

## NEITHER ĀTMAN NOR ANATTĀ: TAPERING OUR CONCEPTION OF SELFHOOD

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**ABSTRACT:** *I provide critical discussion of conception of and talk of psychic integration which I take to be both excessive and deficient; these viciously extreme positions are championed by the Apostle Paul and St. Augustine (and both their religious and their secular cultural descendants in the West), and by Jacques Lacan and María Lugones (and their contemporaries), respectively. I suggest that we must negotiate a Buddhist-inspired understanding located between these extremes in endorsing any acceptable conception of the self, generally speaking—a conception which, contra the strong antirealist about selves, allows for the continued use of selfhood in everyday discourse, but which, contra the strong realist about selves, does not fall into an unhealthy idealization of anything approximating perfect psychic wholeness.*

**Keywords:** *self, identity, anattā, Buddha, Nāgārjuna, Lacan*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Pāli *suttas*, the Buddha was once approached by Vaccha, a wandering ascetic, who inundated him with unsolicited metaphysical enquiry (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore 1957). Among the questions raised was, *Is there a self or is there not a self?* It is said that, even when pushed, the Buddha refused to answer. This, of course, raises another question: Why the stonewalling?

Answering on behalf of the Buddha, Archie Bahm notes that fixating on such questions more often than not leads to significant discontent; he writes: “The important issue in life is how to be happy. If you have a [self] you merely make yourself unhappy by wanting not to have one. If you have no [self], you cause

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yourself unhappiness by wanting one” (2013, 136).<sup>1</sup> The wise thing to do, then, is to allay an “irrational greed for [such] views” (2013, 136)—to simply let this questioning go, when possible.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Murti sharpens Bahm’s point, developing the situational nature of Gautama’s prescriptive, curative philosophy:

Buddha’s teaching is adjusted to the need of the taught as the medicine of the skilled physician is to the malady of the patient. He does not blindly...prescribe [a] remedy to all and sundry. He corrects those with a nihilistic tendency by affirming the self...To those addicted to the dogmatic belief in a changeless substantial *ātman*...he teaches the ‘no-self doctrine’ as an antidote: his ultimate teaching is that there is neither self nor not-self as these are subjective devices (quoted in Julia Ching, 1984).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While the Buddha balks at answering Vaccha’s question for the reasons noted, he has long been associated with the doctrine of *anattā*. This is shown in his earliest depictions and in the manner in which he is said to have referred to himself; Stephen Batchelor writes: “In the fragments of stone friezes that survived [located throughout northern India, from the times of early Buddhism], [the Buddha] is represented as an empty seat, a pair of footprints, or the wheel of Dharma that he set turning. While alive, he referred to himself as the *Tathagata*, the ‘One Thus Gone.’ It was not until Greek settlers in India converted to Buddhism ... that Gautama was first personified, in the form of the god Apollo” (2000, 7).

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that at least three major schools of Buddhism hold to positive, but contrary, views about the self, with each attributing its own views to Gautama; these are *Theravāda*, *Yogācāra*, and Japan’s *Jōdo Shinshū*, or *Shin*. Bahm writes: “Theravāda Buddhism denies existence and continuity to a self through its basic doctrines of *anattā* (no-soul) and *aniccā* (impermanence). Yogācāra Buddhism merges individual and cosmic consciousness (*vijñāna*) which, in effect, is an eternal world-soul perpetually preoccupied with transient appearances. Shin Buddhism believes that each individual soul will dwell eternally in the blissful company of Amida Buddha in a Pure Land from which none will remain excluded. Thus, the history of Buddhist doctrines of self, expressed by persons attributing their views to Gautama, has consisted largely of a series of repudiations of Gautama’s refusal to answer the questions: ‘Is there a soul or is there not a soul?’” (2013, 138).

<sup>3</sup> Compare this with what Ankur Barua says here: “... while the Buddha may not have explicitly stated that ‘there is no self’, it is clear that the early Buddhist texts also deny that there is an inner controller, foundation or establishment for the psycho-physical components (*skhandas*) into which the human person is deconstructed. Given the pragmatic thrust of Buddhist teaching, one might therefore view *anattā* not so much as a doctrinal standpoint, but as a ‘soteriological strategy’ for reinforcing in the aspirant for liberation appreciation for the lack of permanence in all empirical phenomena ... In place of a substantial self that is ontologically distinct from its properties such as thoughts and feelings, [one comes to hold that] there are simply interrelated processes of cognitions and feelings, and no ‘I’ that possesses or comprehends these events as ‘mine’” (2012, 223-4).

Compare both Murti’s and Barua’s take with Jay Garfield’s equally instrumentalist translation and reading of Nāgārjuna. The latter writes: “That there is a self has been taught. / And the doctrine of no-self, / By the buddhas, as well as the / Doctrine of neither self nor self.” Commenting, Garfield writes: “There are many discussions of the way to think about the self in the Buddhist canon. For those who are nihilistic about the self (such as contemporary eliminative materialists or classical Indian Cārvākas), it is important to explain the conventional reality of the self. For those who tend to reify the self, the doctrine of no-self is taught, that is, the doctrine of the emptiness of the self...Both the terms ‘self’ and ‘no-self’..., Nāgārjuna claims, are conventional designations. They may each be soteriologically and analytically useful antidotes to extreme metaphysical views and to the disturbances those views occasion. But to neither corresponds an entity—neither a thing that we could ever find on analysis and identify with the self, nor a thing or state that we could identify with no-

Insofar as we may prescribe specific reorientations to individuals with particular inclinations in tow, this piecemeal prescription seems optimal. But, how should we evaluate conception of the self, more generally? Put another way, what is the healthiest way to conceive of the self when situating the notion within everyday discourse? How should we conceive of the self, in Murti's words, qua "subjective device," *collectively*?<sup>4</sup> In formulating an answer, we should carefully consider all effects of using the concept, as presently understood, within the culture in which such a discourse takes place. Here, I consider *selfhood* within the context of the contemporary, secular West.

As Charles Taylor has pointed out, psychoanalysts working in our society are dealing progressively less with those disorders which made up the bulk of caseloads in the classical Freudian era. Reports regarding "hysteria" and accompanying symptoms have dwindled; meanwhile, the number of patients complaining of absence of a sufficiently unified self—or "ego loss"—has increased dramatically of relative late (1989, 19).<sup>5</sup> Echoing Taylor, Louis Sass observes that we are living in an age

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self...To say neither self nor no-self is, from this perspective, not to shrug one's shoulders in indecision but to recognize that while each of these is a useful characterization of the situation for some purposes, neither can be understood as correctly ascribing a property to an independently existing entity" (1995, 245-50).

Finally, compare the accounts provided by Murti, Barua, and Garfield with the exchange had between the sage, Bodhidharma, and his would-be disciple Hui-k'o; Stephen Batchelor recounts: "Bodhidharma went to Mount Sung...During this time he attracted students who were...intent on attaining enlightenment...One winter a monk called Hui-k'o approached the cave [in which Bodhidharma had sequestered himself], stood outside in the snow, cut his arm off as an act of devotion and cried: 'Your disciple's mind is not yet at peace! I beg you, Master, give it rest!' Bodhidharma said: 'Bring your mind to me and I will put it to rest.' Hui-k'o replied: 'I have searched for the mind but have never been able to find it.' 'There,' said Bodhidharma, 'I have put it to rest for you.' Hui-k'o's inquiry into the nature of mind led him neither to a metaphysical essence nor to a blank nothingness ... The story illustrates a therapeutic strategy of questions that aims at freeing one from the fixation of 'things' and 'nothings.' Rather than encouraging his disciple to realize 'emptiness,' which could all too easily have been construed as either something sacred or simply nothing at all, Bodhidharma asks him to investigate the nature of his own immediate experience. This led to an easing of Hui-k'o's vision, in which the constrictive hold of fixation was, for a moment at least, relaxed" (2000, 26-7). See Stephen Batchelor (2000, 67-8) for his discussion of Nāgārjuna's therapeutic pragmatism.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I draw my reader's attention to the fact that my focus will remain on the utility and disutility of certain forms of *conceiving of* and *talking about* the self rather than on the metaphysics of personal identity. My interest in self-talk centers on how the vocabularies involving what I refer to below as *psychic perfection* and *psychic disarray* either help us, as a culture, or hinder us in navigating our world. In the spirit of Buddhism, then, I will be evaluating these vocabularies in terms of their potential for soteriological results and not in terms of isomorphism with the "actual world," whatever one might take that to come to. I would like to thank this journal's anonymous referee for pointing out my need to clarify this, and will look to reemphasize this point throughout the remainder of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fulton has argued that such disorders and the methods by which they are treated are peculiar to the Western world largely because of our culturally-situated beliefs about an independent, subsistent, and autonomous self; he writes: "...many [mental disorders] reflect the unique cultural stresses of their host society and are properly considered culture-bound syndromes...The [Western] cultural standard of independence and autonomy is simply inconsistent with how we actually function. Some of the 'culture-bound' disorders commonly seen in the psychotherapy office arise from this tension. For example, when we strive to become...independent, relationships become complicated

