

## A Buddhist Response to Olla Solomyak: “The World to Come: A Perspective”

Bronwyn Finnigan (Australian National University)

Olla Solomyak discusses Life and the Afterlife from the perspective of Hasidic Judaism. She presents it as an alternative to two dominant Jewish conceptions of the “World-to-come”, what she calls the intellectualist and the supernaturalist, each of which she finds problematic. According to the intellectualist conception, a pure intellect with knowledge of eternal abstract truths enters an immaterial World-to-Come after death. Solomyak argues that this inadequately accounts for how the “individual self” survives death, since our “first-personal” sense of ourselves consists of more than an abstract grasp of spiritual truths. This implies a Jewish desideratum for an adequate account of the World-to-Come: (D1) it is the individual self who survives death and exists in this state. According to the “supernaturalist” conception, the World-to-Come is the physical domain in which we presently exist and into which the individual is physically resurrected at some time after death. The problem with this, for Solomyak, is that it inadequately accounts for *how* physical resurrection occurs. Its defenders insist it requires divine intervention. Solomyak argues that explanatory gaps remain, such as *which* of our physical dimensions are resurrected (surely not our decomposing corpses) and *how* the relevant physical dimensions could possibly be resurrected at some later time. This implies a second Jewish desideratum for an adequate account of the World-to-Come: (D2) it needs to provide a reasonable explanation for *how* the individual self enters this state.

Solomyak’s Hasidic alternative promises to meet both desiderata. It does so by distinguishing two perspectives on reality; a “non-fundamental” perspective of “common-sense” in which we are spatio-temporally structured individual selves, and a “fundamental” perspective in which ‘we’ are viewed as mere “expressions or manifestations” of a “single, unified God”. While Solomyak claims that the fundamental perspective “grounds” the non-fundamental, she does not take a position on what this implies for the status of non-fundamental entities (i.e., whether they are “fictional characters or figments of God’s imagination”). She also admits that she hasn’t explained how the individual self “survives” death or the role of death for realising the fundamental perspective. She nevertheless thinks this Hasidic account can satisfy D1 and D2. It satisfies D1 because it is the very same individual self that realises these two perspectives. And it satisfies D2 because, while some

account is needed to justify the validity of the two perspectives (not offered here) and to explain how the fundamental perspective is realised and “unhidden” (also not offered here), the individual self is not assumed to enter the World-to-Come in any ontologically substantive sense that needs explaining.

How might a Buddhist respond to this proposal? The general explanatory strategy is familiar. Buddhism and other Indic philosophical traditions frequently employ a distinction between two standpoints on reality; one that is non-fundamental and reflects common-sense descriptions of a physical world populated by spatio-temporally distinct entities, and another that is ultimate or fundamental. Buddhist philosophers disagree amongst themselves about how best to characterise the ultimate or fundamental mode of reality. None, however, assume that it consists of a single, unified God that grounds whatever non-fundamentally exists.

Until modern times, the idea of rebirth, or a life after death, was widely accepted and asserted by Buddhists. We might ask whether their idea of rebirth satisfies the Jewish desiderata, D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub>. A quick argument against D<sub>1</sub> might suggest itself. D<sub>1</sub> is the desideratum that the individual self survives death. The Buddha taught that there is no self. So, one might argue, it cannot be the individual self who survives death. But this raises the obvious question: *who* then is reborn after death? A more sophisticated answer is needed that shows how the Buddhist denial of self is consistent with rebirth if the concept of rebirth is to make sense. This answer would also need to satisfy some version of D<sub>2</sub>. That is, it needs to tell some story about *how* whatever is reborn *can* be reborn.

Buddhist philosophers have a lot to say about these issues, and offer different explanations that turn on different conceptions of the relevant sense of self that the Buddha denied. I will here sketch one early Buddhist position and argue that while it might satisfy a version of D<sub>2</sub>, it is unlikely to satisfy D<sub>1</sub>.

The Buddha denied that there is a self (*ātman*). While there is debate about the exact scope of this denial and its implications, most Buddhists understand it to at least reject the existence of a permanent, unchanging and eternally existing substance that persists through time and across lives. Instead, what we call persons, are empirically and conceptually analysed as dynamic and highly complex causal systems of psychophysical elements. The Buddha offers several classifications of these elements. The most well-known is of the five-aggregates, according to which persons are analysed to consist of: (1) material bodily elements, (2) elements of feeling, (3) elements of discriminative cognition such as

perceptions, thoughts, and recollections, (4) volitional elements such as intentions and reactive attitudes, and (5) events of consciousness. This analysis is assumed to be exhaustive; there is nothing else that constitutes a person other than tokens of these five types of elements. According to the Buddha, all these elements are impermanent and depend on causes and conditions for their existence. Moreover, their unification as a 'whole' system (a persisting person) is not considered to be a real substance with causal properties. Some Buddhists attribute to the Buddha a distinction between two standpoints on reality, the conventional and the ultimate, to explain why we nevertheless talk as if there were persisting persons and assume them in our social, linguistic and moral practices (Siderits 2005).

Can this Buddhist analysis of persons satisfy D2? *How* is an individual person reborn? On an early Buddhist view, persons are reborn in the sense that key elements in the causal system of psychophysical elements that we conventionally identify with that person extend beyond the boundaries of their natural death. While the physical elements fall away at death, elements of a subtle form of consciousness have causal effect across this boundary and spark an embryo into sentience. Certain volitional elements also causally transmit into the next life since they are the bearers of the karmic debt accumulated as the result of good and bad actions performed in this life. They causally influence the nature of the persons next mode of existence (i.e., whether they are reborn as a divine being, a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, or a hell denizen) and cause some auspicious or inauspicious events to occur in that life (Jackson 2022). While this might seem mysterious in the sense of being experientially unverifiable (except by the spiritual insight of an enlightened being), the underlying mechanism is thought to be similar in kind to what regularly occurs in a single lifetime; it is held to be akin to the fact that the psychophysical elements of an infant are not identical to, but causally related in the right kind of way to, those of the adult later in life.

What about DI? This is the desideratum that it is the individual self that survives death and exists in the World-to-Come. By 'individual self' Solomyak means a first-personally aware subject of experience; 'me!'. Is it *me* that is reborn in the next life on the Buddhist account? This is complicated. Some Buddhists argue that subjective awareness (on some minimal construal) is constitutive of certain modes of consciousness (Coseru 2012). But there are different views about what this amounts to (Finnigan 2018) as well as about which mode of consciousness has causal effect in the next life (Batchelor 1997, Jackson 2022). If it turns out that subjective awareness *is* constitutive of the kinds of conscious events that *do* have causal effect in the next life, then it might be argued that it is "the same" subjective awareness both

before and after death but only in the sense that those conscious events are causally related in the right kind of way. This account is unlikely to support a sense of ourselves persisting across this boundary, however. On most Buddhist accounts, the experience of a persisting 'me' involves more than just subjective awareness but also inferential and conceptual activities supported by memory. These cognitive supports tend not to feature in accounts of what crosses the boundary of death. We typically do not recall our past lives, for instance, and so are unlikely to recall our present life when reborn into the next. It is also thought to be much more likely that we will be reborn as some kind of animal (or hungry ghost or hell denizen) due to the bad karma generated by our misdeeds in the present life. If this is right, and while there are complex issues around the nature of animal sentience, it is unlikely that the relevant mode of subjective awareness will possess the rich sense of ourselves that we might hope to continue in our next life.

#### REFERENCES

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