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Impermanence, Anattā, and the Stability of Egocentrism; or, How Ethically Unstable Is Egocentrism?

Michael G. Barnhart¹

Abstract

Egocentrism has always been viewed as profoundly unethical, and thus a reason against ethical egoism. This paper examines the arguments for such claims and finds them somewhat wanting. It then considers the positions that egocentrism is psychologically untenable and that it is philosophically unstable. Though it appears true that egocentrism is a psychologically unappealing position for many, it isn't universally so and may be adaptable to some dystopian situations. However, the claim that it is philosophically unstable may be more promising, and the paper turns to Owen Flanagan's Buddhist-inspired discussion of the issue in his book *The Bodhisattva's Brain*. Flanagan argues that the notion of *anattā* offers an important reason for not taking oneself seriously and thus fatally undermines the meaningfulness of privileging one's own

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interests or concerns over others. The paper examines this reasoning, but concludes that Flanagan's interpretation of *anattā* may be too weak to support his refutation of egocentrism. The paper concludes by suggesting a more extreme interpretation of *anattā* that Flanagan rejects and argues that it might both do the job and better resist philosophical criticism than its weaker cousin.

Ever since the beginning of philosophical time, egoism or egocentrism has suffered a bad reputation. That is not to say it has lacked defenders, but the bulk of opinion has consistently been against it. A number of strategies have been employed to discredit it, but perhaps the most common is to argue that it precludes ethical conduct. Thus, the egoist is presented with the following rather unattractive option: either he can be egocentric or he can be ethical, but he cannot be both. Of course, nothing prevents one from opting for egoism over morality, but I have often wondered whether the egoist must concede morality in the first place. Might the question, "Can one be ethical and yet solely preoccupied with self concerns?" be an open one?

Opting for egoism over morality raises the common "Intro to Ethics" question: "Why be ethical at all?" The answer typically involves an inquiry into human nature, the "self" in a general sense, and the demands of social living. Such inquiry usually concludes that it is irrational not to be in some way other-regarding. This is, one cannot plausibly be egocentric without caring about the good itself, a flourishing life, universal suffering, the demands of social role-playing, or the mysteries of *Dharma*. Thus, one cannot be said to be good, virtuous, caring, or dutiful unless one has concerns that go beyond the self and extend to others. But is this so? Or is it that we simply assume that ethics is unselfish and that these concerns of ethics are matters that are always other-

regarding? In other words, why can't someone be good, virtuous, caring, or dutiful and pre-occupied with himself? I well imagine that one *could* be ethical and care about more than oneself. But *must* one?

To see what I mean, consider the views of a philosopher who accepts the possibility that egoism can be ethical, or that egoistic ethics can exist, J. L. Mackie. In his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Mackie argues that there can be a perfectly good sense in which egoism is ethical: a “variety of egoism which says that everyone should seek (exclusively or primarily) his own happiness” (84). Ethical egoism, then, is a form of universalization. That is, “proper names and indexical terms, as constants, play no essential part” (84). Obviously, if they did, there would be nothing at all universal about the rule, which means it would not be a rule in the sense of being “committed to taking the same view about any other relevantly similar action” (83). Further, Mackie explicitly claims that “Moral judgments are universalizable” (83). By contrast, I’m asking whether that is so. Can the egoist who reasons using statements where proper names and indexicals figure as constants be moral or ethical? Of course, Mackie thinks not. The reason seems to be that we cannot think of morality (or ethics) as an institution without “rules or principles of action” that guide the actions or behavior of those within the institution (80). And without being an institution, it seems, morality cannot be prescriptive or binding. Because a rule requires some level of generality or universality, proper names cannot play an “essential part.” But does morality or ethics have to be an “institution,” or does this assumption rather bias the issue that I am trying to raise? An institution is necessarily interpersonal, but the question I am raising challenges that. Must, in a prescriptive sense, one be institutional? Mackie doesn’t think so as a matter of “general logic” (cf. 80ff). Such subjective considerations cannot count, in his view, as moral or ethical at all.

