

The University of Western Ontario
Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 154E (001)

Nagarjuna on The self

Here's the relevant passage from *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*:

“If the self were the aggregates,
It would have arising and ceasing (as properties).
If it were different from the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates”

Chap. 18 verse 1, translated by J.L. Garfield (see *Course Pack* for bibliographical details).

- (1) **Assume** that the self, understood “as a self-existent, enduring entity” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.208), exists. (I.e. assume that the statement ‘The self exists’ is true, where ‘the self’ is understood to be “a self-existent, enduring entity” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.208).)
- (2) Either the self is identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual or it is not.
- (3) Let's say that the self **IS** identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.
- (4) Given (3), **IF** the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual change, making them importantly different from moment to moment, then so does the self.
- (5) The putative constituent physical and mental processes of the relevant individual constantly undergo change, making them different from moment to moment.
- (6) Given (3), (4) and (5), the self constantly changes, making it importantly different from the self that precedes and succeeds it from moment to moment.
- (7) But given (1), the self does not change (it is enduring).
- (8) Given (6) and (7), it **IS** the case that the self constantly changes **AND** it is the case that the self does **NOT** change. Which is absurd.
- (9) So, given (3) through (8), the self is **NOT** identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.
- (10) Now let's say that the self, though it exists, is **NOT** identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.
- (11) Given (10), then no changes in the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual affect any change in the self.
- (12) Becoming generous, wise, compassionate (and, so, enlightened) involves changes in the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.
- (13) Given (11) and (12), becoming generous, wise, compassionate (and, so, enlightened) does not affect any change in the self.
- (14) But the self does become generous, wise, compassionate (and, so, enlightened).
- (15) Given (13) and (14), it is the case that the self **DOES NOT** and the self **DOES** become generous, wise, compassionate (and, so, enlightened). Which is absurd.
- (16) So, given (10) through (15), it is **NOT** the case that the self, though it exists, is not identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.
- (17) Given (9) and (16), the self is not identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual **AND it is not the case that** the self is not identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual.

(18) Given (2) and (17), either the self is identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual or it is not **AND it is not the case that** the self is identical to the constituent physical or mental states and processes of the relevant individual and **it is not the case that** it is not. Which is absurd.

(19) It is not the case that the self, understood “as a self-existent, enduring entity” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.208), exists. (I.e. the statement that ‘the self exists’ is false, where ‘the self’ is understood as “a self-existent, enduring entity” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.208)) (See *Asian Philosophies*, pp.208-09)

Note that, **IF IT WORKS**, this argument seems to apply to both the Upanishadic view of an enduring self, the Jain view of an enduring self, AND any competing Buddhist views of an enduring self (see *Buddhist Scriptures*, pp.192-97 for an example of such a Buddhist view).

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