Overcoming vs. Letting Go: Nietzsche and Buddha on the Self and Politics
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Introduction

Nietzsche and the Buddha appear to have remarkably similar views on the status and importance of the self. Both thinkers argue that there is no immortal soul or essential self. Both argue that we can infer nothing of philosophical or metaphysical importance from the indispensability of referring in ordinary speech to human beings as if they were selves. The two even agree that false self-conceptions are at the root of many and perhaps most personal and social problems. Yet Nietzsche and the Buddha offer diametrically opposed advice about how one should act based on these insights. In brief, the Buddha advocates letting go of one’s sense of being a self, on the grounds that this illusory experience is not needed for any useful purpose, but instead poses a permanent barrier to peaceful, harmonious relations with oneself and others. In contrast, Nietzsche advocates a process of continual self-overcoming, constantly replacing one’s existing, limiting self with a newly conceived self that allows one to fulfill one’s goals more fully.

These two courses of action represent a fundamental existential choice for anyone who comes to believe that there is no essence to the self, no immortal soul. Given how central that belief has been to Western philosophy since the nineteenth century (not to mention being central to Buddhist philosophy since the fifth century BCE), it is a basic choice of modernity. If it becomes clear to one that the “metaphysical” self is a fiction, one must then choose: shall I not conceive of myself as a self at all, or shall I remake my self to suit my existing plans and values? Reading the Buddha and Nietzsche together helps to clarify what is at stake in this choice. From the Buddha’s point of view, Nietzsche’s decision to affirm even a contingent, more-or-less-temporary self represents a failure of courage to live in a world without guarantees or stable
essences. In other words, it represents the limit of Nietzsche’s commitment to becoming. From Nietzsche’s point of view, the Buddha’s attempt to give up the idea of being a self represents giving up on the idea of pursuing normative ideals and standards. In other words, it is a passive form of nihilism, preferable to the ressentiment-fueled nihilism of the Christian West, but nonetheless a supine surrender to meaninglessness.

The two thinkers agree that one’s self-view is central to one’s ability to cooperate socially and politically with others, while once again disagreeing about which self-view to adopt. The Buddha argues that letting go of one’s sense of being a self will lead one to become less egocentric, less likely to do harm to others, and more likely to be willing to create peaceful means of coexistence. Conversely, he argues that holding onto the conception of being a self is one of the primary causes of social conflict. Nietzsche’s view is more complex. He conceives of his self-overcoming view as the mean between the destructive, reactive egoism of ressentiment and the nihilism that he perceives in the no-self position. Thus while he associates ressentiment with an anti-social inability to control one’s own behavior and a desire for revenge against life, and associates nihilism with a lack of interest in creating stable social systems beyond those necessary for a minimal preservation of life, he views continual self-overcoming as generating a politics of peaceful, joyful cooperation and voluntary self-control (though only among equals).

However, reading these two thinkers together does not merely clarify and sharpen the terms and consequences of the choices that confront us. It also reveals that the Buddha was right and Nietzsche was wrong. As I argue below, the Buddha has the better argument for two main reasons. First, Nietzsche’s claim that we should maintain a contingent self creates a barrier to our ability to accept the full truth of our experience of ourselves, and thus injects resentment against existence back into his theory. Second, Nietzsche is mistaken in thinking that the Buddhist no-
self view leads to an abandonment of agency and the ability to pursue normative ideals. Indeed, precisely the opposite is true: holding onto a self-theory that one knows is false is the bigger barrier to agency and normative striving. The same line of reasoning also holds good for their political views: Nietzsche is mistaken in thinking that continual self-overcoming avoids the dangers of both ressentiment and nihilism, and the Buddha’s argument, that abandoning the idea of the self altogether is likely to lead to peaceful cooperation, is more plausible.

The Self

Before we look at the particular arguments put forward by the Buddha and Nietzsche, it will be helpful to lay some conceptual groundwork, first by arriving at a working definition of the self, and second by creating a typology of the different levels or kinds of selves that we find in both the primary and secondary literatures.

In commonsense terms, what we mean by the self is that element / quality / essence / factor / process that makes each one of us the unique individuals that we are. More concretely, when we talk about the self, we have at least three things in mind: identity, continuity, and causality. By identity I mean that whatever the self might actually be, it is what makes you you. The self is unique to each individual, and it cannot be shared with someone else or taken away. By continuity I mean that the self remains relevantly the same over time. Exactly what that means is the subject of an enormous literature in philosophy, but for our purposes we can bypass that debate. If there is a self, it is the thing that makes it true to say that you are same person today whom you were 10 years ago, and will be 10 years in the future. Further, if you
believe that some part of your identity survives after the death of your body, then the self might be identical with the soul.

The causality condition is a bit more complicated. On the one hand, the self would have to be a primary cause of your basic experiences and actions. Really, that’s just a spelling out of the identity condition—if the self is what makes you yourself, then it must be primarily causally responsible for those things that are distinctive to you: your experiences and actions. Otherwise, it would have nothing to do, and would be an otiose hypothesis, like the luminiferous ether. Obviously external factors will also be causally relevant, but the self is what accounts for the different ways that individuals experience and respond to those external factors. However, on the other hand, the self would need to be largely immune from being permanently affected by external causes. In effect, this is just a spelling out of the continuity condition—if your self could be changed by the influence of external factors, then it’s possible that you would not be the same person today whom you were 10 years ago, and continuity would be lost. Thus the self might be as much as an immortal soul or as little as a minimum degree of psychological continuity over time, but whatever it is, if it exists, the self must possess the relevant qualities of identity, continuity, and causality.

In the primary texts from both Nietzsche and the Buddha, and to a lesser degree in the scholarly commentary on those texts, we find three different levels or definitions of self being discussed (sometimes explicitly, often implicitly). First, there is the self as an ontological or metaphysical fact, a thing-in-itself, a natural essence, a soul, and so on. For simplicity, I’ll call this the metaphysical self. The overwhelming view among interpreters is that both Nietzsche and the Buddha flatly deny that any such thing exists (I note some dissenting views below). Further,
both the Buddha and Nietzsche appear to argue that no one has any direct experience of such a
self, and that the idea that such a thing exists is an inference from other ideas and experiences.

Second, there is what I’ll call the persistent self, which is the self understood as an
ongoing psychological unity. Thus, one might accept that there is no immortal soul or natural
essence that constitutes a human self, and yet still experience or believe that human cognitive
functioning gives rise to a distinct psychological entity that has the necessary qualities of
identity, continuity, and causality (at least during the lifetime of the body).

Finally, there is the punctual self, which is the experience of human beings as single,
more-or-less unified entities at any given moment. Thus, it makes sense for each of us to refer to
ourselves as “I,” and for us to treat others as if they were single, more-or-less unified subjects.
We may think that there is no soul or permanent self, and we may even think that people are not
psychologically continuous over time, but we may nonetheless find it useful and meaningful to
think of human beings as unified agents at any given moment (for example, when we address a
person, or ask them to carry out an immediate action). Both the Buddha and Nietzsche refer to
human beings as selves in this sense, and both appear to believe that doing so does not commit
them to any unacceptable metaphysical premises.

Before we move on, the idea of the persistent self needs a bit more unpacking. Notice that
the metaphysical self is necessarily only a belief—according to Nietzsche and the Buddha, no
one has a direct experience of being a metaphysical self, but instead only an inferential belief
that they are such a thing. In contrast, notice that the punctual self is necessarily only an
experience—regardless of our beliefs, at any given moment we inevitably appear to be single,
unified subjects or agents to ourselves and to each other (except in cases so unusual we call them
pathological). But the persistent self can be a belief, or an experience, or both. Thus, I could
believe that I am a persistent self based on my experience of other people exhibiting psychological continuity over time, even if I do not currently experience that continuity myself (due to amnesia, for example). Similarly, I could experience what appears to be diachronic psychological unity, perhaps by reflecting on how my own previous experiences and intentions affect my current thoughts and actions, though without necessarily arriving at the belief that I am therefore a unified, continuous psychological entity (perhaps I am concerned about Cartesian demons affecting my perceptions). Further, I could (and usually do) have both experiences—feeling myself to be psychologically continuous over time, and also consciously believing myself to be a single self due in part to that experience of psychological continuity.

