**No-self and compassion: Nietzsche and Buddhism**

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**1. Introduction**

One feature of nineteenth-century European philosophy that is sometimes under-appreciated is its engagement with Indian philosophy. An award-winning historian of the period finds it natural to describe Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in particular as ‘orientalizing philosophers’ (Marchand 2009: 43), yet mainstream philosophical accounts have tended to marginalize this aspect of their work. Although Nietzsche is often antagonistic to Buddhism as he understands it,[[1]](#endnote-1) writers whose main concern is to juxtapose Nietzsche and Buddhism have claimed surprisingly often and surprisingly strongly that Nietzsche’s views coincide with central Buddhist ideas.[[2]](#endnote-2) In his recent book *Nietzsche and Buddhist Philosophy*, Antoine Panaïoti makes two claims that form the starting point for this paper: (1) That ‘[i]n Buddhist philosophy, as in Nietzsche’s thought, the self is denounced as a misleading fiction’ (Panaïoti 2013: 31). (2) That Buddhist compassion is ‘very close indeed to the compassion of strength that Nietzsche attributes to healthy types, himself included’ (Panaïoti 2013: 211). In brief, I shall agree with the first claim and disagree with the second. Panaïoti to some extent structures his account around Nietzsche’s rather startling entry in his 1882–3 notebooks, ‘I could become the Buddha of Europe: which admittedly would be an opposite to the Indian one’[[3]](#endnote-3) (KSA 10: 109).[[4]](#endnote-4) Chapters 1 and 2 of Panaïoti’s book are balanced between ‘Nietzsche as Buddha’ and ‘Nietzsche as Anti-Buddha’. I shall argue that the ‘Anti-Buddha’ is predominant: the fact that Panaïoti’s claim (1) is true is less important than the fact that his claim (2) is false. For both Nietzsche and Buddhism, their descriptive metaphysical commitments are ultimately subordinate to their normative projects, and while their descriptive positions may converge upon a ‘no-self’ view, their normative projects are widely divergent.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Many questions arise with the interpretive claims (1) and (2). Are Nietzsche and Buddhists denouncing the same conception of ‘self’, and if so, are they denouncing it for anything like the same reasons? Buddhists have argued among themselves about how to interpret the expression ‘no-self’ or ‘not-self’ (Sanskrit *anātman*, Pāli *anattā*), so even before we get to Nietzsche, what do we compare him with? Again, to be confident that Nietzsche agrees or disagrees with Buddhism over ‘compassion’ and its relation ‘suffering’, we would have to agree that Nietzsche’s *Leiden* is sufficiently similar to the Buddhists’ *duḥkha* (Pāli *dukkha*), and his *Mitleid* to the perfection of *karuṇā*. Simplification is inevitable in this exercise, but we may hope it will be the kind that offers some illumination and helps us engage Nietzsche philosophically with Buddhist thought.

There are close ties between ‘no-self’ and compassion in Buddhism. Some claim that if the Buddhist ‘no-self’ view is right, ‘then a compassionate attitude would seem to follow’ (Priest 2017: 98). In the important ethical work *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or ‘How to lead an awakened life’,[[6]](#endnote-6) by the 8th-century philosopher-monk Śāntideva, a central idea is that dispelling the notion of unitary subjects or agents clears the way for care or compassion towards all sentient beings as the only legitimate attitude to suffering. Nietzsche seems at odds with this view if he both espouses ‘no-self’ and has some coherent way of opposing universal compassion as a positive virtue. One question this raises is whether we should doubt the coherence of Nietzsche’s position or doubt the claim that ‘no-self’ and compassion are intimately linked.

I begin (Section 2) by agreeing with Panaïoti that there is *a conception of self* that both parties reject. From the outset, it is important to note that there is no objection in Buddhism to conventional use of the term ‘person’. ‘The “person”, in the Indian context, is that who is stood before me, … with a name and a family and a caste, born in such-and-such a village, holding such-and-such a trade. There is nothing metaphysical about this’ (Todd 2013: 85). However, while this ordinary, unanalysed notion of the person may be used without metaphysical commitment, matters are different with ‘self’. For Buddhism there is no single, enduring, and independent self of the kind that Indian philosophy calls *ātman*; instead, what we conveniently designate with the term ‘person’ is to be analysed as a collection of psycho-physical processes devoid of a single, unchanging core. Evidence from Nietzsche’s writings of the 1880s supports the claim that he too rejects any single, enduring, independent self and regards the person as a collection of psycho-physical processes, such as the ‘drives and affects’ he frequently cites. I acknowledge that ‘no-self’ views, both Nietzschean and Buddhist, have faced challenges to their coherence, but here I set aside those complex challenges, rather than treat them inadequately in the limited space available.

In Section 3, I distinguish two structurally different Buddhist accounts of the person that have been discussed in recent secondary literature: the reductionist Abhidharma view and the ‘emptiness’ view of Madhyamaka. Panaïoti assimilates Nietzsche’s view to the latter, but my suggestion is that his claim (1) would be satisfied on either account. In Section 4 I acknowledge Nietzsche’s notion of ‘becoming oneself’, which commentators have seen as the would-be achievement of a kind of selfhood. I argue that this need not conflict with Nietzsche’s holding a ‘no self’ view. The ‘selfhood’ that figures in Nietzsche’s normative project can be expressed in terms that do not presuppose any single, enduring, independent self, and indeed this Nietzschean ‘selfhood’ can be grasped only if one has rejected the metaphysical notion of a self. However, Nietzsche’s privileging of states that he calls ‘becoming’, ‘discovering’, or ‘creating’ oneself as something unique, empowered, and circumscribed from others, already sets him deeply at odds with Buddhism. For Buddhists the fundamentally problematic attitude is a pre-theoretical sense of self, ‘egoism’, or ‘self-grasping’ which is at the root of human craving. Agreeing with the philosophical claim that there is no self is not sufficient to dispel this pre-theoretical orientation. And in Nietzsche’s case, a kind of egoism is intensified along with the denial of the self.

In Section 5 I turn to Panaïoti’s claim (2). Mahāyāna Buddhism advocates care or compassion towards all sentient beings as the supreme goal. Nietzsche, by contrast, argues against compassion as a worthwhile virtue, and Buddhist interpreters sometimes acknowledge him as an opponent.[[7]](#endnote-7) However, according to Panaïoti, the form of compassion that Nietzsche rejects is non-Buddhist, while a specifically Nietzschean ‘compassion of strength’ is close to the compassion that is central to Buddhism. I shall argue against this claim: Nietzsche fundamentally questions the value of compassion as Buddhists understand it, because he holds that suffering is not bad in itself and that alleviating all suffering is not a good end. In Section 6, I try to show how Nietzsche’s view disagrees with the connection between no-self and compassion that some commentators have sought in Śāntideva, and in Section 7 I question whether Śāntideva’s Madhyamaka position could counter Nietzsche’s claim that suffering is not intrinsically bad.

**2. The denial of a self**

Panaïoti explains that Nietzsche and Buddhists both reject ‘a discrete, unitary, and enduring self’:

Instead, the Buddhist view of the person is that of a functionally integrated system of psycho-physical processes devoid of a central unchanging core. Under analysis, what is found are various physical events and four types of mental events, namely sensations, conceptualizations, volitions, and cognitions. No irreducible being or person is found as the ‘owner’ or ‘bearer’ of these five constituents …. The illusion of agential/personal (synchronic) unity is generated by the ways in which the manifold psycho-physical streams that make up a human being are functionally integrated. That of (diachronic) identity is generated by … relations of ‘connectedness’ and ‘continuity’ among these psycho-physical streams (Panaïoti 2013: 31–3).

Recent summaries of Buddhism’s diagnosis concerning the self agree with this outline. The person is ‘an assemblage of constantly changing processes’ (Heim 2020: 31). Buddhism diagnoses that ‘we take ourselves to be something more or other than the changing, suffering, impermanent sort of thing familiar from all of our experiences’ (Carpenter 2014: 28) and ‘falsely believe in the existence of a self, a permanent, unchanging essence that binds, controls, and at the same time transcends the various parts that make up the person’ Gold 2017: 159.) According to Buddhism, the psycho-physical components we conceptualize as a person include no such self. Buddhists hold that common beliefs to the contrary are not merely false, but are attended by troublesome consequences of a profound nature.

The conception of self at issue, then, is of something with the following features: (a) a single unified, subject of experience that is distinct from the multiple processes that pertain to the person or human being; (b) something that endures through time; (c) something independent, in the sense of being the autonomous source of action and thought. As has been widely recognized, we find Nietzsche denying the existence of anything that possesses these various features. Some often-cited passages from published and unpublished writings of the 1880s are as follows: ‘[T]hat the soul is something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, that it is a monad, an *atomon*: *this* belief must be thrown out of science! … But the path lies open for … soul as a society constructed out of drives and affects’; ‘The assumption of the *single subject* is perhaps unnecessary’; ‘I take the *I itself to be a construction of thinking* … a regulative fiction with the help of which a kind of constancy and thus “knowability” is inserted into*, invented into*, a world of becoming’; ‘willing strikes me as … something *complicated*, something unified only in a word … [W]e are in the habit of deceiving ourselves … by means of the synthetic concept of the “I”’; ‘a thought comes when “it” [the thought] wants, not when “I” want’; ‘the “soul”, the “I” posited as *primary cause*, and inserted everywhere where there is a *becoming* [*ein Werden*]’; ‘there is no “being” behind the doing, effecting, becoming’; ‘one has mistaken the helmsman for the stream. … [The ship] certainly has a direction but no helmsman whatsoever’; and so on.[[8]](#endnote-8) On the basis of such evidence, we can accept Panaïoti’s first claim: Nietzsche and Buddhists are alike in rejecting a self in the sense currently at issue.

Here I do not address the question whether any ‘no-self’ view is ultimately coherent. Is it possible to account for the nature of human experience as unified in one consciousness, as occurring from a subjective point of view, as cross-modal (being aware of seeing and touching the same thing at the same time), or as characterized by diachronic continuity, without positing a self of some kind? In addition, can the various evaluative and normative commitments that Buddhists and Nietzsche respectively wish to make be sustained without a self? Can one, for example, revalue received values, say Yes to life, commit to universal benevolence, or reap the future consequences of karma, if one is not, or has not, a self in some more robust sense? The ‘no self’ type of view may in the end fall to one or more of these challenges,[[9]](#endnote-9) or it may be that they can be resisted (perhaps by rejecting presuppositions about the kind of unity or continuity that obtain.[[10]](#endnote-10)) I propose no resolution of such issues, and merely assume provisionally that there can be a coherent ‘no-self’ position, whose basic form is shared by Nietzsche and Buddhism.

**3. Versions of ‘no self’**

Recent analytical commentators have invested much effort in distinguishing between (at least) two kinds of ‘no self’ theory within Buddhism. On the one hand there is a reductionist position associated with the Buddhist Abhidharma tradition. According to Abhidharma, ‘person’ is a convenient designation to use in ordinary conventional discourse, and thus we may say that the person is conventionally real, although there is no ultimately real thing that is the person. To be ultimately real, something must be an independent existent, not dependent for its being upon parts (no composite thing is ultimately real on this view), and not dependent on conceptualization. As the philosopher Vasubandhu puts it, ‘persons are real with reference to conception, real in the same sense that such things as heaps and streams are’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Such things are not *ultimately* real, because they are constructed: they depend upon our shared convention of placing multiple distinct mental or physical items under a single concept. It is useful to regard a heap or a stream as one single thing, but they are single things merely conventionally. Persons likewise, on Vasubandhu’s Abhidharma view, are conventionally real—they exist dependently upon manifold streams of mental and physical events (the five kinds of constituents listed above by Panaïoti) being grouped together under a concept that it is useful to have for various purposes.

This is a reductionist view because it holds that *something* is ultimately real: analysis of reality into its components comes to rest at partless mental and physical ‘atoms’ (which in Abhidharma’s extreme view are momentarily existing property-instantiations),[[12]](#endnote-12) and these are what the person ultimately is. Jonardon Ganeri urges us not to confuse this with unreality: ‘A reductionist claims that where there had seemed to be two things, we find that we have only one, but need not deny the reality of either’ (Ganeri 2012: 159). A person, like a heap, is objectively real, on this view, but what has ultimate reality are the independently existing components for which ‘person’ is the convenient designation. But still there are no selves. Though not all Buddhists would make this distinction, some recent commentators have suggested differentiating between ‘person’ and ‘self’. Jay Garfield puts the point succinctly: ‘Persons are conventionally real, although their selves are not’ (Garfield 2019, p. x). And Ganeri suggests that ‘[T]he Abhidharma Buddhism of Vasubandhu … is reductionist about persons, but error-theoretic about selves’ (Ganeri 2012: 187). In other words, selves are not real at all.

The Madhyamaka (‘middle way’) school of Buddhism, initiated by the 2nd-century philosopher Nāgārjuna, adopts a different view. According to a prominent current interpretation, Madhyamaka uses the same conventionally real/ ultimately real dichotomy, but holds that nothing falls into the latter category: not just the person, but indeed everything, ‘arises dependently’ upon conceptualization and hence is empty of its ‘own-being’ (*svabhāva*) or intrinsic nature. As Garfield explains, ‘If nothing has any intrinsic nature, analysis never terminates. … To put the same point another way, nothing is ever given to us as the kind of thing it is, because there is no kind that anything is on its own. Our world is entirely constructed’ (Garfield 2019, p. xi). Not only is everything constituted by the external relations it stands in, but which relations constitute it depends on conceptual impositions we make. In Madhyamaka the key term is *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), which means absence of intrinsic nature. Everything is empty, that is, lacking an intrinsic nature of its own, because everything ‘arises’ in dependence upon something other than itself.

Both of these Buddhist positions agree that there is no self, and that ‘person’ is simply a conventionally useful designation that corresponds to no single, unifying enduring entity. It is an intriguing question—resolving which exceeds the bounds of this paper—which type of Buddhist account, reductionist or anti-foundationalist, Nietzsche is closer to. A reductionist account, note, need not be one that reduces the mental to the physical. Abhidharma reduces the person to ultimately occurring events that are both physical and psychological in nature. Nietzsche’s position would be analogous as long as it held that the person is nothing over and above some ultimately real components into it which can be analysed—a multiplicity of inter-related drives and affects, perhaps, or primitive events or forces out of which drives and affects are somehow composed. If Nietzsche parallels the ‘emptiness’ account, by contrast, his view is that the person is conventionally real because it is conceptually constructed, and that the drives, affects, or whatever, out of which the person is constructed are also themselves conceptually constructed, not independently real.

Panaïoti (2013: 42) associates Nietzsche with the ‘emptiness’ view of Nāgārjuna, which he paraphrases in words from Nietzsche’s notebooks: ‘a “thing” is nothing more than “the sum of its effects”’ (WLN, p. 252/KSA 13: 275)), words that also formed a chapter title in Alexander Nehamas’ well-known book on Nietzsche (Nehamas 1985: 74). Nehamas cites notes in which Nietzsche says ‘That things have *qualities in themselves*, irrespective of interpretation and subjectivity, is *a perfectly idle hypothesis*: it would presuppose that *interpreting and being subjective* are *not* essential, that a thing once released from all relations is still a thing’ (WLN, p. 148/KSA 12: 353), and ‘If I think away all the relationships, all the “qualities”, all the “activities” of a thing, then the thing does *not* remain behind: because thingness was only *a fiction added* by us … (to bind together that multiplicity of relationships, qualities, activities)’ (WLN, p. 206/KSA 12: 580). In a similar passage, which significantly occurs in the context of his finding ‘the Buddhist negation of reality … completely consistent’, Nietzsche calls ‘absolute reality’ and ‘being in itself’ contradictory (WLN 12: 368–9). Such passages present some of the best evidence for attributing something approaching the ‘emptiness’ picture to Nietzsche.[[13]](#endnote-13) However, for present purposes we can finesse the question whether Nietzsche’s denial of a self aligns better with a reductionist or an anti-foundationalist view of persons. Either way, there would be no self of the kind Buddhists deny, for reasons broadly analogous to those that Buddhists would give.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Jonardon Ganeri argues that Nietzsche’s view that ‘“the doer” is merely *a fiction added to* the deed’ (GM I:13), stands in contrast with Buddhism:

The Buddhists need concur with Nietzsche only partially. … They might say that the doer *is* the deed. Nor indeed need they say that because there is something human-centred in what we decide to count as a heap, it follows that heaps are ‘merely fictions’. … The admitted fact that persons are not objective in some absolute sense (*paramārtha-sat*) does not preclude their having objectivity is some other degree (*saṃvṛtti-satya*) (Ganeri 2012: 167).

But it is arguable that Nietzsche also does not deny that persons have objectivity in some degree. The focus of his critique here is that there is no *subject*, no *substratum*, no *being* behind what happens. If (as Ganeri has suggested) we distinguish ‘person’ from ‘self’, it is the latter notion that Nietzsche targets here. According to ordinary belief, one person acts spontaneously and another discrete person is acted upon, and it is precisely these beliefs of the ‘common people’ and their associated reactive attitudes that Nietzsche is investigating: ‘this kind of human needs the belief in a neutral “subject” with free choice’ (GM I:13). In ordinary conventional discourse, people do things; the mistake is to think that behind what we thus conventionally describe there is an ultimately real, controlling substratum that somehow lies outside the stream of ‘becoming’.

**4. Becoming oneself**

It may be objected that the discussion so far omits important senses of self to which Nietzsche is positively committed. Two notions deserve discussion here. One is the notion of a pre-existing primitive self that lies outside of one’s consciousness; the other is that of what I shall call the *achieved-self*.[[15]](#endnote-15) A famous passage in Zarathustra’s discourses states ‘Behind your thoughts and feelings … stands a mighty commander, an unknown wise man—his name is Self [*Selbst*]. In your body he dwells, he is your body. … Your Self laughs at your I and its proud leapings’ (Z I, 4). In the *Genealogy* Nietzsche speaks of the ‘entire animal old self’ (GM II: 18) as developmentally prior to consciousness. And in *Daybreak* he states: ‘*[w]e are none of us* that which we appear to be in accordance with the states for which alone we have consciousness and words … we misread ourselves in this apparently most intelligible handwriting on the nature of our self [*unseres Selbst*]’ (D 115). But I propose that these passages can be paraphrased as: What exists is something composite, bodily, and outside of conscious control, and therefore not *a self* in the sense here in question. As Mattia Riccardi says, ‘the *Selbst* is identical with the structure of one’s drives understood as physio-psychologically realized behavioural dispositions’ (Riccardi 2021: 168). If the pre-existing self is a composite of physical and (unconscious) mental states and dispositions, it need not be a self in the sense denied by the Buddhist *anātman* view.

Many commentators argue that in Nietzsche’s view there is a kind of selfhood that can be achieved, albeit by a select few. Although selfhood is neither a given nor a universal feature attaching to being human as such, for Nietzsche there are nonetheless, it is argued, possible states of affairs which can be described as someone’s having, being, becoming, or creating a self. When he criticizes ‘lack of self’ (*Mangel an Selbst*),[[16]](#endnote-16) he targets a common failure to achieve such states, by contrast with those who are ‘healthier’. The latter presumably do *not* lack ‘self’. There is much disagreement as to what these privileged selfhood-constituting states of affairs consist in,[[17]](#endnote-17) but there being an achieved-self is usually characterized in terms of the obtaining of relations between components of the psycho-physical manifold that make up the human being. Hence, while this can be described as ‘there being a self’, it does not require Nietzsche to reject the view that the individual human being is a system of psycho-physical processes devoid of a single, enduring, independent core. If so, the notion of an ‘achieved self’ does not posit the kind of self that Buddhists deny. [[18]](#endnote-18)

Statements of Nietzsche’s position need careful handling. For example, if we say that ‘Nietzsche’s rejection of “soul atomism” is not a rejection of the idea of self as possessing possible forms of unity, continuity, and identity through time’ (Robertson and Owen 2013: 191), or ‘At the same time that Nietzsche undermines the conception of the unitary, atomic, metaphysical substratum “I” … he nevertheless envisions orders or forms of ruling that give any particular organization integrity, durability, and expressive capabilities’ (Acampora 2013: 382), we must not find Nietzsche reinstating as an aspiration or achievement the atomistic soul that he rejects as a given. Indeed, it is hard to know how one could think of becoming or creating such a self as that. (To take an extreme example, how could something *turn into* a Cartesian thinking substance?)[[19]](#endnote-19) Daniel Came writes that ‘Nietzsche can remain agnostic or even sceptical about the self as an ontological reality while still articulating his views in terms of *apparently* traditional notions of selfhood’ (Came 2013: 222; my emphasis). For our purposes, the Nietzschean ‘self’ must not really be a self in the particular sense under discussion. I do not attempt here any positive account of what the ‘achieved-self’ consists in, but I shall assume that whatever it is, its possibility does not require Nietzsche to retract his critique of the single, enduring, and independent ‘I’. Indeed, a stronger point applies: it is a condition of grasping the nature of the would-be Nietzschean achieved-self that we reject belief in such an ‘I’. To see what it is to become oneself one must realize that there is no self, firstly because becoming oneself is a rare achievement rather than a given, and secondly because *what* we can become is a healthy, well-organized manifold of dynamically changing drives and affects.

However, Nietzsche’s aspiration towards ‘becoming oneself’ manifests a profound divergence from Buddhism. Nietzsche celebrates as a goal a kind of self-centredness, an intensified sense of oneself in the individual human being:

[Y]ou haven’t yet discovered yourself or created for yourself an ideal of your very own—for this could never be someone else’s let alone everyone’s, everyone’s! …. We … want to *become who we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves (GS, 335).

It is here that Nietzsche’s project stands in deepest conflict with Buddhism. For what primarily needs to be dispelled, for Buddhists, is not the metaphysical view that there is a self, but rather an innate, pre-theoretical ‘sense of self’ or ‘self-grasping’, the term for which is *ahaṃkāra*.[[20]](#endnote-20) The Buddha’s very first discourse contains ‘the noble truths’ of suffering, the cause of suffering, and the cessation of suffering through the cessation of its cause, a craving that rests upon the delusion of self. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA), Śāntideva later says ‘*ahaṃkara*, which is the cause of suffering, *increases* from the delusion that there is a Self [*ātma*], and if this is the unavoidable result of that, it is better to meditate on no-self’ (BCA 9.77, my emphasis). The primitive sense of self may *decrease* through rejecting as false the belief in an enduring, unitary self. But it is also possible that rejecting that metaphysical view may make no fundamental difference to our underlying sense of self. As Warren Lee Todd observes, ‘just as knowledge of virtue may co-exist with non-virtuous action, so believing in non-self may co-exist with egoism’ (Todd 2013: 10). In Nietzsche’s case, believing in no-self combines with positive advocacy of a new kind of egoism.

**5. Suffering and compassion**

The most obvious antagonism between Nietzsche and Buddhism seems to be that the latter, at least in its Mahāyāna forms, advocates compassion and the removal of all suffering, while Nietzsche rejects compassion as a virtue and opposes the removal of all suffering. It is common nowadays to explain that translating the term *duḥkha* as ‘suffering’ is misleading. When the Buddha states the first ‘noble truth’ that life is *duḥkha*, he does not mean that life consists merely of episodes of pain or other affective sufferings one after another. The larger point is rather that that *duḥkha* is ‘a fact before it is a feeling’ (Carpenter 2014: 9), that a pervasive unsatisfactoriness is ‘the fundamental structure of our lives’ (Garfield 2015: 9). However, Nietzsche’s concern with suffering (*Leiden*) is also not confined to phenomena such as the headaches and relationship breakdowns with which his own life was plagued. There is also existential suffering: the archetypal human being suffers not only from life’s ‘ordinary’ troubles, but more profoundly from ‘the problem of his meaning’ (GM III: 28), and in his notes Nietzsche links this profounder kind of suffering to impermanence and deceptiveness, factors that also made our existence unsatisfactory for the Buddha:

The human being seeks ‘the truth’: a world that does not contradict itself, does not deceive, does not change, a *true* world — a world in which one does not suffer: contradiction, deceptiveness, change — causes of suffering! (KSA 12: 364, my translation).[[21]](#endnote-21)

Secondly, ‘ordinary’ suffering, such as pains and episodes of anger, are also manifestations of the *duḥkha*, and are discussed, for example by Śāntideva, as part of what the awakened mind must work towards eliminating. So I proceed on the basis that Nietzsche’s discussions of ‘suffering’ can at least be read as standing in genuine disagreement with Buddhism.

The central Buddhist virtue that addresses itself to suffering is *karuṇā*, often translated as ‘compassion’. Jay Garfield prefers the term ‘care’ on the grounds that

*karuṇā* connotes not just an emotive response to another, but a commitment to act on behalf of others to relieve their suffering …. [T]o adopt a caring attitude is … to adopt a mode of comportment to the world, a mode in which the welfare and suffering of others is that which is ascertained in perception, in which sentient beings are perceived intentionally *as suffering*, and in which the actions that are readied in the perceptual cycle are actions designed to alleviate suffering (Garfield 2015: 289).

So does Nietzsche address something like this? When he discusses *Mitleid*—often translated as ‘pity’, but also, more relevantly to our discussion, as ‘compassion’—some of what he says resembles Garfield’s notion of a ‘comportment to the world’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Nietzsche says that if people are believers in the ‘religion of *Mitleid*’, it ‘commands them to help, and they believe they have helped best when they have helped most quickly!’ You won’t understand human happiness, he tells the adherents of this ‘religion’, if you are attuned to suffering as something inherently to be removed, or ‘should you … constantly prevent all possible misfortune ahead of time; should you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence’ (GS 338). Nietzsche depicts an overall orientation to which people commit themselves, in which the suffering of others is salient in perception, but which, he claims, *wrongly* grasps suffering as negative in value and intrinsically such as to be alleviated. The key claim, to which we shall return, is arguably that suffering is not bad in itself. Details aside, Nietzsche and Buddhists are disputing the same point: the claim ‘compassion should be universal because all suffering is bad in itself’ is opposed by ‘compassion is deleterious because it wrongly treats suffering as bad in itself’.

Panaïoti offers a different reading. He claims that Buddhist compassion is ‘very close indeed to the compassion of strength that Nietzsche attributes to healthy types’ (Panaïoti 2013: 211). This ‘compassion of strength’ in fact covers two different Nietzschean views. The first stems from the idea that the value of compassion can alter depending on who is manifesting it. Nietzsche writes of ‘a man who is naturally master’, saying ‘if a man like this has *Mitleid*, well then! This *Mitleid* is worth something!’ (BGE, 293). The contrast is with the *Mitleid* of ‘weak’, over-sensitive ‘unmanly’ beings who cannot tolerate any suffering in themselves or others and form a ‘cult’ that strives to eliminate it at every opportunity. However, the prime trait Nietzsche celebrates here is not compassion, but strength. His *Mitleid* of strength has its peculiar ‘worth’ not because it eliminates suffering, but rather because it expresses a character with the power and self-mastery to tolerate and administer suffering just as much as to remove it. For a little earlier Nietzsche has said that ‘the noble person helps the unfortunate … not (or hardly ever) out of *Mitleid*, but rather more out of an impulse generated by the over-abundance of power … [and] is even proud of not being made for *Mitleid*’ (BGE, 260). For the supposedly strong human being, *Mitleid* is more often a ‘temptation’ or ‘seduction’ to be resisted. Zarathustra’s final test is to *overcome* his compassion for the higher humans (Z IV, ‘The Sign’), and Nietzsche writes, seemingly *in propria persona*, ‘I, too, know with certainty that I need only expose myself to real distress and I, too, *am* lost!’ (GS, 338), meaning that compassion would lure him from his ‘own way’ and his true goals. It belongs to greatness, Nietzsche states, ‘not to perish of inner distress and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering’ (GS, 325).

Panaïoti argues that Buddhist compassion is also quite different from that of Nietzsche’s over-sensitive, cultish ‘weaklings’. The Buddha reportedly approved of causing suffering to a child in order to save it from choking,[[23]](#endnote-23) and in the case of Kisagotamī, maddened by sorrow over her dead son, he used suffering as a therapeutic means that first evoked false hopes and greater disappointment. Panaïoti quotes the tale at length (2015: 199–200) to show that Buddhism is far from promoting an over-protective softness towards human beings: it ‘might very well involve allowing suffering to occur in the case of someone who may not have encountered enough suffering so far—and perhaps even to cause them harm’ (Panaïoti 2015: 203). Too little suffering can prevent one from reaching enlightenment. But the fact that both Nietzsche and the Buddha oppose the ‘compassion of weakness’ does not license the conclusion that they share a common attitude to compassion. For the Buddha, suffering, though bad in itself, can be instrumentally good if it moves someone along the path to the eventual removal of suffering. For Nietzsche, as I shall argue, that is the wrong path to be on: suffering is not bad in itself.

Panaïoti’s second manifestation of Nietzschean ‘compassion of strength’ is the passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* where Nietzsche writes:

Our *Mitleid* is a higher, more far-sighted *Mitleid*: — we see how humanity is becoming smaller, how *you* are making it smaller! … You want, if possible … *to abolish suffering*. And us? It looks as though *we* would prefer it to be heightened and made worse than it has ever been! …. In human beings, *creature* and *creator* are combined … And *your* *Mitleid* is aimed at the ‘creature in humans’, … at what necessarily needs to *suffer* and *should* suffer. And *our* *Mitleid* — don’t you realize who our *inverted* *Mitleid* is aimed at when it fights against your *Mitleid* as the worst of all pampering and weaknesses? — *Mitleid* against *Mitleid*, then! (BGE, 225)

Panaïoti likens this ‘higher’ or ‘inverted’ *Mitleid* to compassion in Buddhism. But the comparison is not sustainable: Nietzsche’s ‘higher’ or ‘inverted’ *Mitleid* is a case of *Mitleid* only ironically, precisely because it is, as Nietzsche says, ‘*Mitleid* against *Mitleid’*. It is an attitude that promotes not the *removal* suffering, but the *allowing* of it as an end. His point is that the strong, creative aspect of humanity is diminished by not allowing suffering to occur, and that (for him) nourishing this strong, creative aspect has greater value than preventing suffering. Nietzsche’s concern for the well-being of creative, self-expressive humanity requires that we replace our customary conception of well-being with another: ‘Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal’ (BGE 225). Nietzschean well-being demands that we do not exclude suffering from the highest state of being to which a human can aspire. Once again, by virtue of seeing suffering as not bad in itself and not to be removed simply qua suffering, this passage differs profoundly from Buddhism.[[24]](#endnote-24)

**6. From no-self to compassion**

Some writers on Buddhism adopt a sanguine view concerning the connection between no-self and compassion. For example, Graham Priest observes that ‘The rise of Mahāyāna occasioned two important theoretical developments in Buddhism. The first was making emptiness the metaphysical keystone. The second was making compassion the ethical keystone. It would seem odd if these were totally independent’ (Priest 2015: 227). According to Garfield,

Care is … the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the emptiness and interdependence of all sentient beings. Once one sees oneself as nonsubstantial and existing only in interdependence, and once one sees that the happiness and suffering of all sentient beings is entirely causally conditioned, the only rational attitude one can adopt to others is a caring and careful one (Garfield 2015: 296–7)

Recall also Priest’s assertion that if the Buddhist ‘no-self’ view is right, ‘then a compassionate attitude would seem to follow’ (Priest 2017: 98).

Priest cites Nietzsche as a dissenting voice concerning compassion and, as I have argued, is right to do so. But does Nietzsche have a credible position? According to Priest, Nietzsche holds the ‘extraordinary claims’ that ‘suffering may be a good’ and that ‘making others suffer may be good’ (Priest 2015: 233–4). He cites two passages in evidence: GM II: 5, where a creditor has the right to take pleasure in inflicting suffering on a debtor; and BGE 258, where a ‘healthy aristocracy … accepts in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all *for the sake of the aristocracy*’. Nietzsche often makes shocking proposals and advocates goals that embrace the suffering of many human beings. There are numerous other passages that Priest could have chosen to illustrate this. The follow-on from GM II: 5 seems to make the point more clearly: ‘Seeing-suffer feels good, making-suffer even more so’ (GM II: 7). However, this passage does not say that making others suffer *is good*. Nietzsche’s points are: (1) that throughout history making others suffer has commonly felt good to human beings, (2) that modern Europeans find it hard to acknowledge this, (3) that not all cultures have shared the assumptions of modern European morality. The slightly fuller passage is ‘Seeing-suffer feels good, making-suffer even more so—that is a hard proposition, but a central one, an old powerful human-all-too-human proposition’ (GM II: 7). Claim (1) states a fact that can be borne out by evidence (some of which Nietzsche indicates). Claim (2) assumes that modern Europeans think making others suffer is not good. The three claims together confront us with a nasty truth about human beings and with the parochiality of our own moral assumption, but do not state that inflicting suffering on others *is good*.

The ‘healthy aristocracy’ passage, by contrast, does seem to regard the shrinking of people into incomplete human beings as a good. But this is here treated as an *instrumental* good, given that one’s end is to attain a ‘healthy aristocracy’. That Nietzsche thinks suffering may be instrumentally good is no big deal, since arguably everyone agrees on that point, Śāntideva included:

If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise.

That is why Supuṣpacandra, though undergoing torture at the hands of the king, did nothing to prevent his own suffering out of sacrifice for many sufferers (BCA 8.105).

When Nietzsche says that suffering is instrumentally good in promoting a healthy aristocracy, what we most likely find extraordinary is not his holding that suffering may be good instrumentally, but rather the particular, vastly inegalitarian *end* to which he thinks suffering is a good means, and the alarming *degree* of suffering he is prepared to countenance in attaining it. On more familiar views, including that of Buddhism, suffering can be instrumentally good if the end is the *removal* *of suffering*, and if the suffering to be removed is greater than the suffering caused. But outside of these conditions, suffering can’t be good at all. As Śāntideva says: ‘If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone’ (BCA 8. 103).

As Derek Parfit succinctly reminds us, suffering’s being instrumentally good ‘is compatible with the view that all suffering is *intrinsically* or in itself bad’ (Parfit 2011: 571). But it is also compatible with two other views: that suffering is intrinsically or in itself good, and that suffering is at least *not in itself bad*. At times (as Priest suspects) Nietzsche appears to hold the former view:

[W]illingly to seek out the dreadful and questionable sides of existence …. Understanding that those aspects of existence previously *negated* are … desirable not merely with respect to the aspects which have previously been affirmed (perhaps as their complement or precondition) but for their own sake [*um ihrer selber willen*] (WLN, p. 173/KSA 12: 455).

However, others of Nietzsche’s utterances are consonant with the more restrained claim that suffering isat least *not bad in itself.*

This idea may seem wild enough, so to make it even *prima facie* plausible we should distinguish between the badness that something has by virtue of its being *negatively undergone* (at the very least disliked) and its *normative* badness as something that in itself we have reason not to want, something that is to be removed, prevented, or diminished in virtue of its intrinsic nature. Nietzsche, in effect, denies the automatic link between these two senses of ‘badness’. He emphasizes the badness of undergoing suffering when he advocates affirmation of aspects of life that are ‘hardest’ (TI, ‘Ancients’, 5), ‘dreadful and questionable’ (WLN, p. 173/KSA 12: 455). Something in no way ‘hard’ would not be suffering. What he denies is the normative claim that such things are by their nature such as to be removed. Suffering, he says, is not an objection to life (EH, ‘Zarathustra’, 1): life without its hard and dreadful aspects would not be a better life, not a life we would have more reason to want. This does not exclude the possibility, indeed likelihood, that *some* sufferings will be such that there are Nietzschean reasons to remove them. But for Nietzsche *that they are sufferings* is not *eo ipso* such a reason. For him, suffering is not normatively bad in itself.

**7. Suffering and the ‘inner sequence and interconnection’**

Buddhism will have a counter to Nietzsche if it can show a firm connection between ‘no-self’ and universal compassion. If there is a persuasive link between accepting the ultimate nonexistence of a self and the insight that all sufferings should be prevented, then Nietzsche might be open to the following internal objection: as a ‘no-self’ theorist, he should accept compassion towards all sufferings as the only appropriate attitude to hold. On the other hand, if Nietzsche’s questioning of the value of compassion is persuasive, the supposed intimate connection between ‘no-self’ and compassion may itself begin to unravel. Commentators have focused on an extended passage in Śāntideva (BCA 8. 90–103) that appears to be forging a link between ‘accepting the ultimate nonexistence of the self (*anātman*)’ and ‘a commitment to altruism’ (Harris 2011: 94), where altruism is the view that one should care equally for oneself and others. There has been some intricate debate about the passage, which I shall not attempt to rehearse here.[[25]](#endnote-25) It has proved difficult to settle on a convincing argument from ‘no-self’ to compassion. In barest outline, as summarized by Garfield et al. (2015), there are two main construals of the would-be argument: (1) Sufferings are ultimately real, but the persons ‘in whom’ they occur are not, therefore it is merely the suffering that matters, not ‘whose’ it is. (2) It is irrational to have a differential concern for my suffering as opposed to what is another’s, because everyone’s suffering matters equally to them. A third possibility is that, rather than an argument linking ‘no-self’ and compassion, Śāntideva instead constructs an aid to meditative practice in which fully experiencing the world as empty of self would bring about a universally compassionate outlook, or at least ‘eliminate the most significant obstacle to the altruistic attitude’ (Harris 2011: 116).[[26]](#endnote-26)

Version (1) of the argument reflects Śāntideva’s line ‘Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?’ (BCA 8. 102). But it raises a number of questions. Why would the occurrence of ultimately real suffering matter, if there is ultimately no one to whom it matters? As Stephen Harris comments, ‘It is at least plausible that the common belief that we should remove suffering is also bound up with the belief that suffering belongs to enduring beings’ (2011: 109). There is also a potential worry about positing ‘ownerless’ sufferings that really occur, but occur to or for nobody.[[27]](#endnote-27) A different issue is that this version seems to adopt an Abhidharma perspective in assuming that sufferings are ultimately real and intrinsically bad. Given that Śāntideva (even as an ‘authorial center of gravity’) is an adherent of the Madhyamaka emptiness position, which holds nothing to be ultimately real and nothing to have an intrinsic nature, there is a question whether or why he would be arguing from this standpoint. Version (2) puts the onus on an egoist, someone who holds it justified to alleviate one’s own suffering without requirement to care for that of others, to explain how that could be a rational attitude. If suffering is bad for me, it must be for all conventionally existent beings, given that there is no relevant difference between us. But, while it does not assume that sufferings are ultimately real free-floating occurrences, this argument does appear still to assume that suffering is normatively bad simply because it is suffering. It is here, I suggest, that Nietzsche’s position can challenge argumentative construals of Śāntideva.

Śāntideva says: ‘If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone’ (BCA 8. 103). The last two sentences state an impartialist view about the value of suffering: if it’s true that my suffering must be prevented, then all suffering must be prevented; but if it’s not true that all suffering must be prevented, then it’s not true that my suffering must be prevented. Nietzsche, crucially, accepts the *second* option, and thus he also is an impartialist about the value of suffering. Consider this extract:

In most cases of beneficence toward those in distress there is something offensive in the intellectual frivolity with which the one who feels compassion plays the role of fate: … Should you adherents to this religion really have the same attitude *to yourselves* [my emphasis] that you have towards your fellow men; should you refuse to let your suffering lie on you even for an hour and instead constantly prevent all possible misfortune ahead of time; should you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence, then you have besides your religion of *Mitleid* also another religion in your hearts, and the latter is perhaps the mother of the former — *the religion of snug cosiness* (GS, 338).

‘This goes for oneself as for everyone’ patently applies here: for Nietzsche, allowing myself my suffering is as important as allowing others theirs, since in both cases well-being would otherwise be diminished. We would miss this fact if, like Priest, we assumed that Nietzsche especially values hurting others.

The same passage in *The Gay Science* further suggests that suffering (whosever it is) is in itself *neither good nor bad*, on the grounds that whatever ‘significance’ suffering has in a particular case is dependent upon its position in a web of relations:

the one who feels compassion … knows nothing of the whole inner sequence and interconnection that spells misfortune for *me* or for *you*! The entire economy of my soul and the balance effected by ‘misfortune’, the breaking open of new springs and needs, the healing of old wounds, the shedding of entire periods of the past — all such things that can be involved in misfortune do not concern the dear compassionate one: they want to *help* and have no thought that there is a personal necessity of misfortune; that terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, midnights, adventures, risks, and blunders are as necessary for me and you as their opposites …. For happiness and misfortune are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or—as with you—*remain small* together! (GS 338).

One way to read this passage is as follows: suffering should not be considered normatively bad in itself, because whatever value it has to the human being who undergoes it is relative to its position in a potentially large web of events and interpretations. This position should have at least some resonance with Madhyamaka, according to which the conventionally existing person, once understood by someone truly enlightened, is *entirely* a constructed ‘sequence and interconnection’ of elements none of which has its own intrinsic nature. As Bronwyn Finnigan says, ‘Mādhyamikas cannot consistently argue that certain actions, qualities, and mental factors are ultimately good or bad in virtue of possessing an essential property’ (Finnigan 2018: 167). If analysis never comes to a stop at anything with its own intrinsic nature, then we can never isolate any item in the world that is a nugget of intrinsic badness. Whatever nature anything has arises in dependence on its causes, its effects, and the conceptual constructions that are put upon it. This view seems congenial to what Nietzsche says. A misfortune undergone might become a good feature of one’s life once construed in relation to what it initiated, what it put an end to, what learning or psychological capacity was gained through it, and so on.

Somewhat favourable to Nietzsche are examples where suffering is an integral part of a goal or an achievement: the pain of the marathon runner, the enormous strain of a Beethoven striving to create something that breaks through the restrictions of the traditional string quartet genre.[[28]](#endnote-28) In such cases, which exemplify a pattern fairly common in human life, we arguably will not just an end, but the reaching of the end through specific kinds of hardship, without which the end would not have the same kind of value for us. The end encompasses the hardship. Admittedly, most suffering is not of this kind. But Nietzsche appears to hold that even adventitious sufferings, misfortunes that arrive unbidden, can in a similar way become integral to the ‘economy of one’s soul’ by retrospective co-option: they become an essential part of a whole that has value and meaning, and by implication, makes one what one is. He views this process, like Beethoven’s achievement, as a kind of creative overcoming that produces a psychological growth that could not occur in the absence of the suffering. The suffering comes to be welcomed, not merely as a means to a separately identifiable end, but as an essential part of a meaningful whole.[[29]](#endnote-29) It is compatible with this that many instances of suffering may turn out to be purely negative because they cannot be construed in relations that constitute an affirmable whole. But Nietzsche’s idea is that undertaking to abolish all suffering is too high a risk because it would remove the suffering that is a part of growth, creativity, and achievement. He is still vulnerable to a challenge: why is the risk of diminishing some instances of growth and creativity more serious than the risk of acquiescing in large amounts of suffering that ends up unredeemed by anything? But to the extent that his position is supported by the claim that suffering is intrinsically neither good nor bad, it is at least unclear that Śāntideva and Madhyamaka can furnish an argument that shows he is wrong. Nietzsche agrees with Śāntideva that one’s own suffering does not differ in value from that of others, and Śāntideva arguably has reason to agree with Nietzsche’s claim that suffering is intrinsically neither good nor bad.

**8. Conclusion**

Evidence from Nietzsche’s texts of the 1880s supports the view that he rejects the self—conceived as something single, enduring, independent, and distinct from the components of the person—as a misleading illusion. In this, I have argued, along with Panaïoti, that Nietzsche agrees with Buddhism about something non-trivial. But I have argued against Panaïoti’s claim that Nietzsche has a view of compassion that can be likened to that in Buddhism. Nietzsche is an impartialist about the value of suffering: he does not especially advocate the causing of suffering in others as a good, and is often concerned that one should affirm *one’s own* suffering. But he arguably holds that all suffering is neither good nor bad in itself, being dependent for its value on its belonging to a wider set of relations with other states and events. For Nietzsche, to eliminate all suffering, which is the aim of the bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is to risk losing those interconnected sequences which constitute psychological growth and great achievement. I have argued further that, if we can find Nietzsche’s position on suffering coherent, he provides a challenge to the claim that accepting a ‘no-self’ view must bring with it a firm commitment to universal compassion, and that Madhyamaka, with its view of the emptiness of everything, cannot obviously counter the claim that suffering is not bad in itself.

We earlier left hanging the possibility that Śāntideva’s invocation of ‘no-self’ is not part of an argument for universal compassion, but rather a contemplative aid that may foster the propensity to compassion. It has been suggested that Śāntideva’s works ‘are best treated as meditation manuals’ (Edelglass 2017: 227), or as protreptic aids towards a reorientation of our attitudes (Carpenter 2019). Śāntideva writes for those in the Buddhist community, who are already committed to the bodhisattva path and needing assistance in fully realizing the outlook of selfless compassion. Concentrating attention on the metaphysical doctrine of no-self may aid in their aspiration to dispel their self-centredness. But, as we saw earlier, Nietzsche’s adherence to the ‘no-self’ view is obviously subservient to no such aspiration. On the contrary, a Buddhist should find Nietzsche agreeing superficially with the descriptive doctrine that there is no self, but at the same time missing the whole point of it. Striving to achieve a kind of self-affirmation as something whole, unique, and powerful amount to a willful intensifying of the underlying egoistic cause of suffering. Nietzsche might reply that, since suffering is not bad in itself, whatever is the cause of suffering does not need to cease, and that a new kind of egoism should be promoted which embraces suffering as an integral part of becoming oneself. Hence the agreement over the ‘no self’ metaphysics masks a gigantic normative gulf. ‘Remove suffering by dispelling the sense of self’ is confronted by ‘intensify the sense of self by embracing suffering’. At the deepest level, Nietzsche succeeded in being, as his notebook entry announced, the opposite of the Indian Buddha.

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1. One may question how well Nietzsche understood Buddhism, given his sources and the distinctive slant on it that he received through the direct and indirect influence of Schopenhauer. I leave such issues out of account here. For a survey of Nietzsche’s reading on Indian philosophy in general, see Brobjer 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Freny Mistry states that ‘Nietzsche and the Buddha spoke differently, but their message is recognisably affiliated and attests to the proximity of their ethical philosophy’ (Mistry 1981: 9). Summarizing some of Mistry’s claims, Graham Parkes states that ‘much of Nietzsche’s thinking is consonant with the basic insights of early Buddhism’ (Parkes 1996: 373). Robert Morrison argues for ‘affinities’ between ‘the key notions of “will to power” and “self-overcoming”, and the Buddhist notions of *taṇhā* [thirst or craving] and *citta-bhāvanā* [mind-cultivation] respectively’ (Morrison 1997: 224). Bret Davis suggests ‘profounder resonances may in fact be found with the Mahayana tradition, of which Nietzsche remained unfortunately ignorant’ (Davis 2004: 89). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. My translation, with *Gegenstück* as ‘opposite’, where Panaïoti has ‘antipode’. It could mean ‘counterpart’: Nietzsche might be imagining himself as complementing an appropriately ‘Indian’ outlook with an appropriately ‘European’ one. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I use the following abbreviations for Nietzsche’s works: A: *The Anti-Christ*;BGE: *Beyond Good and Evil*; CW: *The Case of Wagner*; D: *Daybreak*; EH: *Ecce Homo*; GM: *On the Genealogy of Morality*; GS: *The Gay Science*; HA: *Human, All too Human*; KSA *Kritische Studienausgabe*; TI *Twilight of the Idols*; WLN: *Writings from the Late Notebooks*; Z: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to Ken Gemes for pointing out the salience of this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Garfield’s version of the title (2015: 299). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Carpenter 2014: 49–71; Priest 2015: 233–5 (discussed in Section 6 below). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See BGE, 12; WLN, p. 46/KSA 11: 650; WLN, pp. 20–1/KSA 11:526; BGE, 19; BGE, 17; KSA 12: 369; GM I: 13; GS, 360. For a fuller catalogue of such passages, see Gardner 2009: 26–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a variety of such considerations in Nietzsche see, e.g., Gardner 2009; Anderson 2012; and in Buddhism, see, e.g., Ganeri 2000; Carpenter 2015; Chadha and Nichols 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I thank Paul Loeb for this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Abhidharmkośabhāṣya*, quoted by Ganeri 2012: 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For brief accounts, see Carpenter 2014: 43–6; Siderits 2016: 111–23. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. A constructivist picture about *enduring objects* that merely replaces ‘being’ with ‘becoming’ has not necessarily gone all the way with Nāgārjuna. Constructivism about objects is compatible with a naturalist position which holds that analysis terminates at *something* ultimately real. Justin Remhof suggests such a position: ‘Nietzsche takes modern science to show that at the fundamental level, reality consists in forces, not material bodies. … Boscovich, who anticipates developments in modern particle physics, contends that non-extended physical force points are the ultimate constituents of matter’ (Remhof 2017: 1139). There is arguably insufficient evidence to establish a Nietzschean ‘emptiness’ view, but on such a view, absence of ‘absolute reality’ would also characterize ‘force points’, or whatever physics comes up with in future. Panaïoti implies such a reading when he states that for Nietzsche ‘reductionism is not an option’ because of its commitment to metaphysical realism (Panaïoti 2013: 114). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Comparisons will eventually become complicated, because Nietzsche categorizes both the components of the psychophysical stream and their modes of relation to one another differently from Buddhism, and these differences may prove significant further down the line. For example, Nietzsche holds drives to be chief among the components of the person, and says of them that they stand to one another in relations such as ‘mastering’ (BGE, 6) or ‘complaining’ (D, 109). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The latter issue is raised in response to Panaïoti by Gemes (unpublished). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. TI, ‘Expeditions’, 37. Nietzsche’s related critique of ‘unselfing’ (*Entselbstung*) is also a prominent theme. See BGE 207; GM III: 11, 17; CW, Epilogue; A 54. The term occurs with some frequency in the Nachlass 1887–88 (KSA 12:9[119], p.404; 9[145], p.420; 9[156], p. 427; 10[118], p. 523; 10[153], p. 542; KSA 13:11[48], p.23; 15[13], p.412; 16[14], p.486). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For different accounts of achieving a self, see, for example, Nehamas 1985; Gemes 2009; May 2009; Katsafanas 2011; Anderson 2012; Gemes and Le Patourel 2015; Ridley 2018; Richardson 2020: 398–438. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For present purposes, I hesitate to parse the Nietzschean notions of ‘becoming who we are … human beings who … create themselves’ (GS 335) as ‘becoming a self’ or ‘creating a self’. I resist the temptation to follow Gemes and Le Patourel, who speak interchangeably of ‘becoming a self and/or becoming what you are, and/or becoming a genuine individual, and/or being a person’ (2015: 625). In linguistic terms, although Nietzsche uses the noun *Selbst* (and some compounds including it), he tends not to speak explicitly of creating ‘a self’—e.g. in the canonical passage on ‘self-creation’ (TI, ‘Expeditions’, 49), Goethe is said to ‘create himself [*sich*]’, not to create, as it might be, *ein Selbst*—and Nietzsche rarely uses the expression ‘becoming a self’. An early exception is HH II: 366: ‘*will* a self and thou shalt *become* a self’. In *Human, All-too-Human* Nietzsche also speaks of one’s ‘higher self’ (*höheres Selbst*) as both an ‘ideal’ one has the potential to be, and as what one truly is (HH 624). But that this ‘self’ should not be reified into something Buddhists would deny is suggested by Nietzsche’s insistence that ‘we ourselves are … nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing [of the past within us]’ (HH II, 223). On the ‘higher self’, see Miner 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Along similar lines Graham Parkes states that Nietzsche ‘never talks about the constructing of an ego’ (Parkes 2015: 43). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ahaṃ* is the ordinary word for ‘I’ in Sanskrit. *Ahaṃkara* is translated in many ways, including ‘egoism’, ‘egotism’, ‘egoity’, and ‘ego-clinging’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Nietzsche elsewhere holds that there are human beings who neither seek truth nor suffer from the meaning of their existence, this being a common reading of the ‘last human’ figure in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z, Prologue, 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. A fuller account of Nietzsche on *Mitleid* is impossible here. See, e.g. D 133, 134, 135; GS 338; GM Preface: 5. For some previous discussions, see Cartwright 1988; Frazer 2006; von Tevenar 2007; Reginster 2012; Panaïoti 2013: 173–92. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 499 (*Majjhima Nikāya* i. 395). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For a parallel criticism of Panaïoti on compassion, see Özen 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For some different readings, see Williams 1998; Harris 2011; Garfield et al. 2015; Westerhoff 2015; Finnigan 2018. Garfield et al. explain that the text in question is something of a patchwork resulting from revisions and interpolations. They suggest treating ‘Śāntideva’ as ‘an authorial center of gravity’ rather than a historical figure. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Warren Lee Todd cites an instance of this effect, reminding us that Derek Parfit, once he dropped the concept of a permanent self, ‘claimed that he was “more concerned about others” ([Parfit 1984:] p.281. He therefore appears to agree with the Buddhists, who claim that letting go of the concept of “self” leads to a greater degree of compassion for others’ (Todd 2013: 6–7). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. A point developed extensively in Williams 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The latter is Reginster’s example of ‘difficulty intrinsic to the nature of the achievement’ which he finds characteristic of Nietzsche’s ‘ethics of power’ (Reginster 2006: 179). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. There are further questions concerning the nature of this ‘wholeness’. That it belongs to a Nietzschean *aestheticization* of suffering is argued by Hassan 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)