case against a particular philosophical view. Nonetheless, the success of a philosophical view depends not only on its objective qualities, but also on its capacity to seduce and convince. Indeed, a view that is too much counterintuitive or threatens our ordinary lives in a too radical way is at risk of being rejected without serious consideration–thereby not getting the proper attention it deserves. Therefore, I will argue indirectly in favor of the no-self view by showing that it does not necessarily entail unpalatable existential consequences since the no-self view is consistent with many realist accounts of the meaning of life.

Second, nihilism[1] about the meaning of life is not necessarily problematic. Several important figures have endorsed nihilism about the meaning of life (see for instance Camus 1942 and Nagel 1971). Therefore, the *implication* from the no-self view to nihilism about the meaning of life is not necessarily an issue for the no-self view. In what follows, I merely argue in favor of eliminativism about the self by showing that it is *consistent* with numerous, and especially realist, conceptions of the meaning of life.

II. Eliminativism

In the Western tradition, eliminativism about *material objects* (including ordinary objects and sometimes physical particles[2]) is a metaphysical theory designed to solve philosophical problems like *vagueness*, *persistence through time* or *material constitution* (see for instance van Inwagen 1990, Merricks 2001, Le Bihan 2016, Benovsky forthcoming). There are several motivations for the

adoption of eliminativism about material objects.[3] An important motivation is that it helps solving several philosophical puzzles. For instance, how is it possible for material objects to remain numerically the same through time when these are subject to qualitative changes? An available answer is that they do not remain numerically identical to themselves. There are no *persisting* material objects since there are no material objects *tout court*. One could favor a revisionary approach, arguing that material objects do exist although they are instantaneous and do not persist across time. It follows, however, that material objects as ordinarily construed in common sense–as *persisting* entities–do not exist. A second motivation arises from the problem of material constitution: if one asks whether a statue and the hunk of matter it is made of are one and only one object–arguing that for each volume of space-time there is at most one and only one material object occupying it–or, by contrast, whether these are two distinct objects–arguing that the statue and the hunk of clay have distinct modal properties, for instance because the hunk of matter can survive a reshape, contrary to the statue–a possible answer is that neither the statue nor the hunk of matter exists. The two notions of "statue" and "hunks of matter" are carving reality into two distinct conventional ways.

What there is instead of material objects is then a further question. The main option[4] is that the world is made of *mereological simple entities*, construed as particles or properties for instance, statues and hunks of matter being collections of mereological simples we refer to with different modal conventions. And importantly, the world is only made of these mereological simples: composition never occurs (a view called "mereological nihilism"). When we refer to so-called *statues* and *hunks of matter*, we are thus referring to collections (or classes or sets) of simples with two guises. As a "statue", the collection is targeted in association with the modal convention that if the collection were to change its macroscopic shape, it would cease to be the same collection. By contrast, as a "hunk of matter", the collection is targeted in conjunction with the modal convention that if the collection were to change its macroscopic shape, it would remain the very same

collection. So the view denies that *mind-independent modal properties*–as opposed to *mind-dependent modal concepts*–are real.

It is quite appealing to hold the same position with respect to *both material objects and selves* by either being realist about the two kinds of entities (the common sense view), or by being eliminativist about the two (like Unger 1979a, 1979b, 1979c). Indeed, selves are also supposed to change through time: as time passes, the self changes through the constant flux of thoughts and feelings. Eliminativism offers, here again, a way out to the problem of identity over time: there is no persisting self but only a collection of thoughts and feelings distributed in time and space. Also, a self is supposed to be constituted by, or at least, to be dependent on, the existence of bodily and/or mental states (in the same way a statue is constituted of a hunk of matter). However, it is worth noting that it is possible to entertain different views about the two kinds of entities. For instance, van Inwagen (1990) denies the existence of material objects but believes in organic entities. Merricks (2001) is eliminativist about material objects but realist about conscious entities. Or, to take a last example, Benovsky (2014) endorses eliminativism about material objects and reductionist realism about the self.[5] These three philosophers are inclined to erase material objects from their picture of the world. But they are reluctant (quite understandably) to take the further step and claim that there is no self. Each has interesting arguments to defend the asymmetry between the two cases. Merricks, for instance, argues that selves have causal powers, which are non-redundant with respect to the causal powers of the mereological simples that compose selves. Within the scope of the paper, I will not discuss these arguments, though. I will take for granted that a unified approach bears interesting theoretical virtues and justifies the broad eliminativist view that material objects and selves do not exist.