Nietzsche and the Buddha both argue that human beings naturally experience themselves as being psychologically unified over time. The two thinkers agree that this experience is an illusion that covers over the fact that human beings are in fact made up of unstable arrangements of psychological and somatic experiences, such as instinctual drives, memories, sensory experiences, and so on. But whereas the Buddha argues that we can and should rid ourselves both of the belief that we are psychologically continuous over time and of the experience of being so, Nietzsche argues that we should not get rid of either the belief or the experience. As I argue below, Nietzsche’s position is that we should continue to conceive of ourselves as persistent selves despite knowing that this description is illusory. Thus the Buddha and Nietzsche agree in their description of the facts that lead us to believe that we are selves, but disagree in their normative advice about what we should do once we recognize those facts.

The Buddhist Theory of No Self
Buddhism is a large and complex intellectual tradition, and contains several different schools of teaching about the status of the self. Although in principle those tradition are mutually consistent, they differ widely in terminology, context, and emphasis. It would be impossible to discuss all of them in a single essay, and so I will focus on the teachings on the self found in Early or Canonical Buddhism. All Buddhist traditions and schools recognize the texts of Canonical Buddhism as being genuinely the teachings of the Buddha, though some traditions recognize additional teachings, and the various traditions give different degrees of weight to the several teachings. Thus one advantage of looking at the no-self theory of Canonical Buddhism is that the theory is relevant to all Buddhists, though not necessarily the last word on the subject for all of them.

The basic beliefs of Buddhism are well known. In his first sermon (the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*), the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, which are widely identified as being the core of the religion. First, life is dukkha, usually translated as suffering or unsatisfactory. Second, dukkha is caused by craving or thirst for pleasure. It is this craving that leads beings to be reborn continually, in the cycle of birth-death-rebirth that the Buddha called saṃsāra. Third, it is possible to give up this craving, thus avoiding dukkha, and ultimately exiting the cycle of saṃsāra. Fourth, the way to overcome craving is to live according to the precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path, which are to practice right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Although the details of these various practices are complex, the basic idea is they help us avoid three characteristic errors that feed craving: greed, hatred, and delusion. Meditation, the best known spiritual practice of Buddhism, is a concentrated method for developing the self-awareness and self-control necessary to live according to these eight precepts.
Anattā doctrine

One of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is having right views. The Buddha identified three especially important issues about which we must develop right views to achieve enlightenment. Together these three issues are called the tilakkhāna, which is variously translated as the Three Marks, Characteristics, or Signs of Existence: that life is suffering (dukkha), that all things are impermanent (anicca), and that all things are not-self (anātta). The typical error of sentient beings is to develop delusions about all three: to believe that life could be wholly happy and without suffering, that things could be permanent and not subject to change, decay, or death, and finally that there is a self that persists over time (and perhaps eternally).

The overwhelming majority of Buddhists believe that the Buddha taught that what I have called the metaphysical and persistent selves do not exist, and that our apparent experiences of them are illusions. Similarly, everyone seems to agree that the Buddha used words like person and individual, and that this falls under the punctual definition of the self, which is merely conventional and carries no metaphysical weight. A small minority of Buddhists and scholars believe that the Buddha’s teachings do not amount to a total denial of the existence of the self. Given that the vast majority of Buddhists reject this view, I will not assess it here—for our purposes, we can assume that the Buddha did in fact teach that there is no self.

The locus classicus of the anattā doctrine is the Buddha’s second sermon (the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta). To understand the arguments made there, we need a little background on the theory of the khandhas. That theory is laid out repeatedly in the Pāli Canon (PC; canonical...
teachings attributed to the Buddha and recognized by all Buddhists), and many scholars identify *Samyutta Nikāya* 22:56 (the *Parivatta Sutta*) as being an especially clear exposition.\(^{10}\) There the Buddha teaches that all of the objects of experience (also called conditioned objects) are made up of five *khandhas* (the Pāli word literally means heaps or bundles): form or matter (*rūpa*); sensation or feeling (*vedanā*); perception or cognition (*saññā*); mental formations or volition (*saṅkhāra*); and consciousness or discernment (*viññāṇa*). The Buddha explains that his enlightenment was based on four achievements: (1) knowing the nature of each *khandha*; (2) seeing how each arises; (3) seeing how each ceases; (4) seeing what path of conduct could lead to the cessation of each.\(^{11}\)

In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* the Buddha teaches that no self can be found in the five *khandhas*. He makes two distinct arguments along these lines.\(^{12}\) First, he argues that if the *khandhas* were identical with or amounted to a self, then that self would have volitional control over the *khandhas*. Since human beings don’t have volitional control over the *khandhas*, that suggests that the interaction of the *khandhas* does not either flow from or give rise to a greater self. The text says: “Bhikkhus [Monks], form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: ‘Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.’ [The same comments are repeated for the other *khandhas*: feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness.]” (Bodhi *Connected* 901).

The second argument rests on the assumption that a self would be permanent, either in the sense of being eternal and immutable (i.e., a metaphysical self), or in the sense of being consistent and stable over a long period of time (i.e., a persistent self). The Buddha points out that our actual experience shows us that the *khandhas* are impermanent, and therefore could not either be a self or give rise to a self: “‘What do you think, bhikkhus, is form permanent or
impermanent?’ – ‘Impermanent, venerable sir.’ – ‘Is what is impermanent suffering or
happiness?’ – ‘Suffering, venerable sir.’ – ‘Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to
change fit to be regarded thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my self?”’ – ‘No, venerable sir.’
[The same comments are repeated for the other khandhas.]” (Bodhi Connected 902).

The Buddha concludes: “Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of form whatsoever, whether
past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all
form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this
is not my self.’ [The same comments are repeated for the other khandhas.]” (Bodhi Connected
902).

With apologies to the Buddha, it seems to me that these arguments are not immediately
clear. Remember that above I argued that whatever the self might be, it has to have the three
qualities of identity, continuity, and causality. In essence, the Buddha’s two arguments in the
Anattalakkhana Sutta concern the causality quality (which will in turn implicate the other two).
On the one hand, he argues, if there really is a self, it ought to be the primary cause of our
experiences. Since the khandhas constitute all the possible objects of experience, it seems that if
we had a self it ought to be able to exert some degree of volitional control over our experience of
the khandhas. Otherwise, it seems that the hypothesized self has no power over experience, in
which case Occam’s razor suggests that we should dispense with the idea of a self as being
unnecessary. Yet we do not have volitional control over (our experience of) the khandhas, which
suggests that there is no self to be found in them. On the other hand, the Buddha argues, if there
is a self, it must be identical with one or more of the khandhas, since by hypothesis the khandhas
exhaust the category of possible objects of experience. By definition, the self has to be largely
immune from external causality, or else it would not be adequately continuous over time. But
none of the *khandhas* (or combinations of *khandhas*) are immune from causality—every aspect of our experience, of both the outer and inner worlds, is subject to constant flux and change due to the influences of external causes. In essence, the self would have to be a cause of change in the *khandhas* while not suffering changes due to them. But nothing in our actual experience has those qualities. Therefore nothing in our experience could be a self, and we are justified in concluding that there is no self (it is this last step that a minority of interpreters argue the Buddha himself does not take).

According to the popular interpreter Walpola Rahula, the Buddha makes a third argument against the self in his discussion of dependent origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*). In essence, this theory is a version of determinism—everything that exists arises due to the causal interactions of other factors, and in turn itself is the cause of the arising of yet other things. This is expressed in a formula repeated in many places in the PC: “Thus when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.” If that is true—and our experience of the world appears to support it—then there can be no self, because there can be nothing that has the right causal properties (as above), and thus nothing that has the right qualities of identity and continuity. Anything that we might identify as a self will necessarily be the causal product of other things, will be subject to ongoing causal influences, and thus will not have the causal independence that our concept of self requires.