One might ask exactly what I mean by “morality” or “ethics” when I ask the question. Is there any way for me to use these words meaningfully and *avoid* entailing an interpersonal aspect? Mackie is not alone in thinking that I cannot. Bernard Williams also argues in his classic *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that the question “How ought one to live?” is “the best place for moral philosophy to start” and that this question “naturally leads us out of the concerns of the ego altogether” (4). Obviously, there is a difference between the best place and the only place, and he never undertakes to refute the possibility of the question I am asking. But one might still wonder whether Williams is right.

In answer, consider the possibility that one could take himself to be entitled not to give a whiff of concern for the fate of others. One need not be like Hume’s imaginary monster who prefers the destruction of the entire world to minor personal injury. One need not prefer anything relative to others. One can merely measure the worth of what he does in terms of considerations that bear exclusively on himself. That there are some, I take for granted, and that may be too much of an assumption for some. But I don’t know how to rule out the possibility that there are. If this is possible, then the traditional answer that philosophy gives to the egoist loses its bite. The terms in which the egoist’s interest is formulated appear at least minimally rational. He regards himself as “entitled” to proceed as he does, meaning that he believes he is justified. He has a sense of values in that he can discriminate actions in terms of whether they are worthwhile. Is that not “good” enough?

Maybe not. In *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit argues that morality requires judging actions in terms of whether they are right or wrong.² In

² Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vols. I & II. See the section entitled “Other Kinds of Wrongness” (164-174), especially where he claims that wrongness is the “indefinable property” that always gives us morally decisive reasons not to perform certain acts (173).

fact, *wrongness* is the more basic notion. So, in order to be morally motivated one must want to avoid doing something because he judges it to be wrong, that the wrongful nature of an action is the primary concern. Thus, not only do egoistic actions not count as moral actions, neither do actions aimed at maximizing utility. For example, if an action is done solely to maximize pleasure, the decision is not made because the action is right or wrong. Similarly, if one is acting simply to please himself or look after his own interests, then one is acting on a basis other than the rightness or wrongfulness of the action. Parfit, therefore, regards egoism (166) and act utilitarianism (but not rule utilitarianism) (168) to be, at best, alternatives to morality.

One might object to this claim on the grounds that the act utilitarian at least can say that what counts as right or wrong in regard to one's actions is just whether it maximizes benefit. Thus, following act utilitarian principles does commit one to morality insofar as one's action matters in light of the potential to maximize benefit. Parfit disagrees: the concept of "wrongfulness" does no work in act utilitarianism. That is, wrongfulness does not add anything to what the utilitarian already considers. The same could be said of an egoist. He can, if he likes, define right and wrong in terms of whatever matters to him alone, but the concept "wrong" adds no value for him in itself.³ In contrast, Kant, to whom Parfit is very partial, starts with our concern for avoiding wrongful actions or doing right ones, and works toward a principle that purports to

³ I realize that I am stating Parfit's argument rather differently than he himself does. Essentially, he points out that rational egoism and act utilitarianism, when stated as principles, represent views that could be held without holding other views about whether some acts "must not be done" or are duties, and so forth. See pp. 166-170. Another way to put the point is that for a view to count as moral, it must use words such as 'wrong' and 'moral' in ways that are indefinable. This renders rational egoism and act utilitarianism non-moral because they either make no use of those terms or define them exclusively in terms of their own principles, and stipulatively at that. Thus, 'wrongness' is neither fundamental nor important in terms of stating the theory.

capture our intuitions about these matters. Parfit believes his analysis also explains the tendency of act utilitarianism, not to mention egoism, to proliferate counterintuitive results when applied to specific examples where, for instance, sacrificing oneself to save others in ways that appear wrongful would seem to follow on act utilitarian considerations.⁴ The problem here is that the act utilitarian cannot recognize the difference between what is wrongful and what is inexpedient.

If Parfit is correct, then the term “ethical egoism” would risk self-contradiction on the grounds that egoism is not a moral perspective but, again, “at best an alternative to morality.” I am generally sympathetic to Parfit’s overall view here, but I am not sure his point rules out the kind of ethical egoist I have been imagining. My egoist might be prepared to quite self consciously avoid doing wrong and believe that it is the wrongfulness of some action that prevents his doing it. But at the same time, such wrongfulness most closely corresponds to an appraisal of the negative results for him exclusively on his terms. That is, his first-order beliefs about why a doctor, for example, should avoid sacrificing one patient on the operating table to save five (Parfit’s *transplant* example) involve the wrongfulness of treating someone in that way. However, that wrongfulness is explained at a second-order level entirely in terms of the doctor’s own concerns, whatever they may be.