“when the ‘so-called’ self disorders fill the practices of psychotherapists...[And when] preoccupation with the self seems to have usurped the role of religion as the central focus of what might be called...the moral or spiritual life of modern man” (1988, 552).

In Section 2, I suggest that this malaise is, in part, an outgrowth of a post-religious collective clinging to a viciously strong realism about the self—a realism inherited from the self’s ancestor concept, the *soul*.<sup>6</sup> As this clinging amounts to obsession with attaining the impossible, I argue that the assumptions which support it must be exposed and tempered, significantly—that, put another way, we must dislodge ourselves from *this* conception of and talk of the self, replacing these outworn semantic touchstones with healthier ones less likely to reinforce the compulsive desire (*taṇhā*) for possessing a psychic wholeness.

Despite recognizing the deleterious consequences of embracing such a thoroughgoing realism, in Section 3, I go on to argue against strong antirealists that the *self*, as a concept, should not be jettisoned. As, once sufficiently deflated and therapeutically redescribed, the notion can be of great import when it comes to staving off a certain kind of alienation<sup>7</sup>—that, in other words, we must also not give in to neurotic devotion to the *no-self* doctrine, as that over-correction is harmful in its own way.

As many of us, again, are given to excess in belief in a substantial self, as well as to anxieties about this self’s dissolution—so, since we seem simultaneously situated within the worst of both worlds—I hold that, all things being equal, we should move towards idling between moderately realist and antirealist understandings, curbing those absolutist and metaphysical urges which call for the provision of an objective account of selfhood *once and for all*. This, of course, owes a great deal to certain Buddhisms and their pragmatistic bend. And, much of what I have to say draws inspiration from Nāgārjuna’s middling approach to talk of selfhood, specifically—an antecedent of which is Gautama’s account.

I now turn to discussion of, and argument against, the two immoderate positions which diverge from Nāgārjuna’s path. I start by offering a genealogical sketch of the Western conception of the soul, ultimately linking this to *selfhood* as we tend to understand it today. I open with a quote from Nietzsche, who tacitly accuses

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challenges; how can we become intimate without abandoning ourselves? Relatedness and autonomy become somewhat opposed. Fear of dependency, or dependency itself, becomes a clinical problem to be solved. Unlike most non-Western societies, which hold less extreme notions of the separateness of self, we have an entire clinical language to describe disorders of the self: narcissistic personality disorder, fragmentation of the self, lack of self-cohesion, and the ubiquitous complaint of poor self-esteem” (2010, 59).

<sup>6</sup> I certainly do not intend to suggest that this is the complete story. As stated before, more individuals seem to be suffering from these “self disorders,” and to a greater extent. Holding onto an antiquated conception of the self as ideally whole, though, is one piece of the problem.

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that viewing moral motivation through the lens of one’s self qua fluid network of core values and commitments has the potential to counteract feelings of alienation that can sometimes be experienced by those who adhere to what are taken to be objective moralities, e.g., act-utilitarianism. For the sake of space, I will not rehearse this argument here.

Christianity of introducing a problematic understanding of the self as the (potentially) psychically perfect soul—a conception, again, to which a great many of us remain unknowingly fettered.

## 2. PSYCHIC PERFECTION, FROM SUPERNATURAL TO NATURALIZED

Nietzsche writes: “It was Christianity which first painted the Devil on the world’s wall; it was Christianity which first brought sin into the world. Belief in the cure which it offered has now been shaken to its deepest roots: but *belief in the sickness* which it taught and propagated continues to exist” (1996, 329). We may interpret the apparent spiritual sickness to which Nietzsche refers as involving a perceived disintegration of a once integrated soul resulting from an inherently immoral human nature. The texts central to Christianity are littered with notions and narratives which bolster this connection, as such disintegration is typically tied to sin and its deserved wages.<sup>8</sup> Let’s initiate discussion of this dialectically, by considering the disintegrated’s opposite: Christian *holiness*.

Our contemporary understanding of the state of being *holy* is a conceptual descendent of the Old English notion denoted by *hālig*; in Middle English, *holi*, and earlier, *hali*.<sup>9</sup> A close relative of *hali* is *hāl* (also Old English), meaning *whole* or *healthy*, and whose later English derivation, *hale*, signifies *wholeness*, *completeness*, *soundness*, and once again, *health* (Partridge 1958, 292).<sup>10</sup> Philip Sheldrake writes:

The New Testament assumes the holiness of God and is concerned with showing the equal holiness of Jesus who sanctifies others, making them *hagios*....The Spirit too

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<sup>8</sup> I am concentrating on Christianity, here, primarily for the sake of familiarity and relative convenience, and because Nietzsche’s names it, specifically. However, it is important to note that the linkage between the holy and the whole is peculiar to neither Judaism nor Christianity. To cite just one additional example of a religious tradition which is fixated on wholeness as synonymous with God and the Good, consider the Sufism of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *shaykh*, Jāmī. W. C. Chittick writes: “The key term which is ascribed to man as the manifestation of the Name ‘Allāh’ is the Arabic word ‘jāmī’, meaning, ‘all-embracing, all-comprehending, that which brings all things into a unified whole’ ” (1979, 146). More generally, it is widely known that Muslims, historically and ecumenically within their religion, have so valued wholeness that some accuse Christians of practicing closet polytheism (and so, blasphemous pluralism) due to the Church’s doctrine of the Trinity and its (within certain denominations) habit of praying to any number of saints, rather than to God, Himself.

<sup>9</sup> The English *holi*, *hali*, and *hālig* are akin to the Old Frisian *helich*, the Old Saxon *helag*, the Old High German *heilag*, the Middle High German *heilec*, and the German *heilig*; also, the Middle Dutch *heilich* and *helich*, the Dutch *heilig*, the Gothic *heilags*, and the Old Norse *heilagr*.

<sup>10</sup> While many of us have moved away from thinking about ourselves in terms of being *souls* ideally possessing a kind of *wholeness*, we continue to make sense of ourself in terms of, and to describe ourself as, the secularized progeny of ancient religious thinking: as *selves* ideally possessing *integrity*. Compare the conception of *holy/holiness/wholeness* with *integrity*. Etymologically, *integrity* derives from the Latin *integri*, a root which it shares with *integer*: meaning *whole*, *sound*, or *untouched*. Gabrielle Taylor writes: “...the person of integrity [is] the person who ‘keeps his inmost self intact’, whose life is ‘of a piece’, whose self is whole and integrated....The person of integrity keeps his self intact, and the person who lacks integrity is corrupt in the sense that his self is disintegrated” (1981, 144).

sanctifies. By baptism and ‘renewal’ and ‘rebirth’ through the Spirit, the Christian is made part of the church, which is called ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (2005, 341).

To suggest that some entity is *holy*, then, is to confer to it a kind of *wholeness*. This speaks to our understanding of the rebirth mentioned by Sheldrake, as this is often cashed out in terms of the person in question being *made whole* by the Hand of God.<sup>11</sup> And, additionally, of our conference of sainthood to this reborn person—as *saint* (also *sanctification*) is derived from the Latin *sanctus*, which also means *holy*, and so, of a whole (Eric Partridge, 1958, 579). It is for this reason, Jung has argued, that Christ, the “*Adam secundus*,” perfectly identifies the notion of what it means to have or be *a self* (1978, 37).<sup>12</sup> As Christ—God incarnate—can possess no internal division whatsoever.

Contrast this evaluation of wholeness with that of the psychic fragmentation attributed to those most unholy, and so ungodly, things found throughout the Bible. The story of Legion comes to mind. Jesus’ exorcism of Legion, both whose name and amplified atrocity derive directly from its being an association of multiple, so divided, wicked spirits, is described three distinct times in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> This particular example set aside, the foulness associated with demonic possession, as such, is often emphasized in terms of its involvement of the evil spirit or spirits intermingling with the soul of the possessed, and so, causing an abominable spiritual duality (or plurality) within one host body. There is a litany of other subtler instances in the Bible where lack of spiritual integration is said to indicate a kind of corruption only remediable by God, the Whole of wholes.<sup>14</sup> “If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand” (Mark 3:25).

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<sup>11</sup> There are numerous instances in the Bible where something like *rebirth* (Titus 2:5) is mentioned. This is a recurring theme in the New Testament, especially in the book of Colossians: “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3)”; “Put to death...everything that belongs to your earthly nature (Colossians 3:5)”; “Do not lie to each other since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator (Colossians 3:9-10).” So too, there are many references to the sinfulness of being *double-minded* (James 1:7) throughout the Bible—a concept which, of course, is akin to the state of disintegration and its accompanying state of self-alienation.

<sup>12</sup> Jung goes on to point out that while the Christ of the New Testament is almost universally exalted for this reason by Christians, their conception of perfect wholeness is flawed in that it does not allow for the shadow element of the person to remain, much less to thrive. He writes: “There can be no doubt that the original Christian conception of the *imago Dei* embodied in Christ meant all-embracing totality...Nevertheless the Christ-symbol lacks wholeness in the modern psychological sense, since its foes now include the dark side of things but specifically excludes it in the form of a Luciferian opponent” (Jung, 1978, 41). Given that persons share in both the, in this sense, Christian *and* Luciferian, but equate division with this, a feeling of alienation is both strengthened and perpetuated.

<sup>13</sup> See Mark Chapter 5, Luke Chapter 8, and Matthew Chapter 8.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that even the idea of sin, itself—within a Thomistic framework—is talked about in terms of being a *lack*; or, put another way, failing to be a whole necessarily involves the absence of God.

Although examples of spiritual possession and oppression designate cases where God is, in some sense, radically absent, once one has come to God, an additional fragmentation comes to the forefront—this in the form of a conflict between her recently renewed spirit and her inbuilt human, so innately sinful, nature. Here, the convert is being pulled apart by religious obligations which go to the center of who she now takes herself to be, and self-alienating animalistic cravings which she cannot overcome. The latter is said to be a result of the person's fallen nature and its accompanying *akrasia*. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes just this kind of essential self-fragmentation and its resultant inner-strife:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I do not carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (7:15-20).

And, later in the same letter: “I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin (Romans 7:25).” The mind, that half of the person imbued with reason, values the will of God ultimately, and so, desires to do His will at all times. The flesh, the half constituted by the passions, values those very things forbidden by God.<sup>15</sup> Despite having wholeheartedly committed himself, Paul acknowledges that, being human, there is a sense in which he can never shake the attraction of sin. And so, he can never approximate becoming a true and lasting whole, drawn exclusively to God and to the Good. Let’s call this longed-for abiding integration *psychic perfection*.<sup>16</sup>

Linking up Paul’s take on the sinful nature of humanity with the very kind of psychic disintegration and self-alienation at issue, Augustine writes to God: “You gather me from my own *scatterings*, after I have *torn* myself from your *unity* and *fallen apart* into *multiplicity*...I was *decomposing* before your eyes while in men’s eyes I was pleasing myself and trying to please them” (2006, 27).<sup>17</sup> And, later in the same work, emphasizing the thoroughgoing wickedness which he associates with human limitation: “I was in love with my loss, with my own lack....My soul was perverse, was disarticulated out of its basis in [God], not seeking another thing by shameful means but seeking shame itself” (2006, 32).<sup>18</sup>

So, the person is “gathered” by God, and shaped into what is a transient whole—a spiritual entity, for at least one moment, made in the image of God insofar as

<sup>15</sup> And, on some neo-Platonist interpretations, *because* these things are divinely prohibited.

<sup>16</sup> I borrow this term from Lewis Kirshner (1991, 164).

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis is mine.

<sup>18</sup> We may contrast this critical take on the fallen soul (or self) with the purely structural conception of the soul as indivisible substance—the latter, not surprising, borrowing significantly from Plato’s (2009) position regarding the essential divisibility of corporeal bodies and the essential indivisibility of spiritual bodies.

participation in His wholeness goes. But, as the person's nature is unreservedly sinful, he immediately falls back into a collection of "scatterings." He "decomposes," giving in to mammon desire as opposed to standing firm in his religious commitment. The whole that Augustine momentarily *is*, as integrated by the graceful touch of God, can never last despite his best intentions and all of the will that he can muster. He is necessarily disobedient, and so, he is given to psychic disintegration—after all, he is human. On the other hand, as he is born again in devotion to God, he wills to do what is right. This paints the convert as being cursed to a kind of inescapable Janus-headedness. He both wants to obey God, and to disobey God, and at the same time. Moreover, he cannot do otherwise.

In making better sense of this, it will be helpful to refresh ourselves on the concept of *Original Sin*. Stephen Mulhall describes belief in this view as holding that:

Human nature...is tragically flawed, perverse in its very structure or constitution. [Here,] human beings are not only naturally capable of acting—even perhaps disposed to act—sinfully, but are always already turned against themselves, against the true and against the good, by virtue of their very condition as human. Hence, that sinful orientation will distort and ultimately invalidate any efforts they might make by themselves to alter that orientation; the only possible solution lies in their attaining a certain kind of orientation to the divine...[Original Sin further] entails that our very ability to orientate ourselves toward the good is dependent upon transcendental spiritual sources....We are...the self-originating source of sin; hence, our only hope of regaining any contact with goodness is by *dying to ourselves* (2005, 7).<sup>19</sup>

Again, it is in virtue of being human that one sins and that one must sin. Or, to put it into a more pertinent phraseology, because one is human, she is not now, nor will she ever be for any significant period, psychically perfect. In a person's requesting that God enter her heart, He, as it were, takes the reins and in so doing integrates her spiritually, purging any source of internal dissension.<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of the believer, it is God, Himself, who is healing the divided soul. She simply, submissively, accepts this gift.