At this stage, it is useful to introduce a distinction between two similar views: *eliminativism* and *reductionism*. According to reductionism, the self is real, but it is not identical with a *Cartesian ego*. Rather, it is a *class* or a *bundle* of feelings and thoughts. Hence, both eliminativists[6] and

reductionists agree that "I" refers to a bundle of mereologically simples, but they part company on the *metaphysical status* of the bundle. For the eliminativist, the existence of a collection of experiences does not entail the existence of a self. For the reductionist, on the contrary, this collection of experiences is just what it is to be a self. Therefore, according to the reductionist, a bundle is an "ontological something", a unifying device that belongs to the category of relation rather than the category of substance.[7] In order to get a better grip on the difference between the two views, it is useful to appeal to a distinction made by Leśniewski's (1916/1992) between *collective* and *distributive classes*. A distributional class is a sum of individuals with no further "wholeness material", no supplementary unified entity. The distributional class of individuals is solely the distribution of the individuals under consideration, nothing more. By contrast, a collective class is a sum of individuals as a whole. A collective class of particular individuals is not the distribution of the particular individuals, but the unity of the considered individuals. Armed with this distinction, we may then define eliminativism as the view that bundles are only distributional classes, and reductionism as the view that bundles also are *unities*, collective classes, namely genuine mind-independent unities. In what follows, I will focus on eliminativism and its consequences for the meaning of life. However, it may also be of interest for the reductionist who believes that existence without a substratum generates an existential threat.

The ontological distinction just drawn between reductionism and eliminativism substantively differs from the one we find under the same name in contemporary discussions in the philosophy of Buddhism, where the no-self view plays a crucial role (see e.g. Zahavi, Thompson, and Siderits 2011, Siderits 2016). Indeed, it is common to find the claim that Buddhism suggests *eliminativism about the self* and *reductionism about persons* (see e.g. Siderits 2016). Two distinctions have to be introduced in order to explain the general picture: first, the distinction between "self" (*ātman*) and "person" (*pudgala*), and second the distinction between "ultimate truth" and "conventional truth". The self refers to a specific inner sense, which is taken to be a component,

among others, of the person, and acts as a unifying device ensuring the synchronic and diachronic identity of the latter. Eliminativism about the self is the claim that selves are not to be found either among the ultimate building blocks of the world (the mereological simples) or among the composite entities since from mereological nihilism, it follows that there cannot be cross-temporal composite selves. The ontological status of complex persons is more ambiguous. Indeed, persons are regarded as *conventional entities* or, at least, as involved in *conventional truths* (contrary to selves).[8] Therefore, the claim that persons exist is a conventional truth–but not an ultimate truth. Persons persist across time, enjoying cycles of rebirth, but there is no self (not even conventionally). The realization that there is no self then allows us to access a state of enlightenment, namely *nirvāna*, by bringing existential suffering to a stop. In this picture, the distinction between reductionism and eliminativism amounts to a distinction between useful and useless conventions: the self is useless, entailing eliminativism about the self, when the notion of person is a useful construct, entailing reductionism about persons. However, as I will argue, this distinction is orthogonal to the more ontological distinction that I introduced above, in a such a way that Buddhism entails that we should be eliminativist about both selves and persons.

In order to see why reductionism in the philosophy of Buddhism sense entails eliminativism in the metaphysical sense, we must focus on the nature of conventional truths. How exactly we should make sense of conventional truths is a delicate matter since the notion has both an *anti-realist flavor* with its conventional aspect and a realist feel because of its appeal to the notion of conventional *truth*. Since reductionism about persons follows from the view that the existence of persons is a conventional truth, the interpretation of conventional truths directly impacts the ontological interpretation given to reductionism. In what follows, I present a dilemma for the interpretation of conventional truths and explain why, as a result, I accept an antirealist reading of conventional truths, entailing that *reductionism about persons is eliminativism about persons in disguise*.

Here is the dilemma. On the one hand, if the truth-makers of conventional truths are *real* conventional entities, then it entails that the world is made of two domains of entities, mirroring the two domains of truths: *conventional entities* and *ultimate entities*. Operating under this assumption, conventional and ultimate entities do not differ in existence since they are both real. Rather, they differ in the *kind of existence* they own; metaphorically, they have a different *existential color*. It entails that we should not be eliminativists or reductionists about persons: we should be *dualists*.[9] Indeed, if persons exist as entities belonging to a distinct domain of reality targeted by a distinct domain of truths, then persons cannot be *ontologically reduced* to entities of the ultimate domain (although they are *related to* collections of ultimate entities). Therefore, it is dubious that we should accept that conventional truths entail the existence of conventional entities numerically distinct from ultimate entities. Furthermore, the very idea that existence might come in different kinds is logically problematic as has been argued by Merricks (2017).