Now Parfit might say that it is the doctor’s self-concern and not the wrong of the involuntary sacrifice that justifies this judgment. But it could also make sense to say that it is the wrong of the act that motivates the doctor to avoid it, and that what best explains that sense of wrongfulness is his own self concern. That is, we discover through reflection at a second-order level and through reflection that there is a deep corre-

⁴ Parfit gives a series of paradigm cases that are familiar, so-called trolley car cases for example, as well as one he calls *transplant* where a doctor is faced with the possibility of sacrificing one patient on the operating table to save five (363).

spondence between first-order judgments of right (or wrong) and self-concern. If this does not work, then it is unclear how even Kant's view can be called morality, since he is preoccupied with the universality of our maxims, and not explicitly with the wrongfulness of our actions, at the level of philosophical analysis⁵

The egoist may not be entirely distorting our ordinary sense of the word "ethics." When we identify something as ethical or not, it is analogous to saying that it is legal or illegal. We rule actions or behaviors in or out based on what we will accept.⁶ Each of these rulings represents a judgment that, at least implicitly, references some form of justification. So, when an egoist reports that action A is ethical, he implies that that A is justifiable on grounds that he accepts as ethical. But an egoist makes no presumption that the justification requires more than his own acceptance. What considerations go into such justification are irrelevant; the egoist simply accepts that they appeal to him and that is enough. Now, someone might claim that such justifications must always appeal to others and will only work if they raise considerations that others regard as relevant. But why isn't that just confusing justification with *reasonable* justification? "Reasonable," it seems to me, does involve appeal to others and is generally understood to do so. But, as a matter of logic, does all justification have to be reasonable?

⁵ On page 369, Parfit describes Kant's formula as describing "a *higher-level* wrong-making property or fact under which all other such properties or facts can be subsumed, or gathered." But why cannot that be true of self-concern? The egoist's self-concern is not what comes into mind when making moral judgments. It is the rightness or avoidance of wrongness of the act—but once analyzed on a higher level, it is self-concern that is the wrong-making property. My point is that if this works for Kant, why does not it work for the egoist?

⁶ I'm not implying the "we" here requires care about others.

If my position is that what is right for me may be only that, i.e., right for me, it is logically possible that it is wrong for you. If the very same thing can be both right and wrong, that makes egoism quite possibly a form of radical relativism and there is no coherent meaning to the terms.” However, that is not necessarily as convincing a refutation of egoism as it sounds.

There may be a way of attaching meaning to moral terms that, while perfectly intelligible, opens up the possibility of just such a relativist result. Take, for example, the hoary example of A’s and B’s taste in ice cream. A may love chocolate and hate vanilla and B may have quite the opposite taste, in which case they will each use the term ”good” for exactly opposite things. Jesse Prinz⁷ has argued that moral terms represent culturally-fashioned emotional appraisals, and thus can attach to very different or even opposite things depending on culture and sometimes on the individual alone. That this entails moral judgments behave like appraisals of taste and thus that moral relativism is possible is no objection. Of course, it is possible; that is the very nature of the claim. If we have no problem about relativism when it comes to ice cream, one might argue that we should have little problem with it in the moral context.⁸

⁷ *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. See especially chapter five, “Dining with Cannibals.”

⁸ Of course, many philosophers would reject the sentimentalism that underlies this kind of relativism, especially Parfit. He argues that a sentimentalist theory disallows moral disagreements as well as the view that an act could be “really” wrong. “That is not [he says] how we think about morality” (379). Prinz, of course, disagrees with the point about moral disagreement (see “Moral Debate,” pages 120-121). Furthermore, it is not clear that people, as an empirical matter, generally do believe that their own views of the wrongness of an act preclude its rightness for others in their context and on their terms.

