

***BUDDHISM, DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY AND  
THE ETHICS OF SHARED POSITIONS***

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Abstract. Eastern-inspired concepts of mindfulness, compassion, and acceptance have become widely recognized in mainstream psychological research, especially within applied fields such as clinical and counseling psychology. Within this context it is reasonable to question whether Eastern ideas can also inform dialogical self theory. The question is apposite given that dialogical self theory takes as its prerogative the ‘bridging’ of distinct, even opposing, theoretical approaches and research traditions into a single framework. Our paper examines what is at stake in such attempts through a study of Buddhist understandings of mind and consciousness. We argue that Buddhist principles are grounded in a unique, ethical epistemology contradistinctive from Western traditions and this makes a bridging of dialogical and Buddhist approaches unlikely in the first instance. Attempts to do so, we argue, risk compromising the meanings of Buddhist concepts. Does this preclude the possibilities for dialogue between Buddhism and dialogical self theory? We do not think so. Rather, we suggest that Buddhism can be drawn upon to study the assumptions of dialogical theory, and we exemplify this through a comparative analysis of the dialogical self’s moral program. Our study reveals how dialogical self theory retains a uniquely Western ethics that, despite being explicitly open to alterity, remains at risk of imposing itself onto alternative cultural positions. To genuinely engage Buddhism in dialogue, we conclude, is not a matter of translating Buddhist ideas onto the dialogical platform but to allow the Buddhist position to disturb the certitudes of the dialogical model.

Keywords: DST, Buddhism, ethics, self

“...the psychological study of mysticism seems to be mostly impressionistic and in an even more unsatisfactory state than its physiological study....The psychological studies mainly reveal the limitations of present-day psychology” (p. 118).

Frits Staal (1975)

“The great benefit of science is that it can contribute tremendously to the alleviation of suffering at the physical level, but it is only through the cultivation of the qualities of the human heart and the transformation of our attitudes that we can begin to address and overcome our mental suffering” (p. 4)

Dalai Lama (2005)

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For centuries, Eastern philosophies of reality, mind, and life have fascinated Western scholars who have drawn upon them in diverse ways. In psychology, interest in Eastern traditions has grown since the 1970s and has become a major theme in the field.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, mindfulness therapies, the neuroscience of meditation, and East-West cross-cultural comparisons are familiar practices, demonstrative of the various ways Eastern notions have made their way into the psychological discipline.

It is in light of these developments that our discussion begins with a quote from renowned mysticism scholar, Frits Staal (1975). His early assessment of the psychology of mysticism provides a more general word of caution against simplistic or premature appropriations of Eastern concepts and practices to the psychological field. All too often, Western scholars adopt Eastern ideas by pulling them out of their cultural settings, divesting them of their rich, symbolic contexts so as to make them meaningful for Western frameworks. In such movements, conceptions of mindfulness, loving-kindness, and the like become absolute terms or operationally defined concepts ready to be assessed and interpreted according to the standards of psychological science.

Yet, speaking from a different perspective, the Dalai Lama strongly supports the scientific study of Buddhist principles, and over the years he has collaborated extensively with Western scholars at international meetings, developing research programs and institutes, as well as writing extensively to promote dialogue between Buddhism and modern science. Connecting science and Buddhism with the same goal—the pursuit of truth via “means of critical reflection”—the Dalai Lama (2005) maintains that, “if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims” (p. 2-3).