On the other hand, we may regard conventional truth as following only from the existence of ultimate entities and as not requiring the existence of conventional entities. Both domains of truth would find their truthmakers in the ultimate ontology. In this framework, we act on linguistic conventions–we create fictions–pretending that, through these conventions, we refer to real entities. But then, conventional truths are conventional *fictions*–not conventional *truths*. This interpretation seems more in line with reductionism about persons as Siderits conceives of it (the view that persons are reduced rather than eliminated because the notion of person is useful), but entails *ontological eliminativism* about persons, not *ontological reductionism* about persons. Indeed, ontological reductionism as I have defined above, is just the bundle theory. But from mereological nihilism, it follows that the bundle theory is false: there are no bundles. Therefore, moving from language to ontology, we end up with ontological eliminativism about persons. In what follows, I will not refer anymore to reductionism and assume that eliminativism about x is the correct way to think of conventionalism about x.[10] Therefore, I assume that strictly–ontologically–speaking

persons are no more real than selves, leaving aside discussions on the correct interpretation of the two truths doctrine.[11]

Let us close the section with one last brief clarification. The word "life" conveys (at least) two very different notions: *biological life* and *existential life*. A biological life is an entity studied by biology. Eliminativism about the self may come with *eliminativism about biological lives* as part of a broader eliminativist package. But the two positions stand on independent grounds. Conceiving of the world as inhabited by biological entities, but not by selves, is a genuine option. By contrast, an existential life is a collection of first-perspective experiences. One important point is that an existential life can be real even though no self or biological life is actually steering this existential life. In this sense, an existential life might be identified with a disunited distributional class of experiences. Let me then refine the claim of this paper as follows: *eliminativism about the self does not entail that our existential lives are meaningless*.

III. The Meaning of Life

What is the meaning of life? Along a *deflationist* line, one could construe the very *question* as being meaningless, arguing for instance that it is misleading to construe a life as having a meaning since a meaning should be the property of a sentence or a word, not of a *material entity* (by contrast to semantic entities) such as a life. According to an alternative *nihilist* approach (see Nagel 1971 and Murphy 1982, 12-17), there is no meaningful *answer* to the question, although the question itself actually does make sense.[12] Within the scope of the paper, I will assume that the question does make sense *and* that it is legitimate to try to propose a concrete answer, rejecting both deflationism and nihilism. Indeed, since I want to offer a way to block the path from eliminativism about the self to nihilism/deflationism about the meaning of life, I am not particularly interested at the project of justifying or discussing the two anti-realist views about the meaning of life (nihilism and deflationism). So, in what follows, let us assume that the question is meaningful and may admit of a

rational answer.[13]

What does it mean to say that life has meaning or that one should try to give meaning to one's very existence? In order to have a first grip on the notion, it is useful to think about the notion of *meaningless life*, which often manifests in a feeling that some of us toy with from time to time: the experience that our life is *absurd*. As Nagel puts it, describing a particular case of the experience of absurdity:

> What we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space or time: we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what *makes* life absurd, if it is absurd. For suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)? Reflection on our minuteness and brevity appears to be intimately connected with the sense that life is meaningless; but it is not clear what the connection is. (Nagel 1971, 717)

Absurdity may also appear with another contrast, not between scales, but between *internal* and *external perspectives*. When adopting an outside perspective on life, we may realize that our goals do not matter from this external viewpoint. Nagel puts it like this:

> The things we do or want without reasons, and without requiring reasons–the things that define what is a reason for us and what is not-are the starting points of our skepticism. We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as

> arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded. (Nagel, 1971, 720)

Nagel assumes that we are real and that the problem of the meaning of life pops up from the experience of absurdity grounded, in the first case, in the realization that we are almost nothing with respect to the size of the cosmos in the first case and in the realization that our goals do not matter from an external perspective in the second case. I take eliminativism about the self to yield a similar problem of contrast. The believer in eliminativism might believe that we are *nothing* compared to the scales of time and space since we are nothing *tout court*, and that our first-perspective goals do not matter because there is no such first-perspective self. In other words, eliminativism is a new source of worry for our location in the natural world. From an outside perspective, we come to see ourselves as being nothing but a collection of experiences resulting in a negative judgment about the importance of the goals pursued in these experiences.

To get a better grip on these specific questions about the meaning of life in the context of the no-self view, let us distinguish between three different but related questions about the meaning of life. A first question asks about the *correct conception* of the meaning of life: what makes a life meaningful? Or to put it differently, under what conditions is a life meaningful? For instance, does it have to focus on ethics, religion, social achievement, pleasure, or on something else? Let us call this question the "substantial question". Interestingly enough, the substantial question can admit of a *monist* answer according to which only the quest for one of these goals triggers the meaning of life or, on the contrary, a *pluralist* view[14] according to which the pursuit of various goals may lead to a meaningful life.

A second question is about the *origin* of the meaning of life: what is the *source* of meaningful lives? In a way, this is also asking about what makes a life meaningful (similarly to the

substantial question) but it is not asking about the goals we should aim at to live a meaningful life. It asks for the *ontological source* of these goals. Is it to be found *outside* of the natural world (typically in God or souls) or, on the contrary, *in* the natural world (for instance in decisions, the mind or biological laws)? Let us call this question the "origin question". The origin question is deeply connected to the substantial question. Indeed, in order to know what the required conditions for living a meaningful life, we have to determine its actual ground. If the source of meaning is God, for instance, then the meaning of life can be obtained by fulfilling the purpose that God chose for us (this is the "purpose theory", see Metz 2002). Or to take a naturalist example, if the source is grounded in the important decisions we make, then meaning might arise by acting accordingly to these decisions. In brief, the requirements for a life to be meaningful depend on the source of meaningfulness.

A third question is: "what is *a* meaning of life?" What is the *metaphysical profile*–the metaphysical category–of the meaning of life? Compare this with discussions in analytic metaphysics on the nature of properties. It is one thing to ask what properties there are in the world; this is another to ascertain whether these properties are tropes or universals. Regarding the meaning of life, in the same way, it could be asked what the meaning of life *is* (compare with "what are the natural properties in the world?"); but one may also ask to which metaphysical *category* it belongs (compare with "are properties tropes, universals or something else?"). For instance, is a meaning of life literally a *meaning*? If it is not a meaning, properly speaking, what is it? A value? Or does it belong to a *sui generis* metaphysical category? Let us call this question the "metaphysical question". Since this last question remains neutral with respect to eliminativism, I will leave it aside. I will now have a look at the origin and substantial questions in the framework of eliminativism (sections IV and V) before turning to Buddhism (section VI).

IV. Supernaturalist Approaches

In what follows, I will consider the answers that may be offered to the origin and substantial questions when endorsing eliminativism about the self. The goal is to ascertain whether eliminativism prevents particular answers to the substantial question, namely to the question of what makes a life meaningful. To begin with, following a standard classification (see Metz 2002, 2007 and Hosseini 2015), let us distinguish between two views about the source of the meaning of life: s*upernaturalism* and *naturalism*. Both views are realist since they take for granted that lives of certain individuals are, or can be, genuinely meaningful. They merely disagree on the *source* of this meaning. According to supernaturalism, the meaning of life is to be found, at least partially, outside of the natural world in a *monotheistic god* and, or *immortal souls*[15] (Metz 2002, 2007). According to naturalism, by contrast, the meaning of life finds its source in the natural world. My goal is to answer the following question: Is eliminativism consistent with naturalism and supernaturalism?

Let us focus first on supernaturalism. Supernaturalists fall into three groups. Supernaturalists of the first group originate meaning of life in God. They claim that the existence of God is a necessary condition for meaning to obtain. According to these *God-centered accounts*, the meaningfulness of our lives is grounded in a relationship with God. A famous answer to the substantive question is then the *purpose theory*: our lives are meaningful when "fulfilling a purpose that God has assigned to us" (Metz 2002: 784). The second group of supernaturalists connects meaning of life to the reality of supernatural *immortal souls*. According to these *soul-centered accounts*, the meaningfulness of our lives is grounded in immortal spiritual souls and the fact that meaningful lives are lives worth living in the first place (see Metz 2002: 788-792). Finally, the third group connects meaning to both God and souls, expressing the view that the two of them are necessary conditions for meaning to obtain.

Eliminativism about the self is not consistent with soul-centered accounts of supernaturalism. Indeed, the meaning of life cannot be found in souls. The notion of soul carries the notion of a

substantial self transcending the natural world. The notion of soul is an immaterial unifying device, metaphysically loaded, that permits eternal identity through time, and even after the end of time, whatever this is supposed to mean. Therefore, if there is no minimal self, it follows that there is no soul.

What about *God-centered supernaturalist accounts of the meaning of life*? If the meaning of life is to be found outside of the world in God, then it does not bear on mundane entities such as human lives. If human lives are selfless distributional classes, God could well have set a purpose for them. Still, does it really make sense to construe the world as created or inhabited by God, in the framework of eliminativism? Could She have created a world in which there are no souls or selves? This sounds at odds with several classical monotheist religions; however, as far as I can see, there is no contradiction here. Besides, it is not obvious that it is really and deeply at odds with *all* classical monotheist religions. A non-personal God might have created humankind in Her own image as distributional classes of thoughts and perceptions. In Islam, for instance, God is conceived as an impersonal deity (see for instance Legenhausen 1986). So, it should not be so implausible for a theist that God designed human lives as impersonal selfless collections of entities. Contrary to what one may be believe at first glance, there is room for god-centered accounts of the meaning of life when operating under the assumption of eliminativism. In sum, eliminativism is consistent with God-centered accounts, but not with soul-centered ones.

V. Naturalist Approaches

Let us now turn to naturalism. Naturalism is *objective* or *subjective* depending on where the source of meaning stands with respect to the mind (Metz, 2002, 792). Subjective naturalism locates the source of meaning in the mind. Popular subjective naturalist answers to the substantive questions are that the meaning of life arises from experiencing feelings of satisfaction (Ayer 1990, 189-196) or adopting purposes and acting in order to realize them (Smart 1999). Alternatively, objective

naturalism locates the source of meaning *only* in objective features, along a *pure objectivist account*, or more commonly, in *both* subjective and objective mind-independent features (along a *hybrid view*). For instance, Susan Wolf endorses such a hybrid objective account, claiming that "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf 1997, 211). This objective attractiveness may then be construed further in terms of mind-independent values that we try to access–such as moral or aesthetic values.

How does naturalism fit with the no-self view? Naturalists regard reality as including a space of mind-independent or mind-dependent norms/values, with at least one of these norms/values having to be sought in order to achieve a meaningful life. Does the account conflict with eliminativism? Once again, distributional classes may do the same explanatory job as *Cartesian egos* or *Humean bundles*, acting as ersatz of unifying devices (cf. Benovsky 2009). An existential life, understood as a distributional class of experiences, may directly instantiate natural normative properties. There is no need to introduce further an *intermediary self* between the existential life and its normative properties. And the same holds true for any other naturalist view one may think about. Independently of the kind of normative properties one may wish to posit, one may regard life as instantiating these normative properties. The search for a meaningful life may then be identified with the attempt to make our lives instantiate these properties. Therefore, lives may be meaningful even though no one is sitting in the driving seat. Perhaps one will object that naturalists like Wolf do require a subject to be *actively* engaged in pursuing objective value. However, we may understand the situation in the following way: proper parts of the collections of entities we falsely identify as selves, may collectively instantiate normative properties, and may collectively pursue objective value.[16] The search for meaning is genuine here–but this is not the quest of some*one*. This is the quest of a plurality that perceives–or thinks of–itself falsely as a *singularity*.

One possible exception, however, regarding compatibility with eliminativism may be the

transcendence view endorsed by Nozick (1981, chapter 6, 1989, chapter 15-16). According to the transcendence view, the meaning of life is grounded in the *transcending of our limits in order to connect with larger organic unities*. These organic unities are not literally organic and take their name by analogy with the biological realm. A unity is organic iff it has a high degree of internal complexity and coherence (rocks, biological entities and conscious entities are therefore organic unities in this sense). And the more an organic unity is complex, the more it is valuable.[17] The quest for meaning is then construed as the aiming at transcending our limits in order to connect with other organic unities. As Nozick writes, contrasting *meaning* with *value*:

> Value involves something's being integrated within its own boundaries, while meaning involves it's having some connection beyond these boundaries. The problem of meaning itself is raised by the presence of limits. Thus, typically, people worry about the meaning of their lives when they see their existences as limited, perhaps because death will end up them and so mark their final limit. To seek to give life meaning is to seek to transcend the limits of one's individual life. (Are there two ways to transcend our current limits and hence two modes of meaning: connecting with external things that remain external, and connecting with things so as somehow to incorporate these things, either within ourselves or into an enlarged identity?) (Nozick 1989, 166-167)

> We need not look beyond something to find its (intrinsic) value, whereas we do have to look beyond a thing to discover its meaning. (Nozick 1989, 167)

The reference to selves and enlarged identity raises the following question: is the transcendence view committed to the reality of selves? After all, if a self has to connect with organic unities by transcending its limits, it seems that this self has to be real in the first place. In order to answer this question, it is helpful to consider an interesting objection Metz (2002, 799-800)

addressed to Nozick, namely that, sometimes, events or actions conferring meaning to our lives are *internal*. For instance, it seems to happen when we exhibit integrity or another ethical virtue. This example does not involve any kind of connection with an external entity. Nozick is aware of these possible counter-examples and suggests that, in these particular situations, we may actually be connecting directly to values or "reality". According to Metz (2002, 800), it is mysterious how this kind of connection is supposed to work. As a possible answer, Metz appeals to Gewirth's view that the mysterious connection should be understood as *self-transcendence*. Knowledge sometimes overcomes "the limitations set by the restrictive purview of ordinary sense experience" (Gewirth, 1998, 178) and the meaning of life depends on the use of *reasons*. As Metz expresses it: "self-transcendence involves going beyond one's animal self to a greater degree than people typically do" (Metz 2002, 800). Self-transcendence is thereby understood as the transcending of the animal self to become a rational self.

Now, eliminativism about the self allows for another interesting reading of self-transcendence. Substituting collections of experiences for selves, one may contend that the meaning of life lies in the transcending of the limits of the *apparent self,* in order to conceive of or to perceive existential lives for what they really are. Self-transcendence would be, literally, the transcendence of the self. Thus, far from being at odds with eliminativism, Nozick's naturalist transcendence view inherits of an interesting interpretation when we endorse eliminativism: a life is meaningful, to quote him again, by its "connecting with external things that remain external, and connecting with things so as somehow to incorporate these things, either within ourselves or into an enlarged identity", but *also*, through a *third* path, by dissolving the very organic unity we are supposed to be, namely, by consciously erasing our perception and conception of the limits between the alleged self and the external world. Furthermore, realizing that there is no self could be one way of transcending the animal life. As we shall see, this eliminativist interpretation of the transcendence view bears remarkable similarities with what we find in Buddhism.

VI. Buddhist Traditions

As mentioned above, Buddhism posits two kinds of truths: ultimate truth and conventional truth. In spite of the lack of existence *tout court* of the self (and persons), at first glance, life is perfectly meaningful: Buddhists follow the Four Nobles' Truths (*āryasatya*), a practical code of conduct that urges us to bring the existential suffering to an end, in order to access *nirvāṇa*, a state of enlightenment. Indeed, it is part of Buddhist beliefs that we are subject to rebirth cycles, and that the existential suffering will continue in this infinite succession of lives. In this framework, realizing that there is no self is regarded as a path towards the stop of this existential suffering. Thus Buddhism might lead to an answer to the substantial question: a meaningful life aims at escaping existential suffering. Life would be precious for the very reason that it is ephemeral and offers the possibility to reach a positive state of absence of sufferings. Such a quest would furthermore instantiate nobility, as suggested by the name "Four Nobles' Truths", and the instantiation of this nobility would constitute the meaning of life. This answer to the substantive question thereby depends on a particular answer to the origin question: life partially draws its meaning from a mental subjective state, namely the realization that there is no self. Therefore, we may regard this spirituality as one that uses the no-self view or, more precisely, the *belief* in the truth of eliminativism, as part of what the meaning of life is. Buddhism, therefore, might not only count as a case of compatibility of a realist understanding of the meaning of life with eliminativism but also as a case in which the very meaning of life depends on the fact that there is no self.

It is worthy of attention that if in its original form Buddhism must be regarded as a hybrid view–combining naturalist and supernaturalist features–a purely naturalist account is also available by dropping the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Indeed, by definition, supernaturalism grounds the meaning of life in an entity transcending the natural world (typically, the soul or God). Buddhism, in its original form (accepting the no-self view and the doctrine of rebirth and karma) grounds the

meaning of life in naturalist features (the realization that there is no self and the overcoming of existential suffering in *nirvāṇa*, or at least the project of doing so) and supernaturalist features–the cycles of rebirth and *karma* if we acknowledge that this is a transcendent principle of justice. But note that there is no necessary principled connection between the no-self view and the doctrine of karma and rebirth, and it might be argued that dropping the doctrine of rebirth helps us to make sense of the no-self view, two views difficult to combine.[18] A modified version of Buddhism, with no doctrine of rebirth and karma, makes it possible to ground the meaning of life in naturalist features only: the no-self view and the quest of overcoming existential suffering.

However, the connection between the no-self view, and the practical claim that the absence of selves is important for the pursuit of a meaningful life is not straightforward. Indeed, it relies on a further substantive claim: *Buddhist philosophy conceives of life as being meaningful*. This claim is not obvious since, to my knowledge, the very notion of "meaning of life" is not to be found in the Buddhist literature. Therefore, one might object that Buddhism entails that life is meaningless since there is no self, but nonetheless, life is worth living because there is still something important to do. In that respect, and in order to evaluate the plausibility of the claim that a Buddhist life may be regarded as meaningful, in a somewhat anachronistic perspective, it will help to introduce a distinction between the two notions of *meaningful life* and *life worth living* (see for instance Nozick 1989, chapter 15 and Metz, 2002, 788). A useful way to distinguish between the two notions is to take an example in which we do have the intuition that the presented situation is a life worth living, even if not a meaningful one. Take, for instance, a stamp collector. Such a person could be utterly absorbed in her task during her whole life, having a constant purpose, gaining pleasure and satisfaction from the systematical pursuit of this particular goal. But should we be willing to consider her as having discovered (or created) a meaning of (for) her life through this particular activity? I am personally inclined to answer negatively but, obviously, it depends on how *liberal* one is willing to be about the meaning of life. One may want to go *pluralist*, contending that there