The Stability of Egocentrism

While I do not think there is any way by force of logic alone to definitively rule out the possibility of ethical egoism, I do think there is a possible answer to it. But before turning to that, I want to say a few words about what answers will not work: generally, the kinds of answers that are given to the question of why we must be moral in the interpersonal sense. That is, one might answer that the egoist is ultimately irrational in his self-regard, or that he has an unrealistic conception of his own good because it has been construed too narrowly, or that he will never flourish, or that his form of flourishing does not work for fully reflective human beings.

The first argument, that the egoist is irrational, turns out to be very difficult to prove. Certainly Kant tried, but the degree to which his efforts have been controversial in the history of philosophy should warn us off. Williams offers an interesting reconstruction of a Kantian-style approach that he himself borrows from Alan Gerwirth.⁹ It goes as follows (in my own reconstruction): A accepts the prescription P_a as a consequence of rational agency and of having various needs and wants, namely that others not interfere with his freedom, A's freedom, of course, being necessary to securing A's needs and wants. A can also recognize that B may entertain exactly the same prescription with regard to himself, call this P_b , and that P_b is as reasonable as P_a . However, according to Williams (and I think rightly), it does not follow that A is committed to adopting P_b . In other words P_b does not represent a claim on A that obligates A not to interfere with B's freedom. The same applies to B in regard to P_a . $P_a = P_b$ is clearly false. Hence, rational agency and some capacity for generalization do not alone generate reciprocal obligations or duties.

⁹ See Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pages 60-61.

To reframe this argument with regard to why egoism cannot be ethical: if it were the case that one could not be a rational agent without entertaining reciprocal obligations and duties to others, then egoism would be, from a rational point of view, ethically unstable and it would always yield to a more universalized set of prescriptions. However, as Williams successfully argues, it is perfectly conceivable that one's set of prescriptions might be egocentrically focused: others should not interfere with me but not necessarily the other way around. So, there is little reason to think that such radical egoism is rationally unstable in and of itself.

If it is impossible to show that, in the least principled sense, egoism is irrational *per se*, one could attempt to show that a person cannot be a healthy human being and an egoist at the same time. If egoism is off the table as an attractive option, then ethical egoism cannot be a viable option either. There are two possibilities here: show that egoism is so psychologically unstable that it precludes individual flourishing, or show that it is philosophically incoherent.

Is egoism psychologically unstable? If preoccupation with one's own needs mandates a descent into pathological narcissism, then the answer appears to be "yes." In that case, ethical egoism is but a theoretical possibility and one that we do not have to take particularly seriously. The problem remains of how to show this. Here, a number of strategies appear possible: Aristotelian, Confucian, and Buddhist.

The Aristotelian answer might go something like this. If I care about my flourishing then, because I'm a human being, I have to care about the conditions of flourishing in general and aim at that which is human happiness. This does not really answer the challenge because the egoist can answer that he intends to do all that as well, just without regard for anyone else's flourishing. Aristotle could retort that this is to give up on the possibility of friendship, that no one can be a complete

narcissist and have friends, at least not “friends” in the sorts of relationships that are meaningful and reciprocal—caring, that is. However, all this shows is that egoism is a psychologically unstable policy for most of us and not that it is so *per se*. Furthermore, it does not preclude the possibility of egoism becoming socially adaptive in a world very different from that the one Aristotle had in mind—perhaps one like the more dystopian versions of our own.

The Confucian answer, that an egoist has turned his back on the most important constituent of identity, his role in society, is similarly vulnerable. Even if we accept that an egoist must care about how society views him if he cares for himself, it does not follow that he must care about the well-being of others or accept as binding rules that follow as a consequence of such care. That is, his concern over his societal role need only be self-regarding. Furthermore, society may be such that narcissism in the extreme is adaptive, so that one’s proper role and the narrowest view of one’s self-interests coincide. In which case, the ethical impropriety and psychological instability of egoism would have less to do with egoism itself and more to do with the contingencies of a particular society and its history.

There is, however, another sort of answer that I’ll call Buddhist. It is the kind that one finds in Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons* and that, as far as I can tell, he still holds in his more current work. I call it Buddhist, because it clearly reflects a reasonable interpretation of early Buddhist *suttas*, as Parfit himself notes. It has also been offered by Owen Flanagan as a kind of answer to exactly the question I am raising in his thought-provoking *The Bodhisattva’s Brain*. For Flanagan, we all want to do well, to be happy, and Buddhism, or at least some version of it, offers a perfectly eligible suggestion as to how to get there. But unlike the Aristotelian answer, which involves pursuing a life of wisdom (intellectual) and virtues such as bravery, magnanimity, and so forth, the Buddhist answer in-

volves the cultivation of wisdom (mindfulness) and virtues like loving kindness. To cultivate those, Flanagan argues, the Buddhist must develop an appreciation of *anattā*—the emptiness of the self. This view holds that egoism is philosophically confused.

How does this work? According to Flanagan, the importance of a no-self (*anattā*) view is that it alleviates personal suffering. If there is no “I” properly speaking, then there is nothing that suffers. In more psychologically realistic terms, this means that one who holds onto pleasant experiences or fears the perpetuation of painful experiences is confused. “Thus attachment, excessive attachment to my consciousness, at any rate, is irrational.” (127) Once detached, “persons who see themselves selflessly have reason to be less egotistical, to care about the weal and woe of others, and to give more resources to others” (136). It is interesting to note that Flanagan is also commenting on Parfit’s views in the very same remark.

Parfit, of course, similarly argues that we have no meaningful criteria of personal identity and thus little reason for putting our own interests, particularly those connected with our future, ahead of the current suffering of others. If all who exist are current sufferers, and there are no temporally “extended” selves, then how can we sort out interests in avoiding suffering in a way that privileges oneself, especially “future” versions of oneself? The Buddhist view is slightly different from Parfit’s in this regard, as Flanagan points out. It is not that I replace my own concerns with those of others but that in the freedom of detachment, I dissolve the basis of suffering. Having done so, Flanagan argues that the Buddhist creates the psychological basis for the sorts of virtues that Buddhists associate with flourishing or happiness. So, Flanagan concludes, *anātman* or *anattā* is crucial to establishing the basis for such Buddhist virtues as loving kindness or compassion—the basis for Bud-

dhist ethics itself.¹⁰ “The consistent claim across almost all Buddhism is that if we absorb or internalize a certain metaphysic of the self, that I am no-self, *anatman*, then we will be motivated or see reason to be compassionate and lovingkind” (131).

One difficulty with this strategy is that it begs the question: Who is the “I” that is supposed to be lovingkind or compassionate? For that matter, who is the “I” that is supposed to do all this detaching or avoiding attachment? “Avoid attachment!” is, in its plainest sense, a recommendation made to *someone*. If there is no one there to receive it, it’s not clear what sense it makes to say it. Actually, Flanagan agrees and distinguishes between interpreting the *anātman* view as akin to an Aristotelian or neo-Lockian conception of the self, as having continuous features but no substantial soul, and interpreting it as overemphasizing “ephemerality,” such that I literally have “no self.” The latter view is too “metaphysically excessive” and conceivably mistaken, so Flanagan recommends “resisting *anatman* extremism” (159-163). If we do, then the claims of Buddhist ethics make more sense, he argues, because there is a moral subject within whom compassion may be cultivated.

So, the idea is that once egoism is deconstructed, that is, shown to be conceptually confused, “a life of maximal compassion [becomes] more rational than a life of hedonism” (206). The problem with this, and

¹⁰ One might wonder if this suggests that Buddhist ethics is a version of virtue theory? A number of commentators, notably Damien Keown, have argued this possibility. Indeed, the company in which Flanagan locates the Buddha—Aristotle and Confucius—might lead the reader to think that Flanagan agrees. However, there have been equally strong arguments suggesting that Buddhism is a kind of consequentialism, as Flanagan acknowledges. However, he seems to see less difference between these approaches than might be conventionally assumed and pleads neutrality on the issue. See pages 121-122. I would tend to agree but feel there are substantial objections to either approach. See my “Theory and Comparison in the Discussion of Buddhist Ethics,” *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 1 (2012), 16-43.

to his credit Flanagan fully acknowledges the problem, is that there does not seem to be anything logically entailing in the relation between no-self metaphysics and virtuous dispositions.¹¹ For example, while being no-self may make one more attentive and considerate of the needs and feelings of others, it may also make one sad and despondent. Might one not become insensitive to the needs of others, not because he favors himself, but because there is no one to favor and nothing within their lives to favor? (160) Of course, though one could conceivably feel this way, it does not follow that one must, especially Flanagan argues, if one intends to flourish and achieve happiness. “[I]t is just a contingent fact empirical fact about the way we gregarious social mammals have evolved that first fitness and then flourishing come from extending ourselves to others.”