This paper explores what is at stake when we seek to develop Western theories with Eastern ideas, as we examine the possibility of elaborating Dialogical Self Theory (DST) with Buddhist understandings of the self. Our question is pertinent for the dialogical self because already this theory takes as its prerogative to ‘bridge’ distinct,

psychological perspectives to study the everyday lives of “illegal” migrants in Canada and the United States. Henderikus J. Stam is a Professor in both the Theory and Clinical programs at the University of Calgary. He is founding and current editor of *Theory & Psychology* and the Past-President of the Society for the History of Psychology (Division 26 of the American Psychological Association). His research has focused on the foundational problems of psychology and the 20th century history of the discipline. Correspondence concerning this paper can be addressed to either author: Basia D. Ellis (bdellis@uchicago.edu) or Henderikus J. Stam (stam@ucalgary.ca)

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<sup>1</sup> This literature is so extensive that we will not list the vast number of books published on these topics. We note that these books can range from the relationship between Eastern forms of thought and psychoanalysis, particularly Jungian psychoanalysis (e.g., Judith, 2004) to the relationship between Eastern thought and broadly conceived psychological questions (e.g., Paranjpe, 1998).

even opposing, theoretical approaches and research traditions into a single framework. As Hermans and Gieser (2012) explain, DST is meant to provide an open platform for ‘unexpected meetings.’ For instance,

social-psychological experimental research or personality correlates find their place in the same framework as explorations into transcendental awareness. Or, psychotherapeutic traditions in the West are presented, and theoretically linked, with psychotherapeutic practices emerging in the East. Or, contributions about acculturation problems are placed side by side with an analysis of consumer behaviour, as phenomena with conceptual linkages at a deeper theoretical level. (p. 1)

As a whole DST seeks to bring together different positions not by merging them into a single, unified account but by allowing them to inform one another in dialogical relations. The self’s very structure is made up of a ‘multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions’ that engage in an incessantly changing but continual process of exchange—agreeing and disagreeing, questioning and answering—that seeks to produce new meanings and innovations. Thus the ongoing aim is not to disregard but to actively engage alternative points of view so that they may contribute to the self’s development.

Importantly, with ‘respect for alterity’ inscribed into its very structure, the dialogical self is posed as a particular kind of moral program. The ultimate purpose of the self is to bring diverse perspectives into respectful and innovative dialogues. Hence the mixture of ‘meta-positions,’ ‘third positions,’ and ‘coalitions of positions,’ that overview, merge, and reconfigure the self’s more basic positions into new kinds relations (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Indeed, this special issue is motivated by similar aims: contributors were asked to consider how Eastern philosophies could help illuminate and inform DST.

While we intend to develop the dialogical approach by drawing upon Buddhist psychological principles, our study opens up the question of the moral framework underlying DST. Specifically, without in any way seeking to undermine the merits of a dialogical approach, we draw upon the Buddhist example to scrutinize what is at stake when researchers attempt to ‘bridge’ Eastern perspectives within a dialogical platform, and subsequently, we discuss how comparative analyses ought to be undertaken if they are to avoid undermining Eastern philosophical premises.

Our paper begins with a philosophical discussion of Theravāda Buddhism, which in our view offers rich and unique insights relevant for rethinking the dynamics of selfhood. Our analyses reveal how Buddhist conceptions of mind and existence are premised upon a particular onto-ethical theory that is strikingly different from most Western accounts, and this makes it difficult to incorporate Buddhist ideas into a dialogical framework without severely compromising Buddhist meanings. For this

reason, we argue against the urge to ‘bridge’ Buddhism with DST and instead suggest that Buddhism can be *drawn upon* to study key assumptions of the dialogical theory.

We exemplify the value of this approach by scrutinizing the universality of the dialogical self’s moral program. Specifically, employing a Buddhist lens, we expose how DST retains a uniquely Western ethics that, despite being explicitly open to alterity, remains at risk of imposing itself onto alternative cultural positions. To genuinely engage Buddhism in dialogue, we conclude, is not a matter of translating Buddhist ideas onto the dialogical platform but to allow the Buddhist position to destabilize the dialogical account.