are many alternative meaningful ways to live. In addition, one may contend that any conception of meaning one believes to be true offers a road towards a meaningful life. This is what I mean by a "liberal" conception of the meaning of life.[19] On the contrary, it is possible to adopt a more restrictive position by assuming either *monism* (there is only one meaning of life) or a more *restrictive form of pluralism* (there are various possible meanings of life but, still, not any activity providing satisfaction to someone on a regular basis should count as a genuine meaning of life). In being either monist or restrictive pluralist, it is possible to argue that a life aiming at collecting stamps is not a meaningful life, although it has positive value that makes it worth living (see for instance Wolf 2012).

Equipped with this distinction between *valuable/worth living lives* and *meaningful lives*, let us come back to Buddhist philosophy. The following interpretation of Buddhism suggests itself as a plausible alternative: Buddhists believe that life is meaningless; and it is this last realization that grounds the *positive value* of life–the fact that life is *worth living*. One may combine the idea that there is no self (and so, that life is meaningless) with the idea that it should help us in the conduct of our life (life is valuable). In this regard, there are two main ways to go. Either the Four Nobles' Truths provide us with a meaning of life or, on the contrary, they show us that life, as worthwhile as it is–its value being partially grounded in the no-self view–is meaningless. Then, in order to argue that practical Buddhist philosophy provides us with a case of belief that life is meaningful, a belief grounded in the further belief that there is no self, one has to show that Buddhists are not only believing that life is worth living for but, also, that life is meaningful. However, since the notion of the "meaning of life" is not to be found in the Buddhist literature, it will be hard to use Buddhist primary literature to settle the issue one way or another. I suspect that the answer to this question depends closely on how liberal we are ready to go regarding to what may count as a meaning of life.

Therefore, and although this interpretation depends on a particular understanding of the connection between the value and the meaning of life, Buddhist metaphysics and practical

philosophy may well offer a concrete example of how a no-self view might partially ground the meaning of life. Therefore, far from being an insurmountable obstacle, the no-self view offers a possible answer to both the substantive and the origin questions.

Up to this point, I have been discussing mereological nihilism as a particular threat for the meaning of life, arising in both Buddhist and Western philosophy. But another, more radical, claim may be found in the Buddhist literature. I refer here to a specific Buddhist tradition discussed at length by Western scholars, the early *Madhyamaka tradition*. This tradition accepts the idea that everything (including material objects and selves) is *empty*, namely lacking *substance*. It is not easy to understand exactly what this means in the framework of Western metaphysical categories but what it is certain is that it cannot be identified with mereological nihilism only: mereological simples also come under attack. The emptiness claim seems to point towards at least two alternative interpretations: *ontological deflationism* and *eliminativism about material objects and selves*. According to the ontological deflationist interpretation of the Madhyamaka tradition–endorsed for instance by MacKenzie (2008)–the world is not mind-independently structured. Therefore, because there are no ontological categories in general (such as properties, facts, objects or events) there are no substances in particular. Ontological structures would be mind-dependent conventional projections on top of a world intrinsically free of any categorical structure.[20] By contrast, according to the eliminativist interpretation, the world is mind-independently structured. We should not abandon mind-independent metaphysical categories *per se*. But the metaphysical categories of substance, object, essence and nature do not belong to the furniture of the world excluding both macroscopic objects *and mereological simples*–suggesting perhaps the conjunction of eliminativism and a gunk view (see Le Bihan 2013). Interestingly, the claim that everything is empty makes the challenge for the meaning of life even harder. Indeed, the non-existence of mereological simples makes it difficult to replace selves by a something else–pluralities of mereological simples in other Buddhist traditions–that could collectively instantiate normative properties. As an attempt to sketch

out a solution to this issue, we could appeal to a top-down approach, in the wake of Schaffer's priority monism (2009, 2010)–the view that the whole cosmos is the most fundamental entity and that its parts are less fundamental–in suggesting that although no composite objects and no mereological simples are to be found in the fundamental world, derivative proper parts of the cosmos can instantiate normative properties. However, arguing that a monist interpretation of the Madhyamaka ontology would be sound is a delicate issue for another day.