The Importance of the No-Self View
Adopting the no-self view isn’t merely an intellectual matter of adopting the right position, no matter how counter-intuitive it may be. Rather, according to the Buddha, accepting that there is no self is central to liberation and enlightenment. We can infer this from the fact that the no-self view is one of the three marks or characteristics of existence (tilakkhana)—believing in a self is necessarily always believing something false. There are also a number of places in the PC where the Buddha explicitly makes this point. For example, the following formula appears in repeatedly in the PC and suggests that abandoning self-view is central to enlightenment:

[Buddha:] “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’” [Bhikkhus:] “No, venerable sir”….

[Buddha:] “Seeing thus, bhikkhus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with formations, disenchanted with consciousness. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ He understands: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’” (Bodhi Middle Alagaddūpama Sutta; MN 22; 232-233)

There is also an often-cited sutta about the self-view of the monk Khemaka. A group of other monks question Khemaka about whether he finds a self in any of the khandhas. When he says that he does not, the monks reply (perhaps mockingly): “If the Venerable Khemaka does not regard anything among [the khandhas] as self or as belonging to self, then he is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed [i.e., an enlightened being]” (Bodhi Connected 22:89, 943). Khemaka responds that although he intellectually knows and believes that there is no self, he cannot quite
get rid of the sense that he is or has a self. In the terms I have proposed, he does not believe that he is a persistent self, but he cannot avoid the experience of feeling like a persistent self.

Khemaka says: “Friends, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, still, in relation to the [khandhas] there lingers in him a residual conceit ‘I am,’ a desire ‘I am,’ an underlying tendency ‘I am’ that has not yet been uprooted” (Bodhi Connected 22:89, 945). But, Khemaka explains: “As he dwells thus [dispassionately] contemplating the rise and fall in the [khandhas] the residual conceit…comes to be uprooted” (Bodhi Connected 22:89, 945). As a consequence of having this conversation, Khemaka and 60 of the other monks achieve enlightenment.

Finally, in a number of places the Buddha argues that every possible self-view will lead to suffering—that is, to failure to overcome suffering through achieving enlightenment. For example, in the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta, the Buddha teaches that there are four kinds of clinging (recall that clinging is the root cause of suffering): “clinging to sensual pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to rules and observances, and clinging to a doctrine of self” (Bodhi Middle 137-138). Elsewhere the Buddha says: “‘Bhikkhus [monks], you may well cling to that doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who takes it as a support. But do you see any such doctrine of self, bhikkhus?’—‘No, venerable sir.’—‘Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it’” (Bodhi Middle Alagaddūpama Sutta; MN 22:23, 231).

*The Correct View*
The correct view about the self, according to the Buddha, is to see every experience as merely the causal consequence of impersonal factors, whether they be external or internal. Roughly, the goal is to avoid reifying either the object or the subject of experience, and to avoid clinging to (or actively avoiding) one’s experience. The Buddha did not deny the existence or relevance of mental phenomena like thoughts, emotions, memories, moods, and so on. Rather, he refused to give them special importance—they are merely some among many sources of present experience whose arising and cessation we should attend to dispassionately, and they are impersonal in the sense of arising and ceasing without the need for any subject (just as we believe that animals experience sensation, emotion, and memory and yet do not impute to animals a self).

We can develop the correct view in two ways. The first is largely intellectual—we can come to see that the self is an illusion, and work to rid ourselves of our belief in it. The second strategy is practical—we can meditate on our experience, and come to see that there is no self behind it. Along these lines, the Buddha taught that the path to achieving enlightenment lay in developing the four foundations or establishments of mindfulness (*Cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*), the ongoing awareness of our present experience with regard to our body (*kāyā*), sensations/feelings (*vedanā*), mind/consciousness (*cittā*), and mental contents (*dhammā*), while recognizing that there is no subject that is experiencing the experiences.15

The Buddha never gives an explicit explanation of what it would be like to live without a concept of self, but there are many clues in the PC. From abundant examples, it’s clear that the Buddha taught that it is possible to continue living a recognizably human life without the concept of self. Thus people who have achieved this insight still have the normal range of internal and external experiences—sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, subconscious activity, and so
Further, they still conceive of themselves as physically separate entities with distinct needs, desires, and intentions. The main differences are that, on the one hand, such people are able to accept all of the various constituent parts that make them up, without feeling the need to reject or deny some of those parts as inconsistent with their self-image, and, on the other hand, that such people are able to interact with the outside world in a dispassionate way, not suppressing or denying their feelings, but also not allowing their feelings and reactions to determine their behavior. Rather, precisely because they do not have a self-image to project or defend, they can deliberate on all of their experiences—both inner and outer—and act based on reflection and choice. The Buddha argues that this will lead to the greatest possible personal happiness, and also suggests that it will lead to social peace and harmony (discussed below).

Nietzsche’s Theory of the Self

Although there are many passages in Nietzsche’s work that are indirectly relevant to the question of the nature and status of the self, there is only a handful of passages in which Nietzsche directly discusses the issue. There is also a small but surprisingly diverse secondary literature on this question. Pinning down exactly what Nietzsche says about the self is challenging, both because of Nietzsche’s famously elusive style of writing, and because he talks about both the metaphysical and persistent selves without always clearly distinguishing between them (a problem that causes confusion in the secondary literature as well). However, a majority of interpreters agree that Nietzsche makes two main claims about the self. First, Nietzsche denies that any metaphysical self exists. Second, Nietzsche argues that our experience of being
persistent selves is based on a contingent hierarchy established among a multiplicity of what he calls under-souls (drives, affects, instincts, thoughts, intentions, and so on).

The Metaphysical Self and the Self as Multiplicity: Nietzsche’s Persistent Self

In several places in both the published and the unpublished writings, Nietzsche flatly denies that any metaphysical self exists. For example, he writes in the Genealogy: “But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the deed, its effect, and what becomes of it; ‘the doer’ is invented as an afterthought,--the doing is everything....” (Nietzsche Genealogy §I:13, p. 28).

Similarly, In Beyond Good and Evil, he writes:

“...one must also first of all finish off that other and more fateful atomism which Christianity has taught best and longest, the soul atomism. Let this expression be allowed to designate that belief which regards the soul as being something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an atomon: this belief ought to be ejected from science!” (Nietzsche Beyond Good and Evil §12, p. 43).

Nietzsche’s comments on the persistent self are more numerous and more complicated. His main claim is that our experience of being selves arises from a contingent and unstable hierarchy established among our various “under-souls.” We find this view in a number of places in both the published and unpublished work. Thus, Nietzsche writes in Thus Spoke Zarathustra:
“‘The body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a herdsman....’” (Nietzsche Zarathustra §I:4, p. 61). Similarly, in Beyond Good and Evil he writes: “But the road to new forms and refinements of the soul-hypothesis stands open: and such conceptions as ‘mortal soul’ and ‘soul as multiplicity of the subject’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and emotions’ want henceforth to possess civic rights in science” (Nietzsche Beyond Good and Evil §12, pp. 43-44). Later in the same book, Nietzsche writes: “He who wills adds in this way the sensations of pleasure of the successful executive agents, the serviceable ‘under-wills’ or under-souls—for our body is only a social structure composed of many souls—to his sensations of pleasure as commander. L’effet, c’est moi: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth: the ruling class identifies itself with the successes of the commonwealth. In all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis, as I have said already, of a social structure composed of many ‘souls’...” (Nietzsche Beyond Good and Evil §19, p. 49). In the Nachlass materials ultimately published as The Will to Power, we find: “a single individual contains within him a vast confusion of contradictory valuations and consequently of contradictory drives” (Nietzsche Will to Power §259, p. 149). Later in the same text: “The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? A kind of aristocracy of ‘cells’ in which dominion resides? To be sure, an aristocracy of equals, used to ruling jointly and understanding how to command? My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity” (Nietzsche Will to Power §490, p. 270). Finally, again from The Will to Power: “The body and physiology as the starting point: why?—We gain the correct idea of the nature of our subject-unity, namely as regents at the head of a communality (not as ‘souls’ or ‘life forces’), also of the
dependence of these regents upon the ruled and of an order of rank and division of labor as the conditions that make possible the whole and its parts. In the same way, how living unities continually arise and die and how the ‘subject’ is not eternal...” (Nietzsche Will to Power §492, p. 271).

A number of commentators have argued that this theory, at least on its face, is not coherent. The basic concern is that a being made up only of a multiplicity of drives, without some additional capacity for reflection and choice, simply isn’t capable of the kind of subjectivity and agency that we attribute to human selves. Along these lines, Fennell (Fennell) and Janaway (Janaway "Nietzsche, the Self, and Schopenhauer" 137; Janaway Beyond Selflessness : Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy) separately argue that such a being would merely be tossed about by its various and conflicting impulses, and would not be capable of choice or deliberation at all. Fennell adds the argument that in a number of places Nietzsche does seem to allude to our having a kind of core or essential self that we should seek to actualize, while Janaway merely objects that without such an assumption, Nietzsche’s theory appears to be unworkable. Booth makes a similar argument, emphasizing the point that if we understand Nietzsche’s writings as containing normative advice to subjects capable of choosing their own actions, on Nietzsche’s own theory of the self, there are no human subjects to whom such advice could be addressed (Booth). Staten makes the related point that it is hard to understand what self-overcoming could mean if there were no self either before or after the overcoming (Staten).

Interestingly, this general argument—that without a more substantial self no reflection or choice is possible—is parallel to Nietzsche’s own criticism of Buddhism, which I address below.

Some of these criticisms are based on a failure to distinguish between the metaphysical and persistent selves. If it’s true that there is a persistent self of some kind in Nietzsche’s theory,
and if it’s true that such a persistent self, made up of a variety of under-souls, is capable of reflection and choice, then the alleged incoherence of Nietzsche’s theory is resolved. Hales and Welshon (Hales and Welshon) argue both that such a “bundle” self (in their terminology) is capable of consciousness, and that it is capable of creating a hierarchy among the various under-souls, such that the self has some criteria for making choices and pursuing intentions over time. Regarding the emergence of consciousness, they point to Nietzsche’s discussion of the emergence of conscience in the *Genealogy*. In sections 1-3 of the second essay, Nietzsche argues that the ability to make promises arises out of a long prehistory of people making promises of various kinds, breaking them due to an inability to control their behavior, and then suffering pain at the hands of others who were unhappy about the breach. Over a very long period, the animal desire to avoid pain led to a new mental capacity—remembering what one has promised in the past, and overcoming present disinclination to fulfill the promise. For Nietzsche, this is the development that separates man from animal, and that makes all of culture possible. For our purposes, it also explains how self-awareness might arise out of the conflict of non-conscious drives and instincts. (Even if Nietzsche’s theory is wrong about the history, it’s worth noting that any naturalistic theory of the emergence of consciousness has to make an essentially similar claim—if consciousness was not created by God, it must have emerged out of non-conscious biological processes.)

Hales and Welshon’s argument about the creation of a hierarchy among the under-souls, so that the self can both make choices and persist in intentions over time, follows a similar logic. They write: "The answer is that disciplining the drives does not entail a subject distinct from the drives because the task the subject is supposed to perform is shouldered by each and every drive or set of drives that go into composing the self. Each individual drive and set of drives are
instances of forces that attempt to domineer all the others, so there is no need for a subject
distinct from them that engages in the domineering" (Hales and Welshon 181). Presumably, this
is what Nietzsche meant when he described the drives as existing in an “aristocracy of ‘cells’”—
there is no intrinsic or natural order among the constituent drives, but they are capable of
establishing a hierarchy, partially through straightforward competition among the various
impulses, and partially through contingent historical influences like the development of
conscience.

Most commentators have agreed with this line of thinking, that the self-as-multiplicity
could be capable of agency. Thus the major disputes in the secondary literature are over a
different issue (though not always explicitly). The real debate, and the difference between the
Nietzschean and Buddhist theories of the self, emerge not when we consider Nietzsche’s
descriptive claims about the self-as-multiplicity, but rather when we consider his claims about
what attitude we should take towards our experience of being persistent selves. On this issue we
find three very different interpretations. The first school of thought argues that, on Nietzsche’s
view, we only ever achieve a very limited unity among the various drives, and that it does not or
need not harden into a diachronically continuous identity or self. The second interpretation
argues that for Nietzsche we do need to form and maintain a diachronically continuous
personality based on a relatively stable hierarchy of drives. While this self may be capable of
self-overcoming under some circumstances, and while it may (and should) acknowledge itself as
contingent and potentially fluid, we nonetheless need a relatively stable self over time. Within
this broad school of thought, there are two sub-camps. The first argues that Nietzsche believes
that we need a relatively stable persistent self for cognitive reasons—that without such stability,
we would be unable to make sense of our experience. The second school argues that Nietzsche
believes that we need a relatively stable persistent self for normative reasons—in essence, that we cannot pursue normative goals without having an understanding of ourselves as relatively stable unities that are continuous over time. The third and final school argues that while Nietzsche does indeed believe that we need relatively stable persistent selves, this is only a transitional phase, and that in the future we would be able to rely on the instincts having been adequately trained and harmonized, so that we could learn to let go of our conscious, intentional sense of self, and instead allow our (tamed, harmonized) natures to guide us.

The first view, that Nietzsche’s persistent self never crystallizes into a stable hierarchy of drives, is argued strongly by Miller (Miller) and implicitly by Strong (Strong). Hence Miller argues: “Nietzsche’s interrogation of the idea of selfhood has reached, by a complex series of dissolutions, a definition of the self as a projected, constantly changing virtuality, like the center of gravity of a moving mass. This phantasmal center, moreover, has been doubled, fragmented, multiplied, dispersed into who knows how many separate momentary centers. Each is inhabited by a will to power over the whole, a desire to dominate and be itself the center” (Miller 260). Along the same lines, Strong argues: “Perspectivism, then, does not consist in asserting, with becoming pluralism, that I ‘should’ have or support a number of different points of view. It asserts, rather, that ‘I’ am a number of different ways of knowing and that there is no such entity as a permanent or privileged self. An order of rank is found in a ‘grandiose alliance’ such as Nietzsche, for instance, claims for himself in Beyond Good and Evil and Ecce Homo. If a ‘subject’ is thus a container of multitudes, then it can change both in time and in history” (Strong 177; internal citation omitted).

Here Fennell, Janaway, Booth and Staten have it right: it’s hard to see how this is a coherent account of a self at all. To the extent that Nietzsche’s persistent self is merely a
temporary resolution of the conflicts among forces, and that the balance of power changes from moment to moment, without the creation of a relatively stable hierarchy, no agency appears to be possible. This is roughly our view of non-human animals—that they are tossed about by their instincts and desires, acting on whichever under-soul is strongest at the moment, and lacking the ability to intentionally create a hierarchy among their various motivations. Nietzsche’s description in the *Genealogy* of the emergence of conscience, mentioned above, seems to argue that it is precisely humans’ ability to choose to create a more-or-less stable hierarchy among their under-souls that marks the beginning of human history.

Before considering the second school of interpretation, which I think is largely correct, I’d like to leap ahead to the third, which I believe is mistaken. Graham Parkes and André van der Braak separately argue that Nietzsche’s view of the persistent self is that it is a transitional stage that can eventually be abandoned. Because Parkes’s version of this argument is more fully developed, I will examine his argument as representative of both. Parkes agrees with the view that Nietzsche rejects the metaphysical self, and that he articulates a theory of the persistent self as being composed of a multiplicity of under-souls. Parkes then argues as follows: “The final stage of self-overcoming, then, consists of daring, after prolonged practice of self-mastery, to relax the discipline and trust to natural spontaneity” (Parkes "Nietzsche and Early Buddhism" 264). Further: “The eventual relaxation takes daring because the ego, which would otherwise control the process, has been overcome-dissolved into a plurality of drives-in the course of the protracted self-discipline. What is responsible for the disciplining are various (groups of) drives, and there comes a point where the discipline is no longer necessary because these various groups have learned to live in harmony with each other” (Parkes "Nietzsche and Early Buddhism" 264).
Parkes himself explicitly argues that, on this interpretation, Nietzsche’s view of the persistent self is the same as the Buddha’s. Although there is some dispute about this reading, for the moment I think we should accept Parkes’ claim. If this really is Nietzsche’s view, then Nietzsche and the Buddha do take the same attitude towards the experience of being a persistent self. However, I believe that this interpretation is not the best reading of Nietzsche. There are several arguments against this reading developed in the secondary literature (though only the first is directly specifically against Parkes’ view). First, Morrison argues that this reading seems to imply that there is an implicit or inchoate natural harmony among the drives that one merely has to bring to fruition. Morrison argues that this implies a greater degree of essentialism about the self than Nietzsche appeared to intend or accept, especially given Nietzsche’s rejection of the metaphysical self. Second, Gemes argues that this reading implies that the subject has a greater degree of volitional control over the management of the under-souls than Nietzsche envisioned. Rather, Nietzsche envisioned the drives as being partially autonomous, so that they could be partially harmonized, but never fully tamed. Third, Thiele and Nehamas separately argue that Nietzsche appears to have viewed the possibility of a final, stable unity of the under-souls as being a regulative ideal rather than an achievable goal. Finally, Bret Davis argues that Nietzsche’s texts are indeterminate on this question, that Nietzsche himself could not make up his mind whether completely harmonizing the self would mean dissolving the self or reifying it. Parkes and van der Braak’s reading of Nietzsche presents an attractive view of the attitude we should take towards our experience of being persistent selves—indeed, in the long run I will argue that it is the correct view. But I agree with Morrison, Gemes, Thiele, Nehamas and Davis that it is not Nietzsche’s view.
Thus we come to the second school of thought: that for Nietzsche we do need to form and maintain a unified personality based on a relatively stable hierarchy of drives. This is clearly the majority position among interpreters, though there is some disagreement about why we need to maintain a stable hierarchy. One camp argues that we need a relatively stable self for cognitive reasons. Thus Davey argues: “Nietzsche holds that the very condition of our existence as an organisation of multiple drives will be jeopardised for without an effective cohesion between the drives that make us up, the cohesion of the whole would fall apart. For this reason Nietzsche maintains that we cannot renounce the fiction, an argument which is clearly reminiscent of Hume's case concerning mental dispositions which cannot be opposed” (Davey "Nietzsche and Hume on the Self and Identity" 24). Hales and Welshon agree: "Nietzsche thinks that it is imperative that there be a ruling drive in the service of which the other drives organize" (Hales and Welshon 174). Further: "A flourishing life is thus one in which there is an overarching second-order drive or set of them that coordinates 'the inner systems and their operation' so that a person may create him- or herself" (Hales and Welshon 182; internal citation omitted).

On my reading, this first camp among those who see Nietzsche as wanting us to hold onto the experience of being a persistent self has a defensible, even persuasive, reading of the primary texts. But I believe that this reading plays down Nietzsche’s fundamentally normative motivations. Over and over again, Nietzsche reminds us that his major concern is the question of the value or meaning of human life. As with Kant, Nietzsche’s concern with cognitive or epistemological questions is ultimately always in the service of his normative concerns. For that reason, I believe that the second camp, those who see Nietzsche encouraging us to create and maintain a persistent self for normative reasons, has the better reading.
A number of interpreters take this general position, though they do not all identify the same normative motivations behind Nietzsche’s encouragement of the persistent self. Thus Davey (elsewhere) argues that Nietzsche believes that maintaining a stable persistent self is a necessary condition for maximizing our will to power. Gemes and Zuckert separately read Nietzsche as calling upon us to create a unified subjectivity to overcome nihilism. Hanson argues that Nietzsche’s emphasis on maintaining a stable hierarchy and will actually solves a problem in Buddhism of being unable to explain how willing is consistent with the lack of a metaphysical self. Loy argues that Nietzsche can’t let go of a relatively stable persistent self because his basic project is overcoming an existential sense of lack through the creation of an heroic ego. Unique among interpreters, Davis argues that Nietzsche cannot make up his mind whether we can (or should) give up our experience of ourselves as persistent selves.

As I have already suggested, I believe that this is the best reading of Nietzsche’s thoughts on the attitude we should take towards the experience of being a persistent self. We see this point in a number of passages from Nietzsche, including: “One thing is needful. – To ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye….It will be the strong and domineering natures that enjoy their finest gaiety in such constraint and perfection under a law of their own” (Nietzsche Gay Science §290, p. 232). More generally, Nietzsche’s frequently repeated point that both individuals and peoples need tables of values to guide them, even if those tables are ultimately overturned and replaced by new ones, points in the same direction.

Thus Nietzsche argues that the metaphysical self does not exist, that human beings are persistent selves made up of a multiplicity of under-souls, and further that human beings must
actively work to create and maintain a hierarchy among the under-souls, though any such
hierarchy is both contingent and potentially overcomeable. Those who are unable to establish
such a hierarchy, who cannot give style to their characters, are tossed about by their various
desires, instincts, perceptions, and thoughts. The distinction that Nietzsche draws in the
*Genealogy* between the man of conscience, who is capable of creating a limited hierarchy among
his under-souls, and the man without conscience, whose behavior is determined by whatever
impulse arises most forcefully at the moment, neatly illustrates the importance of this issue. It is
the men of conscience who become the strong and noble, and the men without conscience (or
with relatively weak consciences) who become the weak, the herd, the slaves. Further, it is only
those who are able to accept and integrate every one of their under-souls into a stable
relationship who are able to live out *amor fati* and embrace the eternal return, while those who
cannot harmonize their component drives will always view parts of themselves and their world
with resentment. It is those without stable persistent selves who sink into passive nihilism, being
burdened by the lack of meaning in the universe without being able to do anything about it, while
those who have created persistent selves are able to create meaning for themselves, and thus are
able to both embrace and overcome active nihilism.

**Nietzsche vs. Buddha on the Self**

We come now to the relationship between Nietzsche’s view of the self and that of the
Buddha. As I have argued, both deny that there is any metaphysical self, and both treat human
beings as if they were punctual selves, on the assumption that doing so is inescapable and
metaphysically neutral. Further, the two thinkers agree that what human beings experience as
their persistent selves are in fact multiplicities of experiences—desires, instincts, thoughts, beliefs, sensory impressions, and so on. Both appear to believe that consciousness and the capacity for deliberative choice arise from the interactions of these constituent parts. Further, both agree that the perception of the underlying multiplicity as a single, unified, diachronically continuous self is an illusion. These significant areas of agreement have led a number of commentators to suggest that Nietzsche and the Buddha have the same view of the self.34

As I have suggested above, I agree that Nietzsche and the Buddha offer the same description of the self, but on my reading they offer radically different advice about the attitude we should take towards our experience of being selves. Indeed, Nietzsche himself talked about Buddhism in a number of places, and believed that his own philosophy was diametrically opposed to that of the Buddha.35 I believe that Bret Davis’s reading of the conflict between the two thinkers is exactly right: “In short, while for Nietzsche there is no ego as a given, there is the task of constructing an ego, of organizing the plurality of disparate impulses by submitting them to the rule of a commanding will to power. Buddhism, on the other hand, speaks directly against the willful construction of an ego, and indeed sees the task to be that of uprooting the ruling will behind this construction” (Davis 112). The Buddha counsels precisely what Parkes above mistakenly attributed to Nietzsche: “The eventual relaxation takes daring because the ego, which would otherwise control the process, has been overcome-dissolved into a plurality of drives-in the course of the protracted self-discipline. What is responsible for the disciplining are various (groups of) drives, and there comes a point where the discipline is no longer necessary because these various groups have learned to live in harmony with each other” (Parkes "Nietzsche and Early Buddhism" 264).
So, who’s right? Is Nietzsche right that we need to maintain the illusion of being unified selves in order to pursue normative ideals and overcome nihilism, or is the Buddha right that it is precisely the maintenance of the illusion of being a unified self that prevents us from accepting the world as it is, and thus leaves us caught in resentment against a world that is not as we would have it? Is the goal to overcome the self again and again, always replacing it with a new self, or is the goal to let go of the self altogether?36

The Buddha is right, for two reasons. First, his implicit critique of Nietzsche’s position as being inevitably caught up in existential resentment seems correct even from Nietzsche’s perspective. Nietzsche famously argued, most clearly in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense”37 but elsewhere as well, that language and knowledge are fundamentally falsifying. For reasons familiar since Kant, we cannot have direct access to the world of things-in-themselves, and are not even entitled to assume that there really are any such things. All we have are concepts and perceptions, all of which are crude simplifications and metonymical transpositions of our experiences. Thus there isn’t much to be gained by saying that some experiences or concepts are more true than others—it’s always a question of choosing some lies over others. But there is a distinction to be made between lies that we voluntarily tell ourselves and lies that we cannot help but believe. For example, both the idea that there is a god and the idea that there is not a god are in some sense lies— they are conceptual representations of experience that rely on condensations and assumptions that cannot independently be justified. Nonetheless, Nietzsche argues that, even within that epistemological situation, the idea of god is a more transparent lie than the idea of not-god. We could come to see the idea of god as being contingent, arbitrary, and dispensable without doing much harm to our remaining beliefs, whereas undermining our reasons for believing not-god would destroy many urgently important beliefs. Indeed, some such
distinction, between lies so deeply embedded that they cannot be uprooted, and lies that are less foundational and thus more easily dislodged, is at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise. Without some such distinction, given his epistemological views, there would be no point to investigation and argument.

The experience of being a persistent self—the illusion that we are unified, diachronically continuous selves—is a voluntary lie, one that (with effort) we could come to see as false and dispensable. Nietzsche himself admits as much when he identifies the persistent self as an accomplishment that should be maintained. Both points—that it is possible to fail to develop a persistent self, and that it is possible to lose it—suggest that human beings are capable of living without the illusion of being persistent selves. The persistent self is not a lie that we cannot help believing, but rather one that we could in principle do away with. Thus when Nietzsche counsels us to nonetheless persist in the illusion, it appears that he is telling us to pretend that we are different than we (could) know ourselves to be. Pretending that the world is different than it really is, because we cannot accept the reality (which is of course only a more foundational lie), is the root of resentment. It is precisely the unwillingness to see oneself and one’s world as they really are, and to embrace them wholeheartedly, that typifies the weak, the herd, those who cannot embrace amor fati or the eternal return.

The second reason that the Buddha’s advice about how to relate to our bundle-selves is better than Nietzsche’s advice is that Nietzsche is wrong to believe that letting go of the belief that one is a persistent self will make it impossible to pursue normative ideals. As sketched out above, Nietzsche’s idea seems to be that creating a hierarchy among one’s under-souls is a difficult, fragile, and endless task. The creation of conscience emphasized in the Genealogy is only the beginning, and establishes only the possibility of subordinating some drives to others.
His emphasis in the *Gay Science* on giving one’s character style represents a later stage, in which one tries more systematically to harmonize one’s under-souls. The narrative of *Zarathustra* represents a more extended discussion of the same issues, and the story of Zarathustra himself demonstrates how difficult the process is—indeed, even at the end of the book it is left vague whether Zarathustra has succeeded. Embracing the idea of the eternal return is the touchstone for whether one has fully accepted and integrated all of one’s constituent parts. As Thiele and Nehemas argue above, it appears that for Nietzsche the ideal of being fully harmonized may be a regulative principle rather than an achievable goal.

According to Nietzsche, throughout this long and arduous process of establishing, maintaining, and increasing the hierarchical organization of one’s drives, one has to conceive of oneself as a more-or-less unified, diachronically continuous self. Otherwise, there would be no possibility of talking about progress or regress—there would only be static moments in which one was at some point along the spectrum from disintegration to complete integration. The language of style reveals this concern with unity over time—the issue is not whether at any given moment I can affirm that I have given myself a style, but rather whether I have developed, maintained, and improved my style. Style isn’t merely a question of being well dressed, so to speak, at any moment, but rather a persistent habit of being well dressed at all times.

Nietzsche’s concern seems to be that if one were to give up the illusion of being a persistent self, one would also thereby give up the ability to commit oneself to long-term intentions and goals. In this way, his concern anticipates the criticism made of Nietzsche’s own theory by Fennell, Booth, Janaway and Staten: that a being made up only of conflicting drives is not capable of agency, and thus not capable of pursuing goals and ideals. I argued above that this is a mistaken criticism of Nietzsche’s view, because his theory of the persistent self explains how
agency can emerge from the conflicts of the under-souls. For roughly the same reasons, I believe that it is also a mistaken criticism of the Buddhist advice about how to relate to our bundle-selves. Plainly, it is accurate that a being that is human but has never attempted to create any kind of hierarchy among its various under-souls would be incapable of the kind of self-conscious agency that we associate with human subjectivity. But, aside from feral children and similar highly unusual cases, that is never the case that confronts us. Rather, we are always concerned with cases in which some such hierarchy among the under-souls has already been created through socialization and cognitive development. The question that concerns us is what the individual should now do with regard to the existing hierarchy, especially if and when the individual realizes that the hierarchy is supported by the illusion of being a unified and diachronically persistent self. Here I believe that Parkes has it exactly right: one could achieve a degree of integration of the under-souls such that one could dispense with the illusion of being a persistent self and nonetheless retain the hierarchy among the drives as well as the capacity for agency and choice. Indeed, as the Buddha argues, because the illusion of being a self causes one problems by leading one to resist many of the inescapable circumstances of life (like the prevalence of suffering and the impermanence of all phenomena), letting go of one’s belief in being a self should make it easier to achieve full integration, agency, and the capacity for choice. In Nietzsche’s terms, letting go of the belief in being a persistent self would be letting go of the last vestiges of resentment. The post-self individual would be able to make choices and even pursue normative ideals, to the extent that their existing hierarchy of under-souls embodies or implies those ideals. What they would be unlikely to do is to conceive of themselves as under an obligation to obey normative ideals that do not resonate with their personality structure. But, of course, that’s precisely the advice that Nietzsche gives to those who chafe under the slave
morality because it restricts their nobility of spirit, and is the animating spirit behind the metaphor of the three metamorphoses of the spirit in Zarathustra.39

Finally we come to the issue of the will to power. My bet is that even if you have been persuaded by the argument up to now, you may nonetheless harbor a suspicion that Nietzsche could not accept letting go of the belief that one is a persistent self because doing so would prevent the individual from maximizing/actualizing their will to power. I think the right response to this is that if the will to power consists only in accepting all that one is, so that one experiences maximum internal harmony and the ability to pursue normative ideals that I have argued such harmony entails, then there is no conflict between the will to power and letting go of the idea of being a self. But if the will to power in some way requires one to pursue a normative ideal that is not implicit in a harmonious ordering of all of one’s under-souls, then I believe that Nietzsche cannot consistently argue for such a will to power. In that case, the will to power would conflict with amor fati and the eternal return, despite the fact that Nietzsche explicitly argues that those ideas are harmonious and in some way mutually reinforcing. Nietzsche may well have argued for a broader conception of the will to power—that vexed issue of interpretation is beyond the scope of this essay; my point is merely that if he did so, I believe that argument is inconsistent with his other commitments, and thus cannot unproblematically be used to criticize the no-self position.

The Politics of No Self

The Buddha and Nietzsche’s different views of the self lead them to different conclusions about the role of the self and one’s self-view in politics. The questions of what exactly the
Buddha and Nietzsche thought about politics are the subjects of large literatures.\textsuperscript{40} Given the necessity of discussing their views about the self in depth above, my discussion here of the relevance of their theories of the self to politics is necessarily brief.

Explaining the connection that the Buddha draws between self-view and politics requires some backtracking, because the Buddha never explicitly lays out the relationship in so many words. In the discussion of the Buddha’s theory of no-self above, I mentioned that developing the right understanding of the self (as well as suffering and impermanence) is a crucial step towards enlightenment. Having false beliefs about these issues causes personal suffering and social conflict: “[I]t is the bonds of envy and niggardliness that bind beings so that, although they wish to live without hate, hostility, or enmity, and to live in peace, yet they live in hate, harming one another, hostile, and as enemies….Envy and niggardliness…arise from liking and disliking…. [which themselves arise] from thinking….Thinking…arises from elaborated perceptions and notions.”\textsuperscript{41} The scholar and translator Bikkhu Bodhi explains “elaborated perceptions and notions” thus: “The term seems to refer to perceptions and ideas that have become ‘infected’ by subjective biases, ‘elaborated’ by the tendencies to craving, conceit, and distorted views.”\textsuperscript{42} In other words, our self-driven desire for pleasure and happiness (the desire that has been infected by subjective biases) leads us to thinking (about how to fulfill that desire), which leads us to liking and disliking (of experiences and people), which lead us to envy and greed, which lead us ultimately to hate, harming one another, and hostility. In another teaching, repeated in many places in the canonical texts, the Buddha shows how adopting the right view toward the three characteristics of existence can interrupt this process: “when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit ‘I am.’”\textsuperscript{43}
Following this logic, human beings individually are at their best when they hold and follow the correct views regarding the three characteristics, including the non-existence of self, and the best possible human society would be one made up of such people. When we look at the one *sutta* in which the Buddha discussed the best possible human society (which may be partially fanciful), we find this reasoning confirmed. The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*\(^{44}\) concerns a series of *cakkavattis* or spiritually enlightened kings. *Cakkavattis* can only emerge in a society that is already morally and socially advanced; in particular, the *sutta* makes clear that in such a society there is no poverty, theft, or violence. This suggests that the people have overcome “envy and niggardliness” through coming to have correct views about the three characteristics.

In addition, the would-be *cakkavatti* must make strenuous individual efforts to adopt correct views about the world, presumably including the three characteristics. Once one has achieved this relative degree of enlightenment, one can rule through moral example and without using force or coercion. However, one can only maintain this peaceful kingdom by adopting policies that serve the common interest rather than the ruler’s personal interest, and that also act to prevent common and obvious sources of social conflict. Hence: “you should establish guard, ward, and protection according to Dhamma [truth] for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property.”\(^{45}\)

The *sutta* tells of eight successive generations of *cakkavattis*, and then of a ninth generation in which the king prefers to follow his own ideas rather than the tradition of his predecessors and the Dhamma. This king fails to give to the needy, which leads to envy and theft, which leads to punishment, which in turn leads to violence, and so on until the society is
destroyed and the people reduced to living in the wilderness and killing each other like beasts. At that low point a handful of the people commit themselves to moral self-reform, and manage to rebuild their society. They and their descendants work for tens of thousands of years, until once again the society contains no self-driven crime or poverty and is morally good enough to produce a cakkavatti, who in turn is morally good enough to adopt the proper policies. (Since the Buddhist conception of time is both cyclical and anti-teleological, the implication is that eventually the society will decline again, only to be rebuilt yet again, and so on.) The highest possible stage of social development is reached when the people (not a cakkavatti, since one has not yet re-emerged) create a society largely free of envy, hatred, stinginess and violence. As the Buddha suggests above, that is only possible by adopting the correct views about the three characteristics, including the non-existence of self.

As I suggested above, Nietzsche sees his theory of the self as the mean between ressentiment (a self-view rooted in being rather than becoming) and nihilism (the no-self view). Although Nietzsche never spells out what a society based in nihilism would look like, it seems that his discussion of the Higher Men in Zarathustra gives us some hints. In brief, the higher men have the intelligence, honesty, and courage to recognize that their previous beliefs are false and pointless, but lack the imagination and faith to create new, contingent beliefs for themselves. They continue many of the outward rituals of their former faiths, for lack of any alternative, but no longer believe in or enjoy them. Lacking a guiding principle, they lack the will to live fully. I believe that we can extrapolate that a society of such people might persist, but would be stagnant, drab, and lifeless. Nietzsche views such a future with horror.

In contrast, and at the other extreme, a society based in ressentiment would have guiding principles, but those principles would be hostile to human life. The basic motivation is to
revenge oneself against a life that is too strong for one, too painful, too unfair. The characteristic move is to create a transcendental source of value, measured against which the world will always come up short. Nietzsche suggests in a number of places that anti-social violence, theft, deceit, and so on are all generated by ressentiment. For example, we see this point expressed clearly in the Genealogy:

Historically speaking, justice on earth represents….the battle, then, against reactive sentiment, the war waged against the same on the part of active and aggressive forces, which have partly expended their strength in trying to put a stop to the spread of reactive pathos, to keep it in check and within bounds, and to force some kind of compromise with it. Everywhere that justice is practiced and maintained, the stronger power can be seen looking for means of putting an end to the senseless ravages of ressentiment amongst those inferior to it… (Nietzsche Genealogy 49).

The mean between these extremes is occupied by people strong enough to withstand life without resentment or resorting to false justifications. Nietzsche describes such people thus:

[They are] strongly held in check by custom, respect, habit, gratitude and even more through spying on one another and through peer-group jealousy, [and], on the other hand behave towards one another by showing…resourcefulness in consideration, self-control, delicacy, loyalty, pride and friendship… (Nietzsche Genealogy 22).

By implication, a society made up (only) of such people would be a democratic society, since presumably no one would be willing to be told what to do by someone else, as well as a peaceful
society, since those who are strong and capable both understand the value of social peace and are able to achieve it through self-control (as opposed to those who run on *ressentiment*, whose conception of peace is mutual inability to do harm). (I intentionally leave aside the question of what kind of politics Nietzsche envisions in a society that contains both the strong and the weak—that fascinating and difficult issue of interpretation is beside the point for my current purposes. Rather, here I’m interested in the question of what a utopia consisting of those with Nietzsche’s preferred self-view would look like.) As I argued above, the people who occupy this mean are precisely those who have overcome their earlier beliefs, and have created new, contingent beliefs for themselves as a path to yet further overcoming. In the language of self-views, they are people who have adopted Nietzsche’s view of the persistent self.

Thus, Nietzsche and the Buddha agree that people who continue to believe in what I have called the metaphysical self are not only mistaken but are adopting a view that is likely to lead them to engage in anti-social behavior. Where they disagree is over how far one might go in effacing one’s sense of self. The Buddha argues for letting go of it altogether, while Nietzsche argues that it should be relativized but not abandoned. The Buddha sees no-self as the basis of the best possible social order, while Nietzsche fears that that position goes too far and leads to nihilism. Above I have argued that the Buddha has the better argument when it comes to the likely effect on the individual of abandoning one’s self-view, and I believe that the points I raised there are also relevant to the question of who has the better prediction of how changing our self-view will affect politics. On the one hand, it seems unlikely that abandoning one’s self-view would lead one to be unable to make commitments or pursue ideals, since one’s basic personality structure and values would already be in place. Thus it seems unlikely that the no-self view would lead to the kind of aimless nihilism that Nietzsche fears. On the other hand,
pretending that one is a persistent self when one knows that one really is not threatens to preserve a destructive kernel of ressentiment in one’s worldview. It is precisely when one cannot fully accept the truth of how life is that one falls back on resentment against it, a petulant complaint to the universe that life isn’t as one would have it. By holding on to the persistent self, Nietzsche threatens to undermine the achievements he envisions arising from effacing one’s sense of being a metaphysical self, since there will always be one fact about existence that one can not, will not accept. That festering seed of resentment threatens to reintroduce precisely the anti-social harms that Nietzsche thought he had overcome. For both of these reasons, when it comes to politics as well as self-view, the Buddha was right and Nietzsche was wrong.

**Conclusion**

Although I have argued that the Buddha’s views of both self and politics are right, perhaps they are only right relative to Nietzsche’s views. In other words, perhaps the Buddha’s views are better than Nietzsche’s but still wrong overall. Given how radical a change the Buddha’s theory implies for more familiar, Western conceptions of personal identity and social cooperation, it’s doubtful that any argument could completely overcome this concern. It is extremely difficult to reassess our most basic presumptions, and in many cases it simply isn’t possible at all—as Wittgenstein taught us, those presumptions define what counts as evidence either for or against themselves.

Rather, in cases like this, where a fundamental change in background assumptions is being proposed, the only method of evaluation likely to succeed is some version of trial and error. Here something that is often seen as a liability may be in fact a benefit: the great difficulty
of overcoming self-view, and the long period of intense effort doing so usually requires. If we are provisionally convinced that the Buddha has a good point, we can work towards weakening our self-view, while at the same time assessing whether that leads us towards being better or worse citizens, neighbors, parents, partners, friends, and so on. Indeed the Buddha counseled exactly this approach when asked by a community how they could know whose spiritual teachings were correct:

   Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, “This contemplative is our teacher.” When you know for yourselves that, “These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness” — then you should enter & remain in them.47

If we discover that weakening our self-view causes harm, we can stop. If we discover that it leads to benefits, we can keep going and investigate how far it is possible to go. Perhaps the idea of no-self will turn out to be a regulative ideal rather than an achievable goal—as long as it continues to generate benefits, there is no reason not to pursue it.
Works Cited


Notes

1 For a recent, helpful overview, see Raymond Martin and John Barresi, eds., Personal Identity (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).


4 See for the example the popular introductory text by Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, Second, revised ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

5 This teaching is given repeatedly in the canonical texts. One such instance is SN 22:45 Bodhi, Connected 884-885.


10 Bodhi, Connected 22:56, 895-897.

11 Bodhi, Connected 22:56, 895-897.

12 This analysis is influenced by Collins, Selfless.

13 See Rahula, What the Buddha Taught 52-53. Collins also makes this argument; see Collins, Selfless 110.

14 Bodhi, Connected 12:21, 552.


16 In the work published by Nietzsche:
There are a number of comments on the question of the self in Nietzsche’s notebooks and other material that had not been published at the time of his mental incapacitation. This raises the vexed question of how much weight to give to this Nachlass material. My approach has been to use the unpublished materials to support or clarify points that can also be found in the published works.

Because I cannot claim to have mastered all of the unpublished materials, I cite here the places in the Will to Power where Nietzsche discusses these issues, as well as other unpublished comments of which I am aware.


18 Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 38-42.


20 "According to Parkes, the "final stage of self-overcoming" is learning "to relax the discipline and trust to natural spontaneity." This is possible as "the discipline is no longer necessary because these various groups [of drives] have learned to live in harmony with each other." I cannot agree with this. This way of looking at what Nietzsche is aiming at is far too essentialist, as if all one had to do was create harmony among the various drives. But I mentioned earlier that in Nietzsche's gardener analogy it is not a matter of rearranging the relations of what is there, but of weeding out certain traits, cultivating those worthy of cultivation, and bringing new drives into being. It is this model that has affinities with Buddhism, that reflects the nonessentialist doctrine of paticcasamuppada" Morrison, "Response to Graham Parkes' Review," 276.

21 See note 20.

22 "Rather the reinterpretation of drives, their redirection, is something that occurs at a more fundamental level. Unification is not the result of a conscious subject pruning an overly luxuriant garden of drives according to some articulate master plan. Rather drives come with their own telic structure. In most individuals conflicting drives can only express themselves through the repression of other drives. However in some of the drives some individual
drives form a hierarchy which allows some drives to redirect others so that the total can form a concerted singular expression” Gemes, "Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," 344-345.

23 "But the completely ordered soul does not exist. Man, like all forms of life, is in a constant state of becoming. There is no stability, only ascent or decline" Thiele, Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism 91.

24 Nehamas writes: "The unity of the self, which therefore also constitutes its identity, is not something given but something achieved, not a beginning but a goal. And of such unity, which is at best a matter of degree and which comes close to representing a regulative principle, Nietzsche is not at all suspicious" Nehemas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature 182. Further: "It begins to seem, then, that Nietzsche does not think of unity as a state of being that follows and replaces an earlier process of becoming. Rather he seems to think of it as a continual process of integrating one's character traits, habits, and patterns of action with one another" Nehemas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature 185. Finally: "Freedom of the will so construed is not the absence of causal determination but a harmony among all of a person's preference schemes. It is a state in which desire follows thought, and action follows desire, without tension or struggle, and in which the distinction between choice and constraint may well be thought to disappear. Nietzsche thinks of this state as a limiting case, to be reached, if at all, only with the greatest difficulty" Nehemas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature 187.

25 "This tension between 'the fixation of a perspective in exclusive opposition to other perspectives and the opening up to the multiplicity of possible perspectives' is reproduced in the two ways of understanding Nietzsche's 'unrestricted Yes' to the eternal recurrence of the same. Does this unrestricted Yes, this amor fati, indicate that the wise man has learned to bless every moment and everything for its own sake? Or does it mean that the strong man succeeds in interpreting all existence, including that of the nauseating last man, as necessary for the 'high point of the series, the moment of his own affirmation?" Bret W. Davis, "Zen after Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation between Nietzsche and Buddhism," The Journal of Nietzsche Studies. 28 (2004): 124-125; internal citations omitted.


28 "We feel ourselves to be effective subject-identities because in this form we experience our greatest sense of unified power. The subject-feeling is essentially an assertive act, the result of our organic being as multiplicity of drives asserting itself against other power centres or subjects" Davey, "Nietzsche and Hume on the Self and Identity," 23.

29 "In contrast to the postmodern reading it will be argued here that Nietzsche's attack on essentialist dogmatic metaphysics is in fact a call to engage in a purposive self creation under a unifying will, a will that possesses the strength to reinterpret history as a pathway to the problem that we are" Gemes, "Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," 339.
“On the descriptive side, Nietzsche and the postmodernists agree that the received notion of the unified Cartesian subject is a myth, however on the prescriptive side, where the postmodernists typically celebrate the death of the subject, Nietzsche rejects this valorization of disunity as a form of Nihilism and prescribes the creation of a genuine unified subjectivity to those few capable, and hence worthy, of such a goal” Gemes, "Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," 339.

30 “Nietzsche seeks a solution to the crisis of modern life in the individual or ‘self,’ but not as that individual presently exists. The individual as he exists is, in all his particularity, the product of accident, history over which he himself had no control. There is no meaning or reason for his particular existence in these external causes. Only he himself can give these accidents meaning by finding a way of living which justifies the past” Zuckert, "Nature, History and Self," 70; internal citation omitted.

31 Hanson, "Searching for the Power-I: Nietzsche and Nirvana."

32 “Nietzsche ends up celebrating an impossible ideal, the heroic-ego which overcomes its sense of lack, because he does not see that a heroic ego is our fantasy project for overcoming lack” Loy, "Beyond Good and Evil? A Buddhist Critique of Nietzsche," np.

“What he considered the crown of his system- eternal recurrence- is actually its denouement. Having seen through the delusion of Being, Nietzsche could not let it go completely, for he still sought a Being within Becoming” Loy, "Beyond Good and Evil? A Buddhist Critique of Nietzsche," np.

33 Davis, “Zen after Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation between Nietzsche and Buddhism.”

34 This group includes Parkes, van der Braak, Mistry, Hales and Welshon, and Morrison (all cited elsewhere).


36 This way of posing the contrast is similar to Davis’s distinction between overcoming and releasement. See Davis, "Zen after Zarathustra: The Problem of the Will in the Confrontation between Nietzsche and Buddhism."


38 This suggests that Hanson’s argument, that Buddhism’s ability to explain willing by the enlightened would be improved by adopting Nietzsche’s theory of the persistent self, is mistaken. See Hanson, "Searching for the Power-I: Nietzsche and Nirvana."
39 See Nietzsche, Zarathustra 54-56.

40 See my discussion of the literature on Buddhism and political theory in Matthew Moore, “Political Theory in Canonical Buddhism,” hopefully forthcoming somewhere sometime soon.


46 Nietzsche, Zarathustra 257-286.

47 Anguttara Nikaya 3.65 at Insight, "Anguttara Nikaya".