Ironically, the preparation for this integration has at times been described as God's "breaking" of us, His "battering" of our hearts—His "burning," and "striking" of us with "blows" (John Donne, 1970). The idea here is that due to our fallen nature we cannot freely choose salvation *in practice*, so God must step in and force our hand, but only at our request. Once God hears the call, a restoration of the self takes place. The moment that God relinquishes control, though, the person restored immediately turns from Him, falls, and disintegrates. At best, then, she can come to

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<sup>19</sup> Emphasis is mine.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Altizer makes the point more eloquently: "So it is that in the life of faith we are the Lord's, none of us either lives or dies to himself (Romans 14:7), for in the life of the Spirit we are not our own (I Corinthians 6:19). Here, we are not our own because what is my own is sin and death, at most I can wish or desire to serve the Law of the God within my mind, but actual obedience is closed to me so long as I live according to the flesh, and I live in bondage to the flesh so long insofar as I live as my own" (1983, 360).



be in fleeting communion with God, so to know, in however limited a way, His wholeness. In order to achieve this, the person must—as Mulhall puts it, echoing what Paul says in Colossians—*die* to herself. So, we are talking about death and rebirth again. But, here's the rub, even after being spiritually reborn, the person retains her predilection for sin, and so, spiritual disintegration looms large.<sup>21</sup>

To return to Nietzsche, it is definitely worth asking whether, in introducing this conception of *holiness* as spiritual *wholeness*—so, as psychic perfection—certain religious traditions have not established a standard which is necessarily injurious to our collective psyche.<sup>22</sup> Is it the case that, in introducing the belief that the psychically imperfect self is essentially bad, orthodox Christianity has guaranteed that its devotees anguish in this conviction? Moreover, is it the case that, in introducing the belief that the psychically perfect self is essentially good, Christianity has assured that its faithful will incessantly dwell upon and, perhaps only subconsciously, covet this impossible state of the self? And, as result, eschew any understandings of self-integration which make sense of suitable, realistic personal integration in terms of partial cohesion?

Now, speaking in her own defense, she who adheres to the belief in the holy psychic perfection of God will answer an emphatic *No* to each of these questions. As, *In talking of the wholeness of selves, it is always clearly stipulated that no finite being, by definition, can attain lasting integration. And, so, it is not as if an impossible standard has been introduced which anyone—God certainly included—expects humans to live up to. Those who make attempts to achieve a state approximating psychic perfection do so out of the very arrogance and prideful nature which exemplifies humanity's Fallenness. They, like Lucifer, desire to become God, themselves.*

Given this view, we achieve salvation by the grace of God, not by our becoming psychically perfect, like Him. In recognition of this we enter into a state of ever-renewing thankfulness to God for His unending love and patience in the face of our fallen nature. We come to acknowledge His unique grace, and are appropriately humbled in the process. But, to speak for Nietzsche, that is exactly, in part, why the introduction of the notion of psychic perfection is objectionable. In introducing the conception of a perfected personal integration as had by God, we have set ourselves up for millennia of self-ridicule and the shared low self-esteem problems which go along with it. We are told that we will always fall short, and on the surface we accept this. But simultaneously, we believe deep down, perhaps only subconsciously, that we *must* achieve this level of perfect personal integration. Or, we must maintain earnest attempts to do so, at the very least.

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<sup>21</sup> Analogues to the Christian equation of wholeness with perfection go at least as far back as Platonistic readings of Parmenides. By the time we reach Plotinus, the *One* has been literally deified.

<sup>22</sup> Once more, it is not fair to lay this at the door of Western religion and only religion—as, just as there were secular precursors to the notion that the self (or soul) may be divided and that this can be a great evil, there were also those which spoke of the self (or soul) as being (ideally) a whole. Again, Plato's Socrates seems to hold such views at various points in the dialogues. By extension, it has been argued that Plato, too, held the view that selves were essentially wholes.

We fail, and fail again, of course; and, again and again, God picks us up and dusts us off. But, the fact that we do not deserve such grace—in our psychic imperfection—only makes matters worse as far as our collective self-concept goes. The idealization of psychic perfection, alongside the persistent attempt to achieve this state, alongside our understanding of ourselves as being forgiven by God in light of perpetual failure, constitutes a vicious cycle that, in extreme cases, can lead to excessive self-loathing; and, when projected onto the entire species, to an ill-founded misanthropy. Here, God's perfect love devolves into a perfect hatred, and His deliverance becomes capricious and mean:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell...abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire....He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight...And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell...but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship (Edwards 1999, 57-8).

Admittedly, this is an extreme take offered by an extremist. However, I am Nietzschean enough (1998) to believe that there is a little Edwards lurking within most of us—a *daemon* in the dark which routinely takes each of us to task over, for believers, our radically flawed nature and resultant lack of spiritual wholeness; and, for nonbelievers, our inkling that we are essentially psychically fragmented, woefully ambivalent, and incomplete in a way with which we should not be at peace.

Let me slow down here a bit, and emphasize the latter claim I have just made regarding modern secularists. While I have offered prolonged discussion of those who idealize a perfected soul qua *one* whole spiritual substance, my primary aim in doing so is not academic. Linking bygone religious ontology with contemporary folk psychology, I now want to suggest that that *our* intuitions regarding selfhood remain saddled to burdensome ideas about the need for complete psychic integration due to their lineage. While we, as a society, have largely moved away from *soul*-talk and much of what goes along with that, our *self*-talk (and the notions which undergird it) has retained an idealization of wholeness, which, of course, assumes the possibility and fuels the desirability of the impossible. Consider, once again, Louis Sass's (1988) and Charles Taylor's (1989) independent assertions that the effort to treat the more debilitating symptoms which accompany self-fragmentation has become a veritable cottage industry within mainstream clinical psychology and psychiatry.<sup>23</sup> In keeping a version of our conceptual baby, we have unwittingly preserved its metaphysical bathwater: belief in, and the desire for, psychic perfection, this time with respect to a naturalized understanding of the human psyche.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Freud, of course, anticipated these trends, writing more than a century ago of a self that has become increasingly fragmented across all intelligible lines, and whose ego has been—to borrow from contemporary psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic thought—*decentered*.

<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank the journal's anonymous referee for pointing out my need to clarify my position, and to emphasize my primary point, here; her/his comments were extremely helpful.

With this in mind, I return to Nietzsche: whether Christian or Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, agnostic or atheist, it is the *striving* (*tanhā*) for psychic perfection, and the often excruciating disappointment with ourselves upon failure, that is the *sickness*; not the lack of complete integration, itself.<sup>25</sup> Understanding oneself as, above all else, deformedly incomplete and broken is the *sickness*; not our essentially “sinful” (for the believer) or “conflicted” (for the secularist) psychically imperfect nature.

I leave it up to the reader to decide whether Nietzsche’s overall criticism is a persuasive one, and I will simply say that the continued idealization of psychic integration (in whatever form), alongside our continued efforts at achieving this state of the mind, only promise to keep us from accepting more sensible conceptions of selfhood. Furthermore, in marking the worldview which supports this account of the self as objectively true and non-negotiable (whether behind the ramparts of Western religion or those of folk understandings of the soft sciences and flaky selfhelpism), its more fanatical adherents have made transitioning to healthier collective self-understandings extremely difficult and slow-going. Once again, that the idealization of a unified soul is mirrored in our contemporary secular conception of selfhood doesn’t help. But, as these cultural artifacts are so closely related, how could this be otherwise?<sup>26</sup>

I have gone to some lengths, here, to describe the conceptual progenitor of our contemporary understanding of the integrated self, understood in this context as the (potentially) psychically perfect soul. And, provided its connection with certain ingrained religious traditions and an attending seriousness, I hope it is now better understood why the acknowledgement of any significant degree of self-fragmentation is accompanied with anxiety by many—even those of us who are wide-eyed religious skeptics. However, assuming that this striving was not originally initiated by such belief systems—that, in other words, such traditions have an historically-situated source as well as anything else—nothing has been said about the actual origins of the will to psychic perfection, itself. I think that a few such theories are worth mentioning in passing, and will provide a nice segue into introducing the proponents of what I will call *psychic disarray*, below.<sup>27</sup>

I will now briefly discuss an account which I find both cogent and illustrative of the same type of collective self-alienation that, according to some critiques,

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<sup>25</sup> This clinging to a strong realist conception of selfhood, and the striving to possess such a self (*attavadupadana*), often—as Buddhaghosa (2003) points out—interpenetrates clinging to the wrong views (*ditthupadana*) and clinging to certain rituals (*silabbatupadana*).

<sup>26</sup> I would argue that it is up to us to distance ourselves from such misguided understandings through pragmatically-attuned redescription. For the sake of space, I will not offer detailed discussion of what this might look like here, but will refer my reader to Richard Rorty (1989). I should note that while Rorty is, perhaps, the most celebrated contemporary exponent of this kind of conceptual pragmatism and redescription, much of what he has to say fits nicely with the approach attributed to the Buddha in the opening paragraphs, above.

<sup>27</sup> For the sake of space and in the interest of shifting the focus towards post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought, specifically, I will limit this discussion to those working roughly the same side of the same street. However, it would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor to compare the accounts offered here with those working in contemporary cultural anthropology and evolutionary psychology.

accompanies the Western religious conception of psychic perfection. The account, advanced in its most convincing form by Jacques Lacan (1977), goes something like this: The infant's experiences of itself are initially those of being thoroughly fragmented and not at all in control of its own actions. This is the result of having underdeveloped cognitive ability, a still-developing capacity for self-reflection and understanding, and extremely limited motor functioning. At some point, typically between the ages of six to eighteen months, the child first experiences a visual reflection of itself in, say, a mirror. Predictably, the child identifies with this visual.<sup>28</sup> As opposed to each of its previous "self" experiences, the form in the mirror appears to be an integrated whole. *It is one*. At some level, the child idealizes this, and throughout the duration of her life she desires her inner world, however chaotic, to resemble this apparent whole.<sup>29</sup>

While a widely accepted theory, it should be noted that this account is not accepted as the Gospel truth even among Lacanians. Some psychoanalysts, in fact, have argued that the disintegration of the self—while, as Lacan suggests, the default condition of the infant's subjectivity—is actually willfully sustained *by* the infant. This is so because the infant purposively disallows the integration of those parts of its self to which it stands estranged. Melanie Klein has endorsed such a view; she writes:

The early ego lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits....The result of splitting is a dispersal of the destructive impulse which is felt as the source of danger....Since the destructive and hated part of the self which is split off and projected is felt as a danger to the love object [e.g., a parent] and therefore gives rise to guilt, this process in projection in some ways also implies a deflection of guilt from the self to the other person (1975, 5-12).

This intentional disintegration continues, on Klein's account, throughout our lives. Although, we experience the effects of this sustained splitting in an often negative way, also; this is, of course, why the pendulum swings in both directions, sometimes oscillating rapidly. Later in the same article Klein writes about a dream reported to her by one her patients. The dream recounted involves the patient's unsuccessful attempts to dissuade a child from murdering an unknown innocent person. When it becomes clear that the child will not listen to reason, the patient dreamt that she strung up the child on a rope suspended from a tree's branch, and awoke just before she hanged her:

In the dream the patient's personality was split into two parts: the wicked and uncontrollable child on the one hand, and on the other hand the person who tried to

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<sup>28</sup> In other cases, it might not be the infant's own reflection that it sees which leads to this idealization, but the integration it attributes to some other person—the mother, for example—instead. Hereafter the child forms the belief that its self, like its material shadow, must also be an integrated whole.

<sup>29</sup> While there are more differences than similarities here, I believe it would be fruitful to read Lacan's account of the infant's projection of and idealization of psychic wholeness alongside Ludwig Feuerbach's (1989) account of our species' projection of and idealization of what are traditionally taken to be the divine attributes of God.

influence and control her...Killing the child...represented an annihilation of one part of her personality (1975, 20).<sup>30</sup>

The patient cannot, of course, actually *do in* this part of her self; so, in effect, she disowns it, sustaining a felt degree of disintegration in the process. While this feeling of psychic fragmentation brings about significant discomfort, the subconscious mind constantly acts to preserve this state in order to keep the greater threat at bay—until, again, the greater discomfort finds its source in her feelings of internal disintegration.<sup>31</sup>

Having now discussed a pair of attempts to explain the source of the need to integrate or partially disintegrate, I now return attention to Lacan. As stated above, the attempt to introduce healthier conceptions of the self is very much a two-front battle. Setting aside those who would have us retain an understanding of selfhood in terms of psychic perfection (whether rooted in the religious or the folk secular), the move towards adopting healthier understandings will also hinge upon our ability to overcome what those with opposing intuitions have characterized as a psyche which cannot be integrated to *any* significant extent. Given this, I must also have something compelling to say to the proponent of radical psychic disintegration who holds that *selfhood*, as a concept, is a misleading and potentially oppressive relic that we would do better to drop altogether, along with talk of *sprites*, *monads*, and *homunculi*. Here, I consider a pair of understandings of what this commitment to necessary and complete personal disintegration might look like; accounts provided by Lacan and María Lugones, in turn. After discussing the more salient points of each, I offer criticism.

### 3. PSYCHIC DISARRAY, LACANIAN AND FEMINIST

Some theorists—Lacan, for instance—have argued that the self cannot be integrated to virtually any extent; and, in part for this reason, that we should discontinue its use as a concept, altogether. Subjectivities are, on Lacan’s view, essentially disintegrated,

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<sup>30</sup> We can certainly imagine the author of Romans 7:15-20 having such a dream.

<sup>31</sup> Setting aside those accounts in which one willfully, if subconsciously, acts to integrate or disintegrate the self, some theorists have argued that the disintegration felt first in childhood most often results from a disconnection from someone, typically a parent, with whom a child identifies prior to the full formation of their own self. Ernest Wolf writes: “Withdrawing the needed selfobject experiences before the child has irreversibly and cohesively established the evoked self results in a deficient structure or sometimes in fragmentation of the self....We often hear [such] people complain that they feel like they are ‘falling apart’ (1993, 60).” Wolf goes on to argue that even into adulthood persons must sustain certain intimate relationships and the frequent and focused interaction central to these in order to remain integrated: “Human beings universally and continually need selfobject experiences in order to maintain the integrity of their selves. From birth to death we need to be embedded in a matrix of relationships supportive of our selves....Slight fragmentations manifest themselves as relatively minor psychological discomfort, perhaps some mild depression or anxiety, and they usually quickly heal when one is provided with appropriate selfobject experiences. Massive fragmentation is associated with major mental illness and even loss of self to an extent equivalent to psychosis” (1993, 61).

and radically so; and, he holds, the felt need to treat this disunity is symptomatic of humanity's cowardice in accepting that the person is essentially a *manqué* (*lack*). On this view, there is no cohesive self to restore, nor should we ever hope to construct one. Moreover, forcing the conception of an integrated self onto one's own subjectivity amounts to a kind of auto-oppression. Joel Whitebrook (1992) describes the position this way:

...the ego, far from being an agency of truth and emancipation is in fact a defensive structure, a submissive salve, sycophant, opportunist, and liar—a 'symptom' as Lacan puts it—that narcissistically seeks to protect the individual from otherness, and, in so doing, ultimately violates the otherness of the Other. Or, stronger yet, it may be the case that the very idea of emancipation is itself simply one of the grandiose illusions of modernity which seeks to deny our finitude, that is, our inescapable embeddedness in nature, language and tradition through omnipotent mastery. According to this account, the ego...[and] the desire for center in general, is a product of *anxiety*.<sup>32</sup>

Let's call the state of the essentially disintegrated self *psychic disarray*. In sidestepping a more reasonable rendering of this challenge, I simply will not have anything to say about the integration of the individual person's unconscious and conscious mental components. Most obviously, this is because I simply do not possess the expertise to make the most elementary assumptions about this fragmentation and its resolution. And so, I leave this particular divide to the psychotherapist.

I will say, though, that—to revamp one of Mark Twain's quips—I *believe that reports of the necessarily disintegrated self have been greatly exaggerated*. In other words, against the Lacanian, I hold that some significant degree of self-reconciliation and derivative personal integration, even at the level of the conscious and unconscious, is entirely possible. Moreover, I believe that that psychoanalysts and their analysands—especially those working from within Kohutian and Jungian paradigms—achieve this end in their cooperative work every day. Aside from the voluminous research available on the subject, there is ample anecdotal evidence which supports this point.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Emphasis is the author's own.

<sup>33</sup> Here, I would like to make two parenthetical, but important, points. First, since I am engaging Lacan, I will speak mainly in terms of the *treatment of analysands*. Everything that I have to say in favor of my talk of the self and against his, though, goes for talk of the self by and about the more general population. Whether we seek out professional therapy or not, we all face these same issues, after all; and, we can certainly all benefit from thinking about and talking about the self in healthier ways. Second, here and hereafter, it might sound as if I am falling back into the trappings of metaphysics. I seem to have just asserted that a significant degree of self-integration is (objectively) possible, after all. Much like the Buddha and the pragmatist though, I remind my reader, I am not at all interested in reaching metaphysical bottom in talking in these ways; like them, I am interested only in *talking* in these ways if these ways of *talking* have the potential to lead to a desired result. Once more, I ask my reader to keep this in mind throughout—if I assert something which sounds like a metaphysical thesis, please take this to be merely my favoring a *way of talking* which, for one reason or another, I take to be potentially restorative for a group not entirely at peace.

Against this, of course, the Lacanian will likely lodge something like the following complaint: *We have no way of knowing that the self has, in fact, been to any degree integrated in such instances, or even what that kind of talk might mean. A feeling of greater psychic wholeness on the part of the analysand, and an accompanying inner peace, does not guarantee that anything approximating personal integration has taken place, and may just as well be accounted for in other ways, provided that the analyst is working from within a theoretical framework which correctly does not suppose that there is something like a self to be assembled or reassembled, whichever the case may be.*

In response to this, I would say that we may reach a correct conclusion about what best accounts for the therapeutic results mentioned above by considering these outcomes from different psychoanalytic perspectives. I am of the—admittedly amateur—opinion that those frameworks which assume the possibility of some degree of self-reconciliation and personal integration seem to better explain this alteration and the subjective experiences of the patient than do those which assert from their inception that the psychical components cannot be reconciled at any level. And, I find accounts which make sense of therapeutic progress in these terms to be extremely compelling for this reason.

Here, the Lacanian might concede that methodological frameworks which center on the self and its reconciliation do have seductive explanatory power; however, that, since talk of the self is potentially burdensome to the subject—partly in that it validates with use of the concept, *selfhood*, an unattainable ideal along the lines of something like psychic perfection—those therapeutic vocabularies which make use of it are detrimental to the long-term betterment of the patient. Put another way, as there can be no metaphysically “real” self to create or to restore, talk of one, and the implicit goal-setting and negligent idealization tied to this, sets up the analysand for succumbing to feelings of failure and despair. More than that, such talk feeds into the ego’s tendency to duplicitous self-ossification in the name of finding a center within the subject.

In Buddhist traditions, the term associated with this kind of clinging to permanence is *upādāna*—literally, *fuel*. Regarding unhealthy attachment to the idea of substantial self, Nāgārjuna writes: “Clinging is to insist on being someone— / Not to cling is to be free to be no one” (2000, 131). Following Nāgārjuna’s position, I take Lacan’s worries to be legitimate ones. We do tend toward this clinging. But, why? Simone de Beauvoir puts it this way:

Along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence (1997, 16-7).

Rather than face, with courage, the anxiety associated with the subject’s contingency and nonessentiality, the ego deceives the patient into believing that she

has (or should have) a core self; and, of course, for reasons which are probably fairly obvious, the patient is more than willing to play the role of dupe. Here, the subject allows herself to become the creation of the ego's will, and gives in to the fantasy of self-substantiality. Coming to form the belief that one is a self, while easing the analysand's distress, betrays a kind of bad faith on her part—as, so the story goes, to view oneself *as* a self is to reify one's subjectivity in a self-deceived and essentially inauthentic way. To use Sartrean terminology, to claim to be *a* self is to view oneself as an *in-itself*. And, kowtowing to the will of another, even if this other is a part of one's own mental make-up, is to allow oneself to be an *in-itself* strictly *for* another.

Again, I take this to be a powerful cluster of concerns, but believe that there are adequate responses: First, I grant that talk of the *self*, where this term is taken to denote the completely integrated and transparent Cartesian mind-stuff of Western lore, could very well lead the analysand to form unrealistic expectations regarding the degree of personal integration achievable, so strengthening her givenness to *upādāna*. For this reason, I want to suggest that selfhood be fundamentally redescribed, and with just those limitations in mind which have been accentuated by Lacan's critique of humanistic psychologies.

So, while I disagree with Lacan in regards to the disutility of *self*-talk, generally, I do feel as though he is owed a debt of gratitude in drawing renewed attention towards the extent to which vocabularies making use of the concept may be detrimental, given a lack of sufficient irony and historicism. Again, rather than getting bogged down in metaphysical parley about the self, I would argue that we shift the focus to distinguishing between healthier and unhealthier ways of *talking about* the self *à la* the Buddha.

Second, and following from this, there is little cause for justifiable concern that the analysand's expectations will outgrow her potential for partial integration, given acceptance of such an understanding. Moreover, keeping this redescription fresh in the mind of the analysand will hinder the ego in its plans to initiate any kind of covert self-reificatory action; and so, will prevent the conscious subject from falling into anything like the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In a sense, then, routine talk of the self, provided that the analysand buys into its redescription, may actually prevent her from falling into the very kinds of misunderstandings about which the Lacanian is worried.

Speaking about the self redescribed, the patient may work with the analyst in establishing some degree of cohesion by bringing certain components of her psyche into accord—values, commitments, and so on. But, in continuously acknowledging her lack of essence, and the impossibility of coming to sustain the self as *a* thing, she may simultaneously understand and come to terms with the necessity of a degree of heteronomy. The former, the partial integration of psychic components which constitute a self, and the sense of security that this offers, may help the analysand to better face her overall lack of essence and the more distressing psychic effects that follow from the acknowledgement of this.

In addition to keeping these fresh understandings present by means of external or internal therapeutic dialogue, there are practices found within various Buddhist



traditions which can aid in the periodic *unintegration* of the self, and so, to provide routine reminders about how the concept should and should not be used.<sup>34</sup> Here, I am talking about meditating on one's essential *sunyata*—her *emptiness* or *voidness*. “Emptiness,” Mark Epstein writes, “is not a thing in itself, but is always predicated on a belief in something. Referring to the absence of self-sufficiency or substantiality in persons...emptiness describes the lack of just those qualities of independence and individual identity that we so instinctually impute” (1995, 100). Embracing one's *sunyata* amounts to coming to terms with the fact that there is no persistent self qua substance which desires, values, suffers, and so on; but that the self just *is* that open-ended series of desiring, valuing, suffering, and so on. Once one shifts from the view that these activities are, in some strong sense *hers* rather than *her* she has achieved unintegration, and witnesses directly the true contingency of self.

I will now briefly discuss two distinct ways of attempting to unintegrate by way of meditation. These are: first, by internally searching for one's substantial self, and, in virtue of its absence, laying bare one's *sunyata*; and second, by meditating on the content of the mind without making judgments about or taking direct ownership of these things. This indirect approach allows one's misconception of the self to gradually melt away. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey writes:

If we meditate with the four keys [i.e.,] (1) coming to recognize ‘how we view the “I” as inherently existent, as if it were independent of the aggregates of body and mind’; (2) coming to see that ‘the inherently existing “I” must exist as either one with the body and mind...or separate from them’; (3) ‘ascertaining the absence of true sameness of the “I” and the five aggregates’; (4) ‘ascertaining any true difference between the self and the aggregates to search for the self in our body...and our aggregates of mind as well, we won't find anything...It's like looking for a cow in a certain field. We walk all around: up the hills, down the valleys, through the trees, everywhere. Having searched the entire area we found nothing, we arrive at the certainty that the cow simply isn't there...This is the understanding of emptiness (2005, 196).

Much like Hume (1978), the practitioner of this meditation takes stock of that for which she is searching—a substantial self—looks inward exhaustively in order to locate this, fails to find a trace, and surmises that her belief in such a self has no experiential basis.<sup>35</sup> Of the second approach, Mark Epstein writes:

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<sup>34</sup> I borrow the concept *unintegration*—a notion whose affinity with Buddhism has been remarked upon extensively by Mark Epstein (2007)—from the post-Freudian psychoanalyst, W. D. Winnicott. Unpacking this notion in brief, Adam Phillips writes: “Unintegration means being able to entrust oneself to an environment in which one can safely and easily be in bits and pieces without the feeling of falling apart” (1989, 80). The stock example of this is the completely relaxed infant in its mother's trusted arms. As I have suggested, sitting meditation can facilitate this experience as well.

<sup>35</sup> I am playing fast and loose with offering a comparison between the Buddha and Hume here, but believe that it is overall a good one to make at least insofar as each thinker's initial approach to the problem goes. However, some interpret the two as doing something very different, at the end of the day. For extended discussion, see James Giles (1993).

[In meditation,] the self-representations and self-feelings are observed instead of identified with, conflicts are noted without attempts having to be made to solve them. But this holding is not what we usually imagine it to be—it is not a holding on, but more like a juggling. Keeping a number of balls in the air, we hold all of them and none of them. In so doing, the experience of self is opened up, deepened, made more transparent, and transformed.<sup>36</sup>

Here, what is taken to be the unsubstantiated belief in a unified self is bracketed, as, implicitly, is belief in no-self. The meditator allows herself to experience all present mental content, but does not discriminately color these with convictions of ownership, and so does not experience these as if it were up to her to appraise them—much less as if it were her responsibility to police these events, as she mindlessly does amid her normal comings and goings. This detachment from all mental content dissuades any personalization of these experiences, and allows the subject's sense of substantial self to dissolve.

While each of these two meditations leads one to abandon, for a time, what the Buddhist takes to be a thoroughly unhealthy sense of self, it is important to note that this does not lead to an acceptance of anything like a Lacanian strong antirealism about selves. None other than His Holiness the Dalai Lama, writes:

Buddhism asserts selflessness; is it not that the self is non-existent? If Buddhists did assert that there are no persons and that selves are non-existent, there would not be anybody to meditate on selflessness, and there would be no one with respect to whom one could cultivate compassion. Hence, our own experience establishes that there are persons, selves.<sup>37</sup>

So, in her soft antirealism, what conception of the self is the Buddhist denying? Walpola Rahula describes it as “a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world...the thinker of thoughts, feeler of sensations, and receiver of rewards and punishments for all its actions good and bad” (1974, 51). Of course, I hold that we should deny such a self also. However, doing so does not preclude us from conceiving of the self in a fundamentally different way. And, it certainly does not commit us to rejecting *talk* about selfhood, altogether. I am not sure how a vocabulary devoid of such a crucial conceptual piece would even function when the time came to describe human experience. This brings me to my final complaint against Lacan.

I suggest that the subject must come to understand herself qua self under some, however deflated, description, even if, in taking part in Lacanian analysis, she is not using this particular term to denote the concept. Said another way, even when the analyst is making use of those vocabularies which intentionally disallow expressions such as *self*, etc., I would argue that the analysand has worked out her own way of making sense of being a self in those terms which are being used. The concept, I want

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Epstein (2007, 221).

<sup>37</sup> Tenzin Gyatso (1984, 161).

to suggest, is simply too vital to the subject's making sense of subjective life for it to be otherwise. John Barresi puts it this way:

From a phenomenological perspective, it does not matter whether this self that we attribute identity to through time is metaphysically real or mere psychological fiction, what matters is that it is essential to our phenomenology of self, and without it, we scarcely could consider ourselves as persons, with a past, present, and future<sup>38</sup>

To travel a bit further down this same road, I take it that some degree of acknowledged integration of the conscious components of the self, and discussion of this, is necessary for the attribution of personal responsibility to the subject; and, certainly for her ability to self-identify as an autonomous moral agent. Here, though, the Lacanian might just accuse me of assuming much too much: namely, that *responsibility* itself is a concept which we should continue to take seriously and use in analytic discourse. At this point, we reach an impasse. Richard Rorty writes:

It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing [of lasting philosophical substance to refer to] to choose between us [liberals] and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out the differences. That Nazi and I will always strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles (1999, 15).

Similarly, it might turn out to be the case that there are simply not enough common (in our respective minds) axiomatic starting points for the Lacanian and I to make any headway as far as the disagreement goes, here. That being the case, there is not much else to do other than congenially duke it out in Mill's Marketplace of Ideas, and see who is left standing at the end of the day—hopefully each keeping an open mind with respect to the other's position in the process. For my part, I am certainly allow for the possibility that the Lacanian's vocabulary is more advantageous than my own—for now, though, I do not see it that way for the reasons already stated.

Setting Lacan aside, there is an another noteworthy interpretation of what consented-to essential disintegration looks like, and why we should embrace it as a legitimate and healthy baseline. This take on the fragmentation of identity, associated with certain flavors of feminism and diasporic philosophies, suggests that as we are all no more than a conjunction of identities and roles; and that, since some of these identities and the value systems in terms of which they are defined may oppose others of ours (and their accompanying values) in an irremediable way, we should simply accept ourselves *as* this conflicted multiplicity and surrender the mission to locate or create anything like an integrated self. María Lugones has argued for this position; she writes:

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<sup>38</sup> John Barresi (1999, 91).

I am giving up the claim that the subject is unified. Instead I am understanding each person as many. In giving up the unified self, I am guided by the experiences of bicultural people who are also victims of ethnocentric racism in a society that has one of those cultures as subordinate and the other as dominant. These cases provide me with examples of people who are very familiar with experiencing themselves as more than one: having desires, character, and personality traits that are different in one reality than in the other, and acting, enacting, animating their bodies, having thoughts, feeling the emotions, etc., in ways that are different in one reality than in the other.<sup>39</sup>

And, elsewhere, speaking of her own experiences:

One of the possibilities of myself as unitary but lacking, is myself as a cultural participant in Nuevo Mejico: *en los pueblitos nortehños*, working to keep the culture alive, working to undermine the de-moralization that keeps people from embracing the aliveness of the culture and from strengthening it through critical and creative participation. In [Sarah] Hoagland's use of 'autokoenoous,' this work can only be accomplished by an autokoenoous self, a self in community and this self can only be well if the community becomes actively engaged in its own well-being....I, whom this community of place grounds by making it possible for me to be an autokoenoous Hispana, and *Nuevomejicana* lesbians for whom this is their community of place, will not be heard as real participants in this rejection of anglo domination if openly lesbian. These communities do not recognize us as fully their own if lesbian....The other possibility of my self is in the lesbian community, in separation from heterosexism: both from racist, imperialists, capitalist, anglo relationships, conceptual and social frameworks and from Hispano heterosexism, steeped in poverty and ravaged by anglo racism and colonialism. I come to lesbian community with 'my culture on my back,' but this is not where I can struggle for the survival of Hispana culture and life. Thus my autokoenoous self is lacking in lesbian community....It is only through participation in each community that I nourish each autokoenoous self. But the autokoenoous creation in each community cannot walk as autokoenoous in the other.<sup>40</sup>

I take Lugones's point to be this: She is a Latina who happens to also be a lesbian; so, we are tempted to say that Lugones self-identifies—or could—as a lesbian Latina. But, she cannot. She can self-identify as neither a *lesbian* Latina nor a lesbian *Latina*, because there is an inbuilt incongruity, albeit a contingent one, which stands to oppose the one self-conception against the other. In order to fully take part in the Latino community, and so, to wholly affirm her Latino identity, she must, to some significant degree, accept the values which are endemic to that community, and to act from them as they are constituted within Hispanic culture. But, among these values is an extremely rigid and ensconced heterosexism. So, insofar far as Lugones self-identifies as a Latina, she cannot simultaneously self-identify as a lesbian; as her lesbian self stands at odds with her Latina self. As a result, she stands alienated from that component of her personality at particular times.

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<sup>39</sup> María Lugones (1990, 503).

<sup>40</sup> María Lugones (1990, 141-2).

Conversely, insofar as Lugones self-identifies as a lesbian, she cannot significantly take part in Latino culture, because in self-identifying as a lesbian under *some* description of who she is, *some* of the time, she stands firmly against the heterosexism which permeates this community and its values, and in an essentially personal way. Because of the prevalence of such incoherencies of identity, Lugones finds it best to define herself in terms of an essentially disintegrated multiplicity; sometimes living in full accord with *these* values, sometimes *those* values. Lugones is sometimes a Latina, other times a lesbian, and routinely travels between these two distinct “worlds” without toting the luggage of either across the borderline.

There is a temptation to interpret Lugones as offering a wholly figurative account of the way in which she, a woman being in some sense pulled apart by conflicting facets of her identity, attempts to navigate her social world; and, on this reading, as a critique of the evils of a world that would unjustly divide her in this way. So far as this goes, I think the “world-traveling” vocabulary she introduces has a great deal going for it. However, this does not seem to be her full intention. And, in as much as we are to take her description of this state of essential selflessness to heart, I think this talk should be replaced with that involving something along the lines of Owen Flanagan’s conception of the *multiplex self*.<sup>41</sup>

For Flanagan, the multiplex self is a self understood as comprised of sometimes mutually exclusive value systems and resultant projects and commitments, where the agent personifies one incorporation of these within one community with which she relates, and others for others. Here, there is sometimes the potential for the interaction between these otherwise compartmentalized facets of the self. But, often the individual cannot emphasize more than one of her practical identities at a time. Let’s further consider Flanagan’s multiplex self by way of an example: the Log Cabin Republican.

The Log Cabin Republican finds himself, in important respects, in the same boat as Lugones. As one whose self-identificatory roles seem at odds in some very important ways; yet, as one who cannot, for whatever reason, continue to make sense of himself in breaking with either. While there is certainly a pronounced conflict between the values which comprise the Log Cabin Republican’s various self-identifications, I do not think that the best way to make sense of the variance of these is by suggesting that he simply cannot have *a* self in any sense. He may affirm his

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<sup>41</sup> Owen Flanagan writes: “[A multiplex self is a self whose] plans, projects, and desires are multifarious—and they are, to a certain extent, in tension with one another both synchronically and diachronically....Normal selves are multiplex. When a single individual experiences herself or expresses her being with different narrators who cannot grasp the connection between or among the narratives or narrative segments, the individual is a *multiple*....Multiplex selves in complex environments display different parts of their narrative to different audiences. Different selves—my philosopher self, my baseball-coach self, [etc.]—are played for different audiences....I draw my selves together through the force of narrative gravity, and I comprehend myself in terms of a single, centered narrative in which they all fit together (but not without tension, various confusions, and much second-guessing)....Multiplex selves live lives that are continuous, connected, functionally coherent, and qualitatively more or less homogenous. Multiplex selves are integrated” (1996, 66-74).

Republicanism among Republicans, and his homosexuality among those in the LGBTQIA community and its allies. And, of course, he may affirm both among close friends, family members, and a significant other.

More than that, though, I would argue that he may, in fact, affirm his homosexuality among Republicans, refusing to accept the heterosexism of the GOP, and the homophobic special interest groups to which it tends to truckle. And, he may affirm his Republicanism among those in the gay and lesbian community, refusing to accept certain liberal values typically adhered to within it, and the progressive special interest groups to which *it* sometimes bows and scrapes. The very fact that he self-identifies as a, specifically, *Log Cabin* Republican makes it plain that he can cope with this practical tension, despite being constantly stereotyped, and perhaps, harangued, by those standing to his Right and his Left. And, stipulating that a commitment to either (or both) of these ways of life is identity-conferring for him, he must do so in order to preserve integrity.

He understands that the largest number of the group with which he identifies politically disapprove of his sexual orientation and the lifestyle choices that go along with it; and, he accepts that, to an extent, while in no way endorsing this. He acknowledges, too, that the largest number of the group with which he identifies with respect to sexual orientation disapprove of his political affiliation. And, he accepts that, to an extent, and, again, without giving in to pressures to forfeit his most preciously held political ideals. Provided these things, I do not see that there is any reason to assert that the *Log Cabin* Republican cannot make sense of himself in terms of being a contingently-integrated self. In fact, given what I have just said about his unwillingness to compromise with respect to either set of his identity-conferring values, one could conceive of him as the picture of personal integrity.

He is both a *Log Cabin* Republican and a *Log Cabin Republican*; he is a *Log Cabin Republican*. He can identify with each role separately, emphasizing one side of his person over others, as well as the conjunction of the roles simultaneously; and, he can do so while inhabiting either of his “worlds.” Similarly—and I definitely do not want to come off as flippant, here, as I do, in the limited way that I can, feel the tremendous strain to be overcome—I do not understand why Lugones cannot make sense of herself as a *lesbian Latina*. She seemingly *can* keep one foot planted in either “world,” while taking part in both.

Finally, to briefly return to Lugones’s own autobiographical example: In quietly accepting that participation in the Latino community necessarily involves the tacit approval of heterosexism, we give way to a troubling kind of cultural fetishism. Groups expressly created for the purpose of the exclusion of others notwithstanding, our various associations, whether collectives based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, social and political issues or whatever the case may be, are not ideologically fixed such that we may have no say in the evolutionary trace of their values. The fact, then, that contemporary Latino culture is heterosexist is a historical contingency, and does not guarantee—*thankfully*—that this particular ideological peculiarity will remain in its various future instantiations. Not to be patronizing, at all, but I would argue, too, that María Lugones the *Latina lesbian* could likely serve

better in bringing about a positive change with regard to the Latino community's heterosexist values than could either María Lugones the Latina or María Lugones the lesbian.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

According to the Pāli *suttas*, the Buddha was once approached by Vaccha, a wandering ascetic, who inundated him with all brand of enquiry. Among the questions posed was, *Is there a self or is there not a self?* It is said that the Buddha refused to answer. This raises another question: Why didn't I follow suit, here?

The Buddha determined that the most beneficial philosophical prescription for Vaccha, at least at the time, was to weaken his obsession with the self—and so, not to give in to even acknowledging his worries as worthy of being pursued. We, as a society, obsess over selfhood also. However, for reasons which I have alluded to above, continued use of the concept *selfhood* is well worth the trouble involved in deflating and redescribing it. My recommendation, then, is that as we conceive of selfhood within general discourse, we prevent our understanding of and talk of the notion from careening into either the extreme of excess (strong realism about the self) or the extreme of deficiency (strong antirealism about the self). I close by briefly returning to Owen Flanagan, who writes:

There are many people who have come to grips with the contingency of their selves, with their fallibility, and with their naturalness, in ways that do not throw them into existential turmoil when they experience their frameworks as lacking transcendental grounding. There is no incoherence in the idea of persons...operating effectively and happily within frameworks that they simply do not see or experience as final or foundational (1996, 160).

In endorsing this, I imagine I am, to some extent, preaching to the choir. However, there are those—family, friends, neighbors—who, in holding to the idealization of something like psychic perfection, are not so receptive to coming to understand the self as extremely fragile and lacking essence; much less of embracing its inbuilt tendency to disintegrate. On the other side of the aisle, there are the intuitive and ideologically-motivated strong antirealists who hold, again, that mental content are necessarily at loggerheads; who hold that any self-talk is a deceptive vocabulary which may only hinder the individual or collective who uses it, irrespective of the extent to which the concept has been deflated.

It is my hope that I have successfully demonstrated that neither of these conceptions of the self are healthy and functional, generally speaking; and so, that our understanding of this notion should avoid each of these poles. I appeal to Nāgārjuna once more, and ask that we make a strong attempt to “Let go of ‘I am.’ / Let go of ‘I am not.’” And to “relinquish being and nothingness” (2000, 107).

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