To sum up, eliminativism is almost completely neutral with respect to questions about the meaning of life. We should not feel particularly committed towards deflationism or nihilism about meaning because of the no-self view, with the possible exception of the Madhyamaka tradition. Pluralist or monist, naturalist or supernaturalist, many conceptions of the meaning of life remain available to the eliminativist. As disturbing as it may seem at first glance, the no-self view does not pose any substantive existential threat. Life may perfectly be meaningful even if no driver is to be found in the driver seat. The sole constraint the no-self view places on approaches to the meaning of life concerns its possible *origin*. And, importantly, the very realization of this fact may even partially ground the meaning of life.[21]

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Endnotes

1 For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the view that there is no meaning as "nihilism", to the view that there are no material entities or selves as "eliminativism", and to the view that mereological composition never obtains as "mereological nihilism".

2 See e.g. Le Bihan (2013, 2015).

3 Obviously, there are many accounts that attempt to solve these problems, and most of them do not deny reality to material objects. I am not arguing that eliminativism is the best way to solve these problems (even though I do believe it is) but I am only providing a short description of why eliminativism about material objects is thought to provide an elegant solution to classical philosophical puzzles.

4 A second popular approach is a top-down monist view. According to the view, the world is one, a cosmos, which instantiates directly natural properties without the mediation of material objects. This monist view comes then into two versions. According to *priority monism*, material objects exist derivatively but not fundamentally (Schaffer 2009, 2010). According to *existence monism*, material objects do not exist (Horgan and Potr 2006). If in the present paper I operate under the assumption of the bottom-up approach, everything that I will write is compatible with a top-down approach.

5 Jiri Benovsky has since changed his mind from reductionist realism to eliminativism about the self. See Benovsky (forthcoming).

6 As we shall see, there may be a more radical interpretation of eliminativism as the view that "I" is not even referring to collections of mereological simples.

7 For a discussion of the distinction between a realist bundle theory and an eliminativist bundle theory, cf. Le Bihan (forthcoming). For a comparison of the substratum view and the bundle view, see Benovsky (2008, 2009).

8 My understanding of the two truths doctrine relies mainly on Siderits (2007), Westerhoff (2009, 2011) and Zahavi, Thompson, and Siderits (2011).

9 Furthermore, and as suggested by their name, conventional and ultimate entities also differ in *fundamentality*: ultimate entities would be more fundamental than conventional entities. But the fundamentality claim does not play any role in the dilemma, what matters in this context is just the duality claim.

10 For a discussion of the difference between reductionism and eliminativism in the context of the Buddhist tradition, which also hints at the distinction between the notions of self and person, see the discussion: Benovsky (2017a), Siderits (2017), Benovsky (2017b).

11 Note that even if one were to accept the conventional existence of persons, the existential challenge would arise again from both perspectives. From the ultimate perspective persons are multiplicities of mereological atoms, lacking any simple or composite self, and with no ultimate unity. Could these plural persons lead a meaningful life? And from the conventional perspective, persons are conventional unities. Could these entities existing only by conventions live meaningful lives?

12 In turn, nihilism thus construed comes into two versions: *radical nihilism* and *mysterianism*. Radical nihilism is the view that there is no meaningful answer to the question because there is no answer *simpliciter*. Mysterianism is the somewhat different view that there is no meaningful answer to the question because such an answer is ineffable. The two versions of nihilism also differ from skepticism, the view that there is a rational answer to the question, but one that we cannot know.

13 I will not discuss the fact that meaning *in* life–conferred by some events–should be distinguished from the meaning *of* life as a whole. I will assume that the existence of meaningful events entail the meaningfulness of life as a whole.

14 See for instance Baggini (2005).

15 Or, alternatively, the meaning of life is grounded in both a monotheist God and souls.

16 See Caves (2015) and Cornell (2017) for a defense of plural instantiation. The authors develop this idea in a broader context–ensuring that mereological nihilism is consistent with emergent properties.

17 "Value is a matter of the internal unified coherence of a thing" (1989, 167).

18 See Siderits (2015, section 4) for a discussion of the issue and a proposal to solve it.

19 Cf. for instance Wolf (1997) and Kekes (2000, 30).

20 One could object that ontological deflationism is not a proper interpretation of the emptiness claim because it entails that the debate between non-reductive realism (the substantial view), reductionism (the bundle view) and eliminativism (the no-self view) is a linguistic game: there is no genuine ontological matter of fact at stake here. However, ontological deflationism entails that the world has no ontological structure, and therefore is not structured in selves, persons, objects and mereological simples. This fits quite well with the idea that everything is empty. Therefore, this interpretation may not be swept aside.

21 For helpful comments on a previous version of this draft, I would like to thank Jiri Benovsky, Karen Crowther and two anonymous referees.