### **Introducing Buddhist psychology**

From the outset it should be noted that there is no such thing as a ‘Buddhist psychology’ that can be examined in separation from Buddhist ontology, epistemology, or ethics. Nevertheless, scholars have often employed the term ‘Buddhist psychology’ to refer to Buddhist analyses of self, mind, motivation, emotion, dreams, social virtues, and the like, as these topics overlap with those basic in Western psychological science. Further, Buddhism comprises a diversity of doctrines—each of which may comprise a unique ‘Buddhist psychology’—and therefore it is important to examine one doctrine at a time. Our paper relies on research focused on Pāli scriptures written in India between the sixth and third centuries B.C.E., which also come closest to the actual time of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama Sakyamuni.<sup>2</sup> Here we refer to the *sutta pikka*, which comprises the main teachings of the Buddha, and which, together with the *vināya* (disciplinary codes for monks), and the *abhidhamma* (doctrinal exegeses written by later systemizers) make up the *Tipitaka*, or core scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism. We rely on this literature because it introduces basic ideas about existence and reality that are relevant for all Buddhist traditions.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The context and aims of the Buddha*

The Buddha developed his philosophy as an alternative to a number of conflicting metaphysical accounts prominent in India during his time. He was especially critical of the substantialist metaphysics that dominated the philosophical scene, as well as the related Upanisadic conception of a permanent, eternal soul (Ātman).<sup>4</sup> Seeking an

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we draw on English translations of Eastern texts, most of which are deliberately organized to address psychological questions.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tipitaka* has been likened to the “Old Testament,” which is then compared to the “New Testament” represented by the Mahayana school (Olendzki, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Widespread belief in Ātman and its lawful connection with a substantive, ordered universe (Brahman) provided the basis for a rigid caste system, which the Buddha strongly opposed. Materialist metaphysics were equally dissatisfying however, as these philosophies reduced the soul to impermanent series of impersonal and material substances, elements, aggregates, etc., which, appearing as discrete moments and dissolving after death, could not explain the continuity of the self within and across lifetimes. (Olendzki, 2003)

alternative, the Buddha studied existence by means of introspective observation, which, in a manner not unlike modern phenomenology, involved suspending all substantive presuppositions about persons and things in order to examine more primal onto-existential processes that made such distinctions possible. His insights cumulated in a philosophy of ‘dependent origination’ (*paticcasamuppāda*), which gives priority neither to matter or mind, self or other, materiality or immateriality. Instead, these processes are seen to co-constitute one another, arising interdependently in experience. From this view the self is both determined by dynamic and discontinuous material processes as well as capable of free will and continuity despite change (Kalupahana, 1987).

*Dependent origination*

Broadly speaking, dependent origination refers to the way the experiential world unfolds through diverse yet interrelated systems of psychophysical processes. Here we overview the ‘six psychophysical processes’ (or eighteen elements), after which we engage in a more detailed discussion of the ‘five aggregates’ that produce the psychophysical personality.<sup>5</sup> Our discussion intends to reveal the extent to which Buddhist conceptions of reality and mind are premised upon a particular onto-ethical theory, which then implies that Buddhist concepts would lose their meanings if divorced from this original context.

*Six psychophysical processes (or the eighteen ‘elements’)*

The Buddha maintained that the world of experience achieved unique forms through one or another of six psychophysical sense systems: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Each of these constitutes a system made up of a sense organ (e.g., eye), sense object (e.g., form) and consciousness, which, in combination with the first two, produces various types of ‘contact,’ or subjective experiences of ‘knowing’ the world (e.g., knowing sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, and concepts). Among these systems, only the mind is ascribed a dual function wherein it perceives not only its own sense objects (i.e., concepts), but also the objects of experience produced by the other senses. Specifically, the mind ‘brings back’ reflections of the latter into consciousness, and in this produces stable impressions of reality. These impressions are adaptive insofar as they simplify and give meaning to what is otherwise a complex, continuously changing world. However, as simplifications, they also generate false divisions between selves, other persons, and things in the world. In actuality, there is neither a stable self nor an objective world, only psychophysical processes that produce *delusions* of these. (Kalupahana, 1987)

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<sup>5</sup> While the two psychophysical systems can be related in different ways depending on the point of emphasis, we discuss the first to show how reality is impermanent in the Buddha’s view, whereas the second explains how within this impermanence the sense of a substantial subject arises nonetheless.

Delusions in Buddhism constitute more than a philosophical or cognitive error, however. “In Tibetan,” explains the Dalai Lama (2005), “the term for what is considered to be of the greatest significance in determining the ethical value of a given action is the individual’s *kun long*.” The participle *kun* translates literally as ‘thoroughly’ or ‘from the depths,’ whereas *long* is understood as an act causing something to arise, awaken, or stand up. Taken together, *kun long* is translated as “what drives or inspires our actions,” both voluntary and involuntary. Further, *kun long* “denotes the individual’s overall state of heart and mind. When this is wholesome, it follows that our actions themselves will be (ethically) wholesome” (p. 31).

According to the Buddha, human suffering exists because our natural propensity—or *kun long*—is unwholesome. Delusion, greed, and hatred comprise the three basic unwholesome roots, which together motivate both attachments and aversions to selves and objects that in actuality are not real. To eliminate suffering and achieve happiness, one must learn to practice opposing, wholesome desires and actions. As we now show in more detail, the entire psychophysical system operates and is analyzed on the basis of the ethical quality of its basic motivations, which is why we argue that Buddhist psychology relies on a unique onto-ethical theory.

#### *The five aggregates*

The five aggregates encompass the material and immaterial processes of the *psychophysical personality* or *complex (nāma-rūpa)*.<sup>6</sup> Of these *Rūpa* comprises the sole material aggregate, referring literally to ‘material form.’ However, in the framework of dependent arising, material objects are not apprehended as substances but as ‘the way things affect us’ (e.g., as roughness rather than ‘earth’). Hence *rūpa* refers to how conscious life necessarily involves a physical dimension.

*Vedanā* refers to feeling or sensation, which can be either pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*), or neutral (*adukkhamasukha*). Every moment of conscious life has an affective tone that contributes to the development of the psychophysical personality. Most importantly, feelings excite basic motivations (e.g., delusion, greed, and hatred), propelling through ‘thirsts for’ various sense objects, which, over time become patterned, develop into unique propensities, and turn into tendencies that generate cyclical conflicts, discontent, and anxieties over deluded selves and objects<sup>7</sup>. Such, at least, is the *original* state of the psychophysical complex, which, without refinement, perpetuates the suffering human condition.

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<sup>7</sup> Pleasant feelings tend to excite greed, painful feelings tend to excite hatred, whereas neutral feelings perpetuate a tendency toward disinterestedness. Greed (*lobha*) then engenders ‘approach desires’; hatred and resentment (*dosa*) engender avoidance desires; and delusion (*moha*) leads to confusion in the mind. (De Silva, 2000)

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Learned responses can be unlearned however, and there are more than three basic motivations. Whereas three unwholesome roots—greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*)—generate unrest and conflict by channelling feelings toward insatiable constructions, three opposing, wholesome motivations need to be cultivated to alleviate human suffering: charity (*alobha*), compassionate love (*adosa*) and wisdom (*amoha*). Actions generated from these roots bring happiness to the individual and allow for harmonious living with others. (De Silva, 2000)

A third aggregate, *saññā*, refers to perception and more accurately, the process of perceiving. Working interdependently with all other functions, perceptions are conditioned by feelings, other non-sensory, conceptual, and imaginative concepts, as well as dispositions. Here again our perceptions can be grounded in wholesome or unwholesome *kun long*, and given our propensity toward delusion, only a trained perceiver who acts on the basis of wholesome motivations views the world ‘as it actually is’ (De Silva, 2000).

Arguably the most ethically significant of the five aggregates is *sankhārā*, which refers to the ‘conative dispositions’ that configure all the aggregates—including the dispositions themselves—into individual forms (Olendzki, 2003). *Sankhārā* may refer to individualized habits that strengthen over time and propel each of us toward particular objects of sense (De Silva, 2000). Importantly, while such habits are often outside our conscious control, they need neither be automatic nor guided by delusion; *sankhārā* also involves ‘motivated and purposeful activity,’ which also has moral consequences” (p. 78). As with the other aggregates, then, *sankhārā* need not be propelled by greed, hatred, and delusion, and can be transformed once wholesome motivations are developed.

According to the Buddha, wholesome root motivations may be developed through active attention to our conscious life (e.g., meditative practices) as well as committing to ‘right’ kinds of thought, intention, speech, etc., which are outlined in his cardinal Eightfold Path. Psychologically speaking, the point of the path is to re-train natural tendencies to operate according to the wholesome roots of compassionate love, wisdom, and charity. (Hagen, 1997).

The fifth aggregate, *viññāna*, often translated as consciousness, acts in concordance with all of the components of the psychophysical complex, serving to illuminate the objects of subjective life that gain unique forms depending on their ethical sources.

### **From Buddhism to DST**

In sum, according to the Buddha, human existence is premised upon the operations of eighteen basic constituents and is uniquely configured through the five material and immaterial aggregates. The aggregates are not merely functional, objective

processes however, as their development is explicitly dependent on the moral springs that guide human action. For the Buddha, the world experienced is neither a representation of objective events nor a subjectively construed reality but a psychophysical event dependent on the ethical quality of our root motivations. Sense organs operate as vehicles for channeling ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ motivations, whereas psychophysical personalities are as diverse as the ethical motives that determine their forms. It is in these ways that Buddhist psychological processes are inseparable from ethical considerations, and the entire Buddhist psychology achieves its meaning from a particular onto-ethical theory. Psychological concepts and processes in Buddhism are explicitly assessed and categorized according to where they stand in the Buddhist moral framework.

The ethical dimensions that cut through these analyses are undoubtedly foreign to Western psychology, which generally seeks ‘value-neutral’ psychological functions and exports the assessment of their moral consequences to other disciplines. This makes it especially challenging to employ Buddhist ideas to develop Western theories. Efforts to overcome these differences frequently involve stripping Eastern concepts of their ethical and/or non-scientific dimensions so that they may be regarded as absolute concepts fit for Western analysis. We see this in the widespread adoption of mindfulness practices, which over the course of several decades have become operationalized for research purposes, assessed according to Western standards, and integrated to fit Western therapeutic aims. More generally, cross-cultural psychologists have constructed an entire discipline by seeking to appropriate alternate cultural concepts into a universal psychology (Ellis & Stam, 2015).

Dialogical self scholars are for the most part sensitive to the above issues, having critiqued mainstream psychology for its self-contained individualism and its corresponding treatment of culture as an abstract, external force. Moreover, dialogical conceptions of selfhood are grounded in social epistemologies that recognize the sociocultural constitution of psychological processes and therefore their inseparable relation with not only cultural, but also historical, political, and moral determinants (Kirschner & Martin, 2010). Indeed, the dialogical self is in many ways an attempt to incorporate all of these insights into a dynamic and open dialogical understanding of the self.

Yet, having revealed the extensive onto-ethical theory that is implied in Buddhist concepts of mind and existence, we are wary of efforts to bring such strikingly different ideas onto the dialogical platform. In our view, attempts to do this tend to follow the kinds of strategies that we associate with mainstream psychological approaches (e.g., Ho, Chan, Peng, & Ng, 2001; Morioka, 2012). For instance, seeking to elaborate dialogical relations in therapeutic contexts, Morioka (2012) introduces the Japanese concept ‘*ma*’ as a useful notion for explaining ‘dialogical space between self and self’ (p. 403). The issue here is not that the term ‘*ma*’ is ineffectively employed by



the author; rather, the problem is that it is borrowed to *justify* the dialogical framework rather than examine its adequacy for explaining experience. Stam (2014) associates such justifications with research that treats dialogicality in a representational or functional sense; whereas if we understand dialogicality in a performative sense (whereby dialogical processes make sense only when they are formed and interpreted as dialogue), then ‘phenomenal accountability’ offers a more suitable approach for determining the relevance of a dialogical explanation.

In our view, if Buddhism is to assist in illuminating dialogical theory, it needs to be understood on its own, epistemological terms, which, as we have shown, involve a particular ethics. We now turn to study the moral underpinnings of the dialogical self not only to conduct a fair comparison of Buddhist and dialogical approaches, but also to understand what is legitimized in the application of dialogical explanations and dialogical modes of relating that may be absent from other cultures. Our project deliberately seeks to avoid premature applications of dialogical principles and instead pursues theoretical comparisons that, by recognizing the epistemological divergences between cultural positions, can lead to genuine innovations in DST.

### **The dialogical self’s moral program**

Although the dialogical self is understood as a social process inseparably related to others, few researchers have questioned its ethical dimensions (Ellis & Stam, 2010, Stam, 2006). The self’s moral commitments are also frequently assumed rather than rendered explicit, as research is more concerned with the relevance of dialogical processes for understanding alternative psychological questions (e.g., development, emotions). Yet, in *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society*, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) provide an elaborate and pertinent exposition of the self’s moral orientation relevant for our discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) begin their book with the following statement: “In a world society that is increasingly interconnected and intensely involved in historical changes, dialogical relationships are required not only *between* individuals, groups and cultures, but also *within* the self of one and the same individual” (p. 1, emphasis original). The authors maintain that social relationships are growing increasingly complex, challenging classical notions of self that treat the self as something ‘internal,’ and calling for more adequate models of self that can reflect the self’s inherent contradictions and oppositions as well as account for how these can be

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<sup>8</sup> Our discussion assumes readers are already familiar with the dialogical self, including its basis in American pragmatism and Russian dialogism, the notions of I-position and an agentic I, and the way the latter are configured as a multiplicity of I-positions dynamically unfolding in the landscape of the mind (Hermans, 2002). Further elaborations of dialogical self theory can be found in Hermans & Kempen (1993), Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010), or Hermans & Gieser (2012).

integrated by persons in varied settings. The major question today is “how the self copes with increasing levels of uncertainty in a globalizing situation” (p. 3).<sup>9</sup>

Uncertainty itself involves four aspects for Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010): (a) growing *complexity* defined by there being greater numbers of ‘parts’ to self and society; (b) more ambiguity about the meanings of these parts caused by their interdependency; (c) deficit knowledge, which replaces traditional superordinate knowledge structures; and (d) increasing unpredictability, which refers to an inability to control our futures (p. 3). The authors then maintain that people all around the world are seeking to minimize global uncertainty, and this can be done through diverse means: (a) minimizing the diversity of positions within the self; (b) allocating power to a leading voice so that it dominates the self; (c) developing strict boundaries between what is self and what is other; (d) increasing the number of rewarding positions in the self (e.g., job positions, hobbies); and (e) developing a dialogical response that “copes with uncertainty by going into and through this uncertainty rather than avoiding it, in such a way that initial positions are influenced or changed, marginally or essentially, by the encounter itself (e.g., meeting with another person, with a group, or with oneself in order to learn, develop, and create)” (pp. 3-4).

Deeming the fifth, dialogical response as the most appropriate for the contemporary situation, the authors recognize the moral program writ in the promulgation of DST. Its merits are further elaborated with historical analyses of the self’s development, for in addition to its *spatial* expansions, the self is also transforming *in time*, on the basis of personal and collective histories. Specifically, the authors describe three historical models of self (traditional, modern, and post-modern), none of which is sufficient in itself to address the contