



## The Incoherence of Denying My Death

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# The Incoherence of Denying My Death

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## Abstract

The most common way of dealing with the fear of death is denying death. Such denial can take two and only two forms: *strategy 1* denies the finality of death; *strategy 2* denies the reality of the dying subject. Most religions opt for strategy 1, but Buddhism *seems* to be an example of the 2nd. All variants of strategy 1 fail, however, and a closer look at the main Buddhist argument reveals that Buddhism in fact does *not* follow strategy 2. Moreover, there is no other theory that does, and neither can there be. This means that there is no tenable theory that denies death. There may be no universally psychologically acceptable alternative, however, which would mean that if denying death is incoherent, this is an unavoidable incoherence.

## 1. Introduction

The influence of death and how we deal with it on our lives can hardly be overstated. To a large extent, we live our lives in the shadow of death, in a shadow created by fear and denial. There is no fear as deep and pervasive as the fear of death. Everyone fears death, but most of us are able to force this fear into the background, into a slumber from which it awakes only occasionally. Religion is the most important (but not the only) means of establishing this slumber; it is, as Marx wrote, “the opium of the people”:<sup>1</sup> an anxiolytic, or a painkiller. According to Ernest Becker (1973), controlling the fear of death is the primary purpose of religion (and heroism), and religion achieves this by *denying* death: religion is a symbolic system of death denial.

Denying death is denying that *I die* – that is, denying the proposition that *everything that is me will (one day) cease to be*, in which “everything” has existential import. In more formal terms (to minimize ambiguity), the claim that I will someday die amounts to the following:

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<sup>1</sup> “Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüt einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist. Sie ist das *Opium* des Volkes.” *MEW1*: 378. (“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart/soul of a heartless world, and the spirit of spirit-less conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.”)

[D]  $\forall x [ x \text{ is me } \rightarrow x \text{ will cease to be } ] \wedge \exists x [ x \text{ is me } ]$ ,<sup>2</sup>

and denying death, therefore, is denying/rejecting [D]. Given that [D] is a conjunction, there are three options for its denial: rejecting the first conjunct, rejecting the second, or rejecting both. **Strategy 1** rejects the first conjunct:

[S1]  $\exists x [ x \text{ is me } \wedge \neg ( x \text{ will cease to be } ) ]$ .<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, it will be technologically possible in the future to transfer someone's mind to a computer or robot (or something else) and in that way make immortality a reality, but even though that hypothetical situation could conform to [S1] if certain further preconditions are met, it is not an example of denying death as intended here. The key difference is that such technological immortality would *make* [S1] true, while the essence of strategy 1 death denial is the claim that [S1] *is already* true (without any technological aid). For that reason I will further ignore the possibility (if it is a possibility indeed) of future technological immortality in this paper.

Negating the second conjunct in [D] has the result that the first conjunct fails to refer to anything and becomes irrelevant, regardless of whether it is negated or affirmed. For that reason, it makes no difference in this case whether one just rejects the second conjunct in [D] or both. **Strategy 2**, therefore, simply negates the second conjunct (and ignores or discards the first):

[S2]  $\neg \exists x [ x \text{ is me } ]$ .

This exhausts the options. There are logically no other denials of [D] besides [S1] and [S2], and consequently, there are no other ways of denying death.

Less formally, the difference between these two strategies is that the first

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<sup>2</sup> This formalization leaves open whether "is me" is a predicate or numerical identity (=) with a constant "me". Perhaps, a more obvious formalization of the proposition that "I die" seems to be  $\exists x [ x \text{ is me } \wedge x \text{ will cease to be } ]$ , but that leaves open the possibility that there is something else that is *also* me that will not cease to be in case of the predicate interpretation, and thus misses the key point about the proposition that "I die": *i.e.* that nothing that is me survives.

<sup>3</sup> In steps: [1] negation of the first conjunct in [D]:  $\neg \forall x [ x \text{ is me } \rightarrow x \text{ will cease to be } ]$ . [1] is equivalent to [2]  $\exists x \neg [ x \text{ is me } \wedge x \text{ will cease to be } ]$ . The first conjunct in [2] cannot be negated because *only* the first conjunct in [D] is rejected and  $\exists x [ x \text{ is me } ]$  is thus (implicitly) affirmed. Therefore, [2] is equivalent to [S1].

and most common strategy denies the verb in “I die”, while the second denies the subject, “I”. The first asserts that I do not really die, that I somehow “survive” death. The second asserts that there really is no “I” that dies, that I do not really exist anyway. The first strategy is that of the monotheistic religions, but of most other religions as well. The second strategy *seems* to be that of Buddhism (with the exception of *popular* Pure Land Buddhism and derivatives, which opt for the first strategy instead) and has apparent parallels in the thought of a few contemporary Western philosophers, most notably Derek Parfit (1984).<sup>4</sup> Superficially, Mark Johnston’s death-denying argument in *Surviving Death* (2010) may seem to follow neither strategy 1 nor strategy 2, but to be a third strategy that combines elements of both, suggesting that there are further options after all, but this is not the case. Johnston’s argument consists of two steps: the first rejects a fixed and thick “I” that dies, as in strategy 2; the second allows for a reconfiguration of whatever is left of the dying subject into something that does not die, ending up with a variant of strategy 1. Hence, Johnston indeed uses arguments typical of (what seems to be) strategy 2, but does so in the context of a strategy 1 argument.

Johnston’s view will be discussed in section 4. Before that, section 2 briefly discusses and rejects the other variants of strategy 1 and section 3 introduces strategy 2. Buddhism as an apparent variant of strategy 2 and the tenability of [S2] in general are discussed in section 5. The main claim of this paper is that because strategy 1 fails and because there are no, and can be no examples of strategy 2, there is no viable theory that denies death. Section 6 argues that there may be no real, universally psychologically acceptable alternative to denial, however, and therefore, that if denying death is incoherent, this may be a (socially) unavoidable incoherence. The final section 7 changes the focus to why and what this matters.

## 2. Strategy 1: Survival Theories

Theories following strategy 1 assert [S1], or in less formal terms: that there

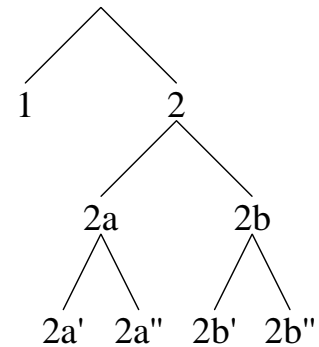
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<sup>4</sup> If reincarnation is understood as involving a soul, then Buddhism would follow strategy 1. However, the Buddhist understanding of reincarnation is purely causal and does not involve any transmigrating substance (although it seems that interpretations differ on this point). Moreover, it can be argued that reincarnation is not an essential element of Buddhism, but merely part of the common sense context within which it developed (*e.g.* Siderits 2007, ch. 2). In any case, reincarnation (if true, of course) is not a “solution” for the fear of death, but a cause of its endless repetition, life after life.

is something that *is* me and that (in some relevant sense) survives after biological death. Such theories can, therefore, be called “survival theories”. What distinguishes different survival theories is the nature of the surviving subject, the *x* in [S1]. The name given to that subject, on the other hand, is mostly irrelevant; it does not matter whether it is called soul, spirit, true self, essence, *ātman*, *ka*, or anything else. In words and diagram, the following shows the options for the nature of the surviving subject:

The surviving subject

- [1] is something material/physical; or
- [2] is *not* something material/physical, but
  - [2a] \*supervenes on something material/physical but does not exist independently thereof, and
    - [2a'] the \*subvenient is the body, or
    - [2a''] the \*subvenient is something else than the body;
  - or
  - [2b] is something immaterial/non-physical and exists independently, and
    - [2b'] there is a material/physical world with material/physical bodies, or
    - [2b''] there is no material/physical world.



Supervenience and its counterpart subvenience are marked \* to note that they should be understood broadly here: as including related notions of ontological dependence. Most contemporary theories on the metaphysics of mind (including functionalism and varieties of property dualism such as emergentism and anomalous monism) postulate a supervenient mind *in this broad sense*. Any extension of such a theory arguing for a surviving mind would, therefore, be an example of [2a'].

The main dividing line between kinds of survival theories is that between physicalism or materialism (broadly understood) and antiphysicalism. Physicalists opt for [1] or one of the two variants of [2a]; antiphysicalists opt for one of the two variants of [2b], that is, for either [2b'] substance dualism or [2b''] idealism. Historically, substance dualism and idealism have been the dominant survival theories. However, idealist and dualist survival theories inherit all the problems of idealism and dualism in general: the first tends to collapse into solipsism and the second cannot explain interaction between the immaterial soul (*etc.*) and the material body.

It should be noted that *if* mind and soul are assumed to be different “things”, soul - body interaction is not necessarily the same as mind - body interaction, and that a substance dualist with regards to the soul can be a materialist with regards to the mind. Nevertheless, there must be some interaction between matter/body and soul if the soul is to reflect somehow (the effects of) the worldly (*i.e.* materially) (mis-) adventures of its associated body, and since that is always (perhaps even necessarily) assumed in dualist survival theories, soul - body dualism suffers from the same interaction problem as mind - body dualism.

Throughout history there have been various attempts to save idealism and substance dualism from solipsism and the interaction problem respectively, but I will make no effort to discuss these. (They can be found in any introductory textbook on the philosophy of mind.) The contemporary consensus among philosophers is that these rescue attempts fail and that idealism and substance dualism are, therefore, untenable. For that reason, repeating all the arguments here (which would require more space than available anyway) seems unnecessary. Instead, I’ll take the shortcut to the conclusion that [2b] fails.

There is one attempt to save substance dualism that deserves some attention, however, not because philosophers consider it less flawed than the others (rather in the contrary), but because it seems to be very common among non-philosophers. The idea depends on a rejection of the material - immaterial dichotomy and the supposition of a third option, which I shall call “quasi-material”. According to “quasi-materialism” we have quasi-material souls (*etc.*), which seems to imply that this option (if it is one) takes an intermediate position between [1] and [2b']. The quasi-material soul does interact with the material world in some way, which solves the interaction problem, but is not something that has properties that can be measured with the tools and instruments of (current) physics. However, regardless of the latter limitation, *if* there is such a quasi-material soul that interacts with the material world, then there must be occasions, circumstances, or experiments in which either that interaction or the soul itself can be observed (or abducted at least). *If* there is a quasi-material soul, there must be some kind of empirical evidence for its existence. There is none.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of “quasi-materiality” is entirely mysterious and explanatory redundant. (How does one even make sense of the notion of

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to popular belief, hallucinations of an oxygen-deprived brain are not visions of the afterlife. (See, for example, Mobbs & Watt 2011, or the first part of chapter 2 of Johnston 2010.)

“quasi-materiality” without collapsing quasi-materialism either into materialism or substance-dualism?) That this doesn’t automatically disqualify the idea (among non-philosophers) is because its appeal does not depend on explanatory power, but on “life-saving” power: on the promise of an afterlife, of surviving death as one’s immortal soul. That substance dualism (and to a lesser extent also idealism) has been dominant within philosophy for so long despite its (obvious) problems, and that there have been so many attempts to save it, is (at least) partly for the same reason. Philosophers are not immune for the psychological need of a fear-repressing belief in survival either. (And unfortunately, this need can make rational discussion of the topic very difficult.)

If [2b] fails and we cannot make sense of an intermediate between [1] and [2b'], then there is no viable (or remotely plausible, at least) theory of an immaterial or quasi-material “soul”, which leaves physicalism/materialism – that is, [1] and [2a] – as the only alternative.

In [1] the surviving subject is the body or a part thereof; in [2a'] it \*supervenies thereon and has, therefore, no independent existence. Consequently, the difference between [1] and [2a'] is irrelevant for survival: in both, my survival depends on the survival of my body or some part thereof (such as the brain). Nevertheless, thought experiments about body swapping versus mind swapping reveal that we identify with our minds rather than our bodies, which indicates that [1] is considerably less plausible than [2a']. In either case, bodily survival theories, such as Christian materialism (I’m not aware of anything similar in other religions), supposing God as “corpse snatcher” or something similar, are exceedingly absurd, and seem more desperate attempts at fear-repressing self-delusion even than the belief in an immortal soul. Mark Johnston does an excellent job at taking these theories seriously and showing them to be incoherent in the first chapter of *Surviving Death* (2010).

Table 1 lists the options for strategy 1 (the survival theory) and summarizes their main problems. In all four cases discussed above, these problems (alone, or in combination with further problems not mentioned here) are fatal, I think. There is, however, one further option that has not been discussed yet: [2a'']. The surviving subject could be some kind of (epi-) phenomenon that supervenes, or depends for its existence on some surviving material being(s) *other than the body*. Mark Johnston (2010) argues for something like this, but his theory depends on arguments that are more typical for what seems to be strategy 2. For that reason, Johnston’s theory, and other options for supervening survivors (*i.e.*

2a"), will be discussed (in section 4) after a brief introduction into "I" denial.

**Table 1:** *Variants of strategy 1 and their problems*

<i>survival theory</i>	<i>surviving subject (x in S1)</i>	<i>problem(s)</i>
[2b'']: idealism	immaterial soul ( <i>etc.</i> )	solipsism
[2b']: substance dualism	immaterial soul ( <i>etc.</i> )	mind/soul - body interaction
between [1] and [2b']: "quasi-materialism"	quasi-material soul ( <i>etc.</i> )	obscurity and lack of evidence
[1] or [2a']: physicalism / materialism	body (or something *supervening thereon)	incoherence (Johnston 2010, ch. 1)
[2a'']		see section 4

### 3. Strategy 2: Denying the "I"

Strategy 2 denies the dying subject, it claims that – in some relevant sense – there is no "I" dying. Or, more formally, it rejects the second conjunct in [D] after which the first is discarded because it fails to refer to anything and is, therefore, irrelevant.

The standard argument for the idea that there is no self/person/"I" (in some relevant sense) is familiar from Hume (1739) or early Buddhist literature:<sup>6</sup> there is no single part or element of a self ("I") or person that must remain the same for that self/person to count as the same person. Therefore, there is no self, or selves are just bundles of experiences, or mere "convenient designators", conventions, phenomena, and so forth. Of course, there are important differences between variants of this basic idea, but it is what they have in common what matters here: the self/person/"I"/dying subject is in some relevant sense not (sufficiently) real. What follows from this differs between Buddhism and Mark Johnston, for example, but before discussing implications, we need some further clarification of the basic idea.

Denying the "I" starts with the observation that there is no single part or element of me that has remained the same (and will remain the same) throughout my life history. In other words, there is nothing, no (single) "thing"

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *The Questions of King Milinda (Milinda Panha; approx. 100 BCE)*.



that defines and identifies me, no essential me. This observation, however, is not entirely uncontroversial, but its rejection would require the identification of some plausible self-essence, and there doesn't seem to be a candidate. What could my (self-) defining essence be? Not my immaterial soul (*etc.*), because – as we have seen in the previous section – I don't have one, and not anything material either, because indeed, there is no material part of me that remained the same (and/or will remain the same) throughout my life. Some structural and genetic properties, such as my genetic code or my birth date, will remain the same throughout my life, on the other hand; but I would share my genes with my identical twin if I had one, and those, therefore, cannot essentially identify me; and the idea that I am my birth date is obviously absurd. Then what's left? “Nothing,” is the answer to that question, confirming Hume's or the Buddha's observation. I have no essence, I am merely a bundle of experiences (Hume 1739).

However, if selves/persons are mere bundles of experiences, then what ties those bundles together (into the phenomenal/conventional selves, thus forming them); what makes them *bundles* rather than mere random collections? Locke's (1690) answer to that or a similar question was that “nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person” (II.xxvii.23).<sup>7</sup> “Consciousness” here refers to memory: it is memory of past experiences that ties a bundle of experiences together into a self/person. The Buddhist answer is causality: there is a causal series of conscious experiences, each lasting only for a moment, then disappearing, but not before causing a replacement to come into existence.<sup>8</sup> Locke's memory/consciousness theory and the Buddhist causal chain theory can be combined into the idea that it is the causal chain of experiences and memories thereof that ties together the bundle. The best known elaboration of more or less this idea is that by Derek Parfit in (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. According to Parfit, it is “psychological continuity and connectedness” that determines personal identity.

While in Locke's theory, there is an element of the self that remains, memories; in Parfit's theory (and in the Buddhist theory), there is nothing that remains: there is no single memory (or other part) that me-30-years-ago and

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<sup>7</sup> This “answer” was given before Hume suggested his bundle theory. Hence, it was not an “answer” to Hume specifically.

<sup>8</sup> There is a vast literature on the Buddhist theory (or theories) of personal identity (as there is on many other aspects of Buddhist philosophy). For an introduction, see Siderits (2007), chapter 3.

me-now (necessarily) share, but there is a causal chain of intermediate stages, collections of memories and other parts, between me-then and me-now, and it is this causal chain, this psychological continuity and connectedness, that makes me-then and me-now the same person. Still, the fact that there is nothing, no thing (*i.e.* no single element that remained the same) that determines my identity, means that *ultimately* there is no “I”, no self, no person. “Person” is a forensic term according to Locke (II.xxvii.26), a mere “convenient designator” according to Buddhist philosophy. Daniel Dennett (1992) made a similar point when he wrote that a self is “a theorist’s fiction” similar to a center of gravity: it is a useful concept for explanation but does not refer to some kind of (really existing) thing or entity. Rather, selves are narratively constructed: a self is a “center of *narrative* gravity”.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Johnston’s Escape

In Mark Johnston’s *Surviving Death* (2010), the idea of the self as a *center* of narrative gravity is echoed in his understanding of consciousness as “an arena with some person at the phenomenological center” (p. 237) and the person as that what is at the center of the arena. Rather than a *bundle* of thoughts and experiences, the person is (at) the *center of an arena* of thoughts and experiences. Johnston rejects psychological continuity as a necessary personal identity condition, which opens up a new possibility for surviving death, which I shall call “Johnston’s escape”. Johnston’s argument is complex, but can be summarized in the following four steps.

- [J1] There is no external criterion for judging competing personal identity conditions (that is, no neutral criterion outside all positions on the matter), and consequently, an “evenhanded” treatment is necessary; that is, an approach that assumes that each position (each identity condition) is right on its own terms.
- [J2] Because relativism is no option, [J1] can only mean that personal identity is a disposition: we are disposed to construct personal identity in a certain way, and therefore believe that we can remain the same person throughout certain kinds of events, while other kinds of events would result in

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<sup>9</sup> The idea that the self is constructed through narrative (the stories we tell of and to ourselves) has been developed further in Narrative Identity Theory within personality psychology.

personal death.

- [J3] *The radical reversal.* While according to the “naive” view, “future-directed concern” (concern for the well-being (etc.) of some future person) is derived from personal identity, the dispositional view changes this around.<sup>10</sup> It is not the case that I am concerned about future person *x* because he is me (as in the “naive” view), but future person(s) *x* is me because I am (genuinely!) concerned about him/her/them. In other words, personal identity depends on genuine (!) future-directed concern, not the other way around. This is what Johnston calls the “radical reversal”.
- [J4] *Johnston’s escape.* From [J3] follows that with the right disposition, the right future-directed concern, we are immortal. Someone who is (genuinely!) concerned about the future of the whole of mankind would “quite literally, live on in the onward rush of humankind”, and therefore, “the good, that is the *really good*, survive death” (p. 296).

Johnston’s may seem to be an attractive view, but there are problems in several of the steps of the argument supporting it. An obvious problem for [J4] is that one does not need to identify with the whole of mankind to survive – if the rest of the argument is sound – but with anything that is likely to survive: one’s nation, for example, will do just as well, which would lead to the conclusion that some nationalists also survive death.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, if one hopes to conquer the terror of death by putting one’s cards on the whole of mankind, solar death must be as terrifying a prospect as personal death for anyone else. For the argument to work as a fear-repressing denial of death, it needs an identification with something absolutely immortal, and there doesn’t seem to be anything available.

It is unlikely, however, that we’ll even get to [J4]. The personal identity theories (theories on the conditions for personal survival throughout various more or less exotic events) that Johnston discusses in his argument for “evenhanded treatment” – that is, for [J1] – can all be described as psychological continuity *plus* further restrictions (or lacking those). In comparing and evaluating these theories, Johnston takes them as unanalyzable wholes, but all

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<sup>10</sup> “Whereas the naive intuitive view is that the holding of the relation of personal identity independently justifies certain future-oriented dispositions, the radical reversal will have it that, within certain limits, those dispositions make it the case that one or another restriction of identity counts as personal identity for a given community!” (p. 274)

<sup>11</sup> I seem to remember that someone else made this point before, but I have been unable to find a source.

that needs judgment or evaluation is what is different between them, not what they share; and (lacking external judgment criteria) an “evenhanded treatment” is, therefore, needed only for the evaluation of those differences. In other words, if the reasoning in [J2] is accepted, then [J1] and [J2] together lead to the conclusion that those *additional* criteria on top of the shared criterion of psychological continuity are dispositional, but not that *all* identity conditions are dispositional; specifically, the argument does *not* lead to the rejection of the criterion of psychological continuity. However, for [J3] and [J4] to work, Johnston needs complete dispositionality, and consequently, [J4] does not follow.

Furthermore, Johnston’s argument for [J3] also involves the rejection of the psychological continuity criterion, but this argument is flawed. He presents his case by means of the following thought experiment:

Alzheimer’s has begun to set in, but I am told that the effective treatment that will more than restore my memory is more than a year away. By that time I will have lost all the memories that support the moorings of this individual personality. The treatment (...) will restore my *capacity* to remember but not my memories. I can get one with a practical form of life after my recovery, but it will not be this form of life. (...) this individual personality will be lost. (...) Even so, the kind of future-directed concern that goes with personal identity does get engaged here. Anticipating all this, it would be natural for me to now plan around the anticipatable needs of that new individual personality. (pp. 276-7)

Whether this works as an argument for the “radical reversal” and against the psychological continuity criterion depends on whether and why it is “natural” for me to treat this post-Alzheimer-treatment person as a continuant of me, regardless of whether it *is* a continuant of me. If the “radical reversal” is sound, then because of my future-directed concern this future person would be me, while according to the psychological continuity criterion, it would not be me, but assuming either one of the two would be begging the question.

There are (at least) two reasons why this thought experiment fails as an argument for the “radical reversal” (and against the psychological continuity criterion). Firstly, I am in a special position with regards to the interests of the post-Alzheimer-treatment person because of various non-personality-bound

continuities (such as continuities of property and other (legal) rights and duties), and I know this and can anticipate that this post-Alzheimer-treatment person can/will know this as well. This, combined with at least minimal empathy for the post-Alzheimer-treatment person, is sufficient to explain why I would “plan” for the future person (or why it is “natural” to do so).<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the case is not intuitively comprehensible because it asks us to imagine the unimaginable. We can imagine to be somewhere else, sometime else, *maybe* even someone else,<sup>13</sup> but it is fundamentally impossible (perhaps even self-contradictory) to imagine *not* to be. Johnston pumps for intuition in an area where our intuitions can only be wrong. We cannot understand non-being *of this present being* (“this form of life”), and that is exactly what is the case here. Regardless of whether this future being is the same *person* (that is what the argument is supposed to establish), it is not me-now (the present self; “this form of life”) or a psychological continuant thereof. Intuitively, we can only think of this future being as *somehow* continuing at least part of the present self; we do not – are not even able to – imagine the scenario of complete elimination of our present selves. We automatically assume that at least *something* is preserved (because there is no other option; because imagination involves putting our present selves in some other situation), and it is that “something” that we intuitively care for. Of course, this intuition is wrong, there is no psychological continuity in the scenario, but it strengthens empathy with the post-Alzheimer-treatment person and thus reinforces the first reason.

While both these reasons in themselves explain the “naturalness” of “future-directed concern” without assuming (or creating) personal identity, and thus without rejecting the psychological continuity criterion, the two reasons together make it rather difficult to avoid future-directed concern for the post-Alzheimer-treatment person, but that proves or disproves nothing. Johnston’s argument fails.

Johnston’s is the only theory of a surviving supervening or (epi-) phenomenal self/person/“I” that I am aware of, but if there are others, those

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<sup>12</sup> This would imply that – if the second reason would be ignored – a psychopath (or someone with another anti-empathic disorder) would not feel future concern for the post-treatment person, which would be interesting (but difficult) to test.

<sup>13</sup> I doubt this, actually. It seems to me that when someone says to imagine to *be* someone else, what they really imagine is to be themselves in the other’s position. And for the same reason that one cannot imagine not to be, one cannot imagine not to be what one actually is (*i.e.* someone else).

would face some of the same problems. An (epi-) phenomenal self can only survive bodily death if it supervenes, or is existentially dependent on some *other* material being(s) that survive. Aside from the aforementioned science fiction story of copying minds to computers or robots (see section 1), the only option is (re-) identification of the self/person with something that survives. Such (re-) identification, however, would imply psychological discontinuity as there is no thing (other than myself) that I can (re-) identify with *and* that is psychologically continuous with me-now. In other words, the idea of a supervening survivor – that is, option [2a"] in section 2 – requires giving up the personal identity criterion of psychological continuity. That, however, is deeply problematic, as none of the “alternatives” for this criterion work. There are no self-defining essences (see previous section), and certainly none that I (could) share with something I could (re-) identify with;<sup>14</sup> Johnston’s “radical reversal” fails, and therefore, so does the dispositional theory; and the only remaining option would be to deny personal identity over time altogether, but that would preclude survival in any form. We can conclude, therefore, that option [2a"] turns out not be an option at all, and as [2a"] was the last straw for strategy 1, it follows that there is no viable strategy 1 denial of death.

## 5. Does Buddhism Follow Strategy 2?

Unlike Johnston, Buddhism offers no escape,<sup>15</sup> but opts for the more difficult path of denying the “I” (*i.e.* the self or person, the dying subject). Suffering (*dukkha*) originates in attachment to impermanent and/or conventional/phenomenal (*i.e.* not “ultimately” real) “things”, and a full realization thereof (through study/“wisdom” and meditation) dissolves (or alleviates) suffering. By fully realizing that the self/person is merely a “convenient designator” and is not ultimately real, one can overcome attachment and thus fear.

This is, of course, an oversimplification, but for the present purpose it offers a sufficiently accurate sketch of the essential idea, I think. To assess that idea (as a possible example of strategy 2), we need to look into the question: *What do I*

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<sup>14</sup> The impossibility of such re-identification becomes especially apparent if one takes into account that (the relevant kind of) identity is either complete or completely lacking. There is no middle way when it comes to the question “Will it be me?” Either it is (or will be) me, or it isn’t. (See Stokes 2013.) There is nothing available for such absolute, unambiguous, and doubt-free re-identification.

<sup>15</sup> Reincarnation is *not* an escape. See footnote 4.

*fear in fearing death?*

The fear of my death is not a fear of losing some kind of *thing*, it does not imply an attachment or clinging to some self-defining essence – *even if* I would believe that I have such an essence. Rather, the fear of my death is the fear of the termination of my stream of experience, of my psychological continuity and connectedness, of discontinuity. *It is continuity I crave, not essence.*<sup>16</sup> But if I'm not clinging to a self-defining essence anyway, then what does the rejection thereof matter? And why would it matter that what I *am* clinging to, continuity, is classified as “conventional” (or “phenomenal” in Kantian/Western terms)? The answer to the *latter* question is that something merely conventional/phenomenal is inherently impermanent and therefore *will* be lost, and *that* is the source of suffering. In more schematic form:

- [B1] The self is mere convenient designator and not ultimately real. (Or: there is no ultimately real self-defining essence, but selves/persons are phenomenal/conventional.)
- [B2] Clinging to a convenient designator (*etc.*) will lead to suffering. (Because it is impermanent and not ultimately real, and therefore, will be lost.)
- [B3] Clinging to the self will lead to suffering. Therefore, to end (this kind of) suffering, one needs to overcome clinging to the self.<sup>17</sup>

While this is perfectly valid, it does not answer the question why the rejection of a self-defining essence would matter. What the argument claims, in short, is that to stop craving for continuity eliminates the fear for discontinuity, but that is obvious – it is just a more sophisticated (or more obscure?) way of recommending to give up the fear of death by not caring too much about one's own life.<sup>18</sup> Although that may be sound therapeutic advise (or not – I'll leave

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<sup>16</sup> Even if I would crave essence, I would only do so because that essence might guarantee continuity. In other words, essence would be mere means to an end, and that end is continuity.

<sup>17</sup> Meditational practice is an essential component hereof. In meditation – at least the here relevant kind thereof – the practitioner observes oneself more or less like a third person, leading ultimately to a lessening or even dissolution of the attachment to oneself. For a useful explanation of the role and nature of meditation, see Lutz, Dunne, & Davidson (2007).

<sup>18</sup> Although this is not a necessary part of the main argument, there seems to be a common assumption that the status reduction (from ultimately real to mere phenomenon, *etc.*) of the self/person matters. If I understand this secondary argument correctly, it is an enthymeme in which the second premise is hidden: [1] The self is mere convenient designator and not ultimately real. [2] Whatever is mere convenient designator and not ultimately real is not worth clinging to. [3] The self is not worth clinging to. This is obviously valid, but has a second (hidden) premise that is quite implausible. Rather,

that aside), the question remains how denying the “I” matters therein. It seems to me that it doesn’t, or not in any *relevant* sense, at least: *the “I” denied is not the “I” clung to*. But if that is right, then Buddhism turns out not to advocate strategy 2 at all.

Remember that strategy 2 claims that [S2]:  $\neg \exists x [x \text{ is me}]$ . Buddhism, however, has a more specific claim:  $\neg \exists x [x \text{ is ultimately real} \wedge x \text{ is me}]$ . That is, it denies the existence of the self/person at some level of reality, but not at another:  $\exists x [x \text{ is conventionally real} \wedge x \text{ is me}]$ . And that conventionally real self will cease to be:

[DB]  $\forall x [x \text{ is me} \rightarrow (x \text{ is conventionally real} \wedge x \text{ will cease to be})] \wedge \exists x [x \text{ is me}]$ ,<sup>19</sup>

but [DB] is a *variant* of [D], not its negation. Consequently, Buddhism does not deny death, it merely offers therapy (instead of a painkiller).

If what seemed to be the most likely candidate for an example of strategy 2 turns out not to advocate strategy 2 at all, one may wonder whether it is even possible to coherently assert [S2]. Descartes’s famous claim that “I think, therefore I am” seems to contradict [S2], but the *cogito* has been subjected to criticism in recent decades. The key to the issue is in the quantifiers in [D] and its two negations [S1] and [S2]. No domain was specified, but any quantifier – by definition – has a domain. The question, therefore, that needs an answer, is: What is the domain of the quantifiers in [D] and its negations?

No restrictions are assumed or suggested in the natural language sentences that [D] is a formalization of. Rather, the domain must include *everything* that could be a possible candidate for the second conjunct in [D]: *x is me*. In other words, if I (specifically, the “I” that I am attached to) could possibly be a useful fiction (Dennett) or a convenient designator (Buddhism) or something else not considered “real” in a restrictive, materialist sense, then those options *must* be in the domain of the quantifiers as well. Since no restriction is implied, it seems

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I’m inclined to say that everything that is worth clinging to (*i.e.* everything of value) is phenomenal/conventional. Love, happiness, beauty, and so forth are not ultimately real, but “mere” phenomena. As mentioned, however, the value/worth of phenomena plays no role in the main argument.

<sup>19</sup> [DB] results from eliminating the redundancies in the longer formula  $\forall x [x \text{ is me} \rightarrow (\neg (x \text{ is ultimately real}) \wedge x \text{ will cease to be})] \wedge \exists x [x \text{ is me} \wedge x \text{ is conventionally real}]$ , which follows from the above considerations. The predicates “is conventionally real” and “is ultimately real” are mutually exclusive.



that the quantifiers in [D] must be absolutely unrestricted, but what “absolute unrestriction” means and whether this is possible is a controversial topic within meta-ontology and philosophy of logic. Root of the controversy is the fact that because of Russell’s paradox, the notion of an absolutely universal set is incoherent. The quantifiers in [D] do not need to range over absolutely everything in that sense, however, just over everything that possibly can be quantified over.

The domain of a restricted quantifier is a subset of that of a relatively “unrestricted” quantifier. Conversely, if “expansion” is the opposite of restriction, then the domain of an expanded quantifier is a superset of that of some restricted quantifier. “Absolutely unrestricted” then, can be coherently understood to mean “maximally expanded”: the domain of an absolutely unrestricted / maximally expanded quantifier is the superset of all other domains, the set of all things that can be quantified over.<sup>20</sup> That (as mentioned) is the intended domain of [D]. And by implication, there is no incoherency in the implicit domains of [D] and its negations.

Understanding the quantifiers in this sense means that there is no argument against the *cogito*. Any such argument depends on a restriction of the quantifier, but lacking restriction, the *cogito* is undeniable: I think, therefore I am, *at least in some sense* (as a convenient designator for the “arena” of the thinking that is going on, for example). It is for the same reason that [S2] cannot be coherently asserted. [S2] denies that there is a self/person/“me” *in any (relevant) sense*, but that is nonsense: even if the self is an illusion, it exists *as an illusion* and thus in *some* sense (and if it is that illusory self that I am attached to, then it exists in a *relevant* sense). In other words, it is not just the case that Buddhism does not exemplify strategy 2, *there is no strategy 2* (or at least no coherent strategy 2). What *seemed* to be strategy 2 then, is not strictly speaking a denial of the “I” or self either, but merely a denial of the exalted status thereof. Rather than denying the self, it desecrates or dissolves it.

## 6. An Unavoidable Incoherence

Sections 2 and 4 rejected strategy 1, section 5 refuted strategy 2, and there is

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<sup>20</sup> See Rayo & Uzquiano (eds.) (2006) for a collection of papers on the possibility of absolute unrestriction. My suggestion of maximally expanded quantifiers is partly based on Kit Fine’s paper in that book and further developed in Brons (2013).

nothing left: with [S1] and [S2] off the table, there is no coherent negation of [D]. The denial of death is incoherent.<sup>21</sup> Denial, however, is not the only way of coping with death, as the discussion of Buddhism illustrated, and because “self-dissolution therapy” (as an alternative to denial as “painkiller” or “anxiolytic”) is inseparable from what seemed to be strategy 2, at least some attention needs to be paid to that option. However, I do not consider myself competent to judge the effectiveness of Buddhism as therapy, nor do I *want* to, but there is a closely related suggestion that I want to comment on: Derek Parfit’s.

Like Buddhism, Parfit (1984) rejects self-defining essences (see section 3), but the therapeutic effect of the realization thereof is considerably more modest than overcoming suffering. He writes that he finds the dissolution of the self “liberating, and consoling” (p. 281), and that:

My life seemed like a glass tunnel (...). When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. (p. 281)

Underlying Parfit’s consoling dispersal of concern is (of course) not the strict (and incoherent) self-denial of [S2], but the aforementioned status reduction of the self: self-desecration or self-dissolution. This idea and its fallout can be summarized as follows:

- [T1] There are no self-defining essences.
- [T2] (*from T1*) Personal identity through time depends on psychological continuity and connectedness.
- [T3] (*from T2*) The boundary between me and you is not much sharper or more fundamental than that between me-now and me-then.
- [T4] Realizing [T3] reduces the (subjective, experienced) distance between me and you, between self and others.

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<sup>21</sup> “Incoherence” may *seem* too strong, but if [S2] is incoherent (as argued in section 5) and [S1] is incoherent with everything we know (*i.e.* externally incoherent), then denying [D] is incoherent indeed.

[T1] and [T2] were discussed in section 3, [T3] does seem to follow from [T2] (although this might need some additional support), and [T4] seems plausible as well. What I fail so see, however, is how [T4] is “liberating” or “consoling”. If there no longer is a fundamental difference between me and you, then neither is there a fundamental difference between my fear, my suffering, and yours. Rather than to console or comfort, this multiplies the fear and suffering: no longer do I just fear my death, my pain, my suffering, *but yours too*. Of course, this may still work in repressing one’s fear of death in the same way that hitting one’s finger with a hammer would be an effective way to forget about a tooth pain; or perhaps the experience of suffering (*etc.*) becomes so intolerable, so overwhelming that one starts to desire one’s own death rather than fear it; but those are hardly the kind of therapeutic effects a patient would hope for.

There are then, at least two plausible “therapeutic” scenario’s associated with the self-dissolution thesis summarized in [T1] to [T4]; that is, two varieties of what would be [T5]: Parfit’s consoling suffering/fear [TC] scenario, and my multiplying suffering/fear [TM] scenario.

[TC] Weakening the boundary between self and others makes my death less subjectively important when others live.

[TM] Weakening the boundary between self and others also weakens the subjective (experienced) boundary between my and others’ suffering.

Most likely this does not exhaust the options, and perhaps, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive either. Furthermore, both [TC] and [TM] are based on anecdotal “evidence” only – [TC] more or less describes Parfit’s experience, while [TM] is closer to mine<sup>22</sup> – and are, therefore, probably just

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<sup>22</sup> James Baillie (2013) recently tried to explain the cognitive/epistemic difference between the abstract knowledge that one will eventually die like everyone else and a full realization of that fact. The full realization, which he calls the “terror of death”, was for him a shocking (even traumatizing) and life-changing experience. The terror of death (in that sense) is nothing like the “normal” fear of death, and neither is it anything like the adrenaline rush one feels when doing something stupid enough to almost die. It is an intense and paralyzing sense of panic. It hurts. It screams. It leaves no room for positive reinterpretation or romantic glorification. Like Baillie, I have experienced some form of the “terror of death” (and the description of the experience in the last sentences is mine, not his). My experience is not completely identical to Baillie’s, however. Perhaps, the most significant difference in the present context is that I do not just experience the terror of *my* death, but sometimes that of others as well. What I felt when I fully realized the absolute inescapability of my death, I feel again – especially when caught off-guard – in quite similar intensity every time I read, hear, or see true stories about people facing impending and inescapable death. Undoubtedly, what I feel is nothing

two points on a field or spectrum of possible outcomes of [T4].

Although not formally death-denying, some of these possible outcomes may be very similar effectively. Particularly, it seems to me that [TC] is a watered-down version of strategy 1. [TC] makes sense only if one is still primarily concerned with *one's own* death, if (the lives of) others are mere *means* to shift the focus away from one's own death to the promise of continuing life, thus enabling neglect of one's own death, drugging fear back into slumber. [TC] depends on the substitution of neglect for denial, which may be clearly distinct logically but which are far less different psychologically; or even on an implicit and nebulous idea of *some* kind of survival as/in the lives of others (*i.e.* strategy 1; [TC] is rather similar to Johnston's version of strategy 1 in this respect; see section 4).

More important than the consistency of [TC], however, is the feasibility of any kind of "self-dissolution therapy" as an alternative to denying death. Self-dissolution itself conflicts with a psychological need of self-affirmation and protection of self-integrity and identity (*e.g.* Sherman & Cohen 2006). According to Ernest Becker (1973) and Terror Management Theory, which is partly based on his work, death denial and this psychological need of self-affirmation are even connected. "Self-dissolution therapy" then, would not only have to suppress *one* psychological need, death denial, but would have to do so by suppressing another, self-affirmation, as well. Moreover, the results of such therapy may not seem obviously attractive to everyone. Regardless of the desirability of [TM] from a third-person point of view, it is not unlikely that for many people it is not an acceptable alternative to the consoling effects of denial, and thus not an alternative at all. But if this is the case, then the apparently *only* alternative for denying death is not (universally) a *real* alternative. It asks too much for too little; it is too difficult (requiring the suppression of two psychological needs rather than just one), and does not have certain and obviously desirable results. And lacking a (real) alternative, the denial of death – at least as a social phenomenon – is unavoidable.<sup>23</sup>

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compared to the panic they felt, but it hurts and screams nevertheless. The "hammer vs. tooth pain" variant of [TM], is not an imaginary scenario: it describes my experience. There is nothing "liberating" or "consoling" about it. (But I never asked to be consoled anyway.)

<sup>23</sup> Of course, this does not deny the possibility in individual cases, but merely that "therapy" is not an alternative on a *social* scale. It is most likely also for this reason that the main lay forms of Buddhism in East Asia, variants of popular Pure Land Buddhism, have diverted from the Buddhist self-dissolution path to a version of strategy 1: the promise of an afterlife in the "Pure Land".

## 7. Epilogue: What/Why Does It Matter?

Western philosophy started more than two millennia ago with theoretical reflections on relatively practical concerns (and arguably, the same is true for Indian and Chinese philosophy). For Plato, for example, those were ethical concerns: How to live well? The increase of specialization has made it increasingly uncommon to return from deeper, more fundamental, and more technical questions to what once motivated them, especially in analytic philosophy. This is an understandable, but also somewhat unfortunate development as one may wonder what justifies debating philosophical problems that have no (direct *or* indirect) relevance for what matters to people whatsoever.

My argument in this paper probably matters in different ways (or at least, I think so), but what I am most concerned about is ethics and social philosophy. I do not (necessarily) want to deny people their “painkiller”, but I am worried about the “side effects”. Some of these side effects are obvious or have been discussed before. Becker (1973), for example, pointed out that theories of death denial compete. If my control over my fear of death depends on certain beliefs, then any beliefs that contradict those are a direct threat to that control. If I am a Christian, then the mere existence of a Muslim is a threat to my coping with the fear of death, and *vice versa*. And since I (psychologically) *need* to control that fear, the mere existence of that Muslim is a threat to me.

An obvious moral implication of the untenability of death denial is that the promise of an afterlife (*i.e.* strategy 1) the quality of which is dependent on one’s actions in this life is immoral as it requests people to “sacrifice” their *only* life for a reward that does not exist.<sup>24</sup> Such a promise of an afterlife is “ideology” in the Marxian sense of that term: it promotes the interest of the ruling class by promising the masses a better afterlife if they meekly accept their lot and follow the rules (that are set by that ruling class in its own interest).<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, equally obvious is that denying death devalues life: if death is not such a “big thing” because either one does not really die (strategy 1) or one does not really exist anyway (strategy 2), then ending a life is a rather minor incident. On the other

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<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, there is the ancient worry that if death “treats” the good and the evil equally, this would undermine all morality.

<sup>25</sup> Extending this point, if all suffering is of equal importance, then all ideologies that request some to “sacrifice” their life, their happiness for the sake of others are (equally?) immoral. This applies especially to Utopian ideologies that promise the good in the more or less distant future (or “the long run”) such as socialism and mainstream economics.

hand, if death is undeniable and absolute, so is the value of life.

Arguments like these may seem to suggest that the denial of death is immoral, and therefore, that (death-denying) religion is immoral, but that is too easy. If cruelty is always immoral, then (intentionally) taking away someone's "painkiller" without offering an acceptable alternative is immoral as well (and note that it was argued in section 6 that "self-dissolution therapy" may not be an acceptable alternative). Hence, even if (death-denying) religion is morally wrong, so is aggressive atheism. Furthermore, it is hard to see anything morally wrong in the actions of a priest (or imam, shaman, *etc.*) who spends great effort consoling those in need, and who does little to spread or enforce some life-devaluing or sacrifice-requiring set of rules.<sup>26</sup> The real problem then, is not so much in determining and substantiating the various moral implications of the incoherence (and unavailability) of the denial of death, but in figuring out the (or a) right balance. I have no clue how to do that. Yet, I can hardly think of a more important and more urgent problem for philosophy.

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<sup>26</sup> In some relatively secularized countries such as the Netherlands and Japan, there is a substantial number of (respectively, Christian and Buddhist) priests who do exactly this. Moreover, there is considerable empirical support for the thesis that the corresponding form of religious experience (*i.e.* personal more than institutional or ideological) is correlated with low psychological distress and with mental health in general (*e.g.* Hackney & Sanders 2003).

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