Thus, Flanagan concludes that if we wish to be happy, we must reach out to others because no other way of life holds prospects of flourishing. That is not a very strong argument. How have we made any progress on the question with which we began: Why think this is so? “Just because” or “it’s simply a fact” is not very convincing. I realize that I have no permanent self of any sort, Flanagan’s version of ultimate truth, but I still have a conventional self, as he himself argues. Since there must be a self to which moral appeals are made, and it therefore must be separate from others in some sense, it is hard to see why this self *must* listen. Because if it is a self, even in the limited sense of having continuous features, for example dispositions, consciousness, and a body (the five *skandhas*), it seems perfectly possible for it to be depressed, miserable, and so on at the news that, for example, life ends. It also seems perfectly

¹¹ This applies just as well to Parfit’s approach. While I may feel motivated to consider the sufferings of others as inextricably my own, perhaps because they are closer to me than my future self, with whom I have no necessary connection, I may just as well preoccupy myself with taking on their desires or obsessions, or even turning away from all affects.

conceivable for such a “self” to be aware of its limits but be completely preoccupied with its own immediate concerns and see absolutely nothing wrong with that. And while we who are “outside” of such a person may try to give him Flanagan’s reasons for not being so self-obsessed, that he will not be able to flourish in either an Aristotelian or a Buddhist sense, it is unclear why that should matter to him. Is it impossible to flourish in the individual’s own unique sense, (flourishing^{egocentric} or happiness^{egocentric} to follow Flanagan’s habit of distinguishing possible senses?

Flanagan seems to see that what is promising about Buddhism and would make it a potentially effective response to the question I am raising, is that it seems to undermine the very premise that there is a self to be obsessed about. The problem is that Flanagan’s version of Buddhism, while it appears to “deconstruct” the self, doesn’t really. Yes, the self in the “substantialist” sense does not exist, but what exactly have we given up? The same could be said in regard to the soul: What exactly are we talking about? So, to deny that we have souls, especially immortal souls, makes little more sense than affirming their existence, as for example, Plato seems to. The same is true with substance talk (or *svabhāva* talk in Buddhism).¹² And if so, it is hard to see what we have gained

¹² In regard to *svabhāva* and *sūnyatā*, if emptiness is interpreted simply as the denial of self-existence, it is hard to see what it amounts to. Philosophers often bend over backwards to interpret Buddhism in this fashion, that things are still ontologically real (such as the self) even though they are empty. Damien Keown is a good example. See pages 26-29 of *Buddhism and Bioethics*. And it’s true that given the “two truth” doctrine in Buddhism, one can argue that there is conventional truth and then there is ultimate truth. But it’s not clear what ultimate truth is given it’s just a denial of chimeras under this tame, philosopher’s interpretation. I’m not at all convinced that what we’re looking at in regard to Buddhism, especially Madhyamaka, is a kind of Wittgensteinian conventionalism where “everything remains the same” after metaphysical deflation. Why is not the ontologically deflated real a handle upon which the mind can grasp? And if so, then however you may explain metaphysically what that graspable handle is (a mere process, an event, etc.) does not change its reality *for me*. Maybe this is why,

through Buddhist metaphysics so understood because the amount of self we are left with, the empirical/psychological construct, seems to be enough to be not only unhappy, but also to be happy within one's own little bubble.

How to Defeat Egocentrism

Let me close with a radical suggestion, that is, one that is "radical" in Flanagan's sense. Perhaps we too hastily abandon the more woolly and extreme version of *anātman*. Perhaps there is a good reason to prefer the more extravagant and seemingly self-contradictory version, namely that if there *really* is no self, then there *really is* nothing to be preoccupied with *at all*. And if there is nothing to be preoccupied with at all, then egocentrism is entirely delusional. Of course, there are two main challenges to this view: (1) it is logically and psychologically impossible to hold; (2) it defeats too much. Not only does it take down egocentrism but morality or ethics, in any sense of those words, as well. For though it is impossible to be self-regarding in this view, one could argue, it is impossible to see how it leads in the direction of concern with others, assuming one sees that as a desirable goal of ethics. If so, the tragedy for ethics would be that the only philosophically decisive argument against egocentrism as an ethical position is an argument against the possibility of ethics itself. While that is perhaps tragic, it is only that and not self-defeating. But I think there is more to be said.

First, it is not clear that extreme ephemeralism, let's call it, is logically or psychologically impossible or a form of metaphysical nihilism. Rather, it is the denial that I exist in any durable sense. Descartes says we

Flanagan despairs, so many, especially American Buddhists are so narcissistic (206). They take themselves to exist as Flanagan says Buddhism allows they should.

cannot say this because we risk self-contradiction—I must exist to deny my existence. But why must I exist for any duration? That which is doing the denying may be me, but me as I am ceasing. Is that illogical? Extreme ephemerality, perhaps, is the claim that as soon as I exist I cease to exist. Maybe that is just a fact, paradoxical perhaps, but not illogical. It suggests that duration is an illusion, but that is not obviously illogical either. Is it psychologically impossible to think this way? Again, it is hard to see why exactly. Maybe this is the only coherent thought I can have, and its very difficulty is testament to the fact that it is a real thought, rather than the easier ones that distort the ephemerality of everything.¹³ Maybe what is really psychologically impossible, once enlightened, is to think that I have this and that or am this and that.

Or maybe we should say that such ephemerality is self-defeating, but that is the point. That is what makes it therapeutically effective, the ultimate *technique de soi* as Flanagan likes to say.¹⁴ From an exegetical point of view, one might argue that this voids the ultimate truth/conventional truth distinction in Buddhism. That is, the ultimate truth, that I really do not exist, undermines and destroys the conventional truth, which is that I exist as a collection of moments or qualities, necessary to get through the day. This may be so, but there are versions of Buddhism that do this as well; for example Nagarjuna famously collapses the distinction.¹⁵ And after all, if the ultimate truth is just to follow conventional truth, it is hard to see why we should challenge anything that we say or think, which seems hardly a defensible attitude. Nor

¹³ Perhaps this is why string theory and other thoughts in physics may be both true and impossible to understand.

¹⁴ See Flanagan's *Bodhisattvas Brain* (174) for an explanation of the term: "Michel Foucault refers to this style of doing philosophy, which involves working to form or restructure the self as utilizing techniques of self-work, as *techniques de soi*."

¹⁵ See Chapter 24 of the *Mulamādhyamikakārikās*.

does it explain the Buddha's own challenge to conventional opinion. After all, it is very conventional to pursue your own ends and focus on number one, or to want your dead loved one back. That these are conventional beliefs and desires does not make them unchallengeable in the name of ultimate truth. Moreover, maybe we need the nihilism of ultimate truth to truly remind ourselves how conventional "conventional truth" is, as a permanent check on its delusional power.

Finally, does it really defeat morality and ethics? Here, again, I am not so sure that it does. The charge seems to stem from the observation that though ephemeralism defeats self-regard, it does not do anything for other-regard. If there are no "selves" in any sense, then why care about anyone or anything? The problem with this argument is that it seems to take for granted what we challenged in the first place, that ethics can only be conceived in terms that lead in the direction of other-regard. And again, perhaps the point might be that the problem lies not in whether we care about anyone beyond ourselves, but whether we are trapped in a delusional state—that of preoccupation itself. And perhaps it is the case that once free of that, our actions look like we are entirely other-regarding, but maybe that is only because those who are doing the noticing are themselves trapped in the preoccupational delusion. It does not necessarily look that way, in fact, may look like no way whatsoever, from within the practices of ethics^{Buddhist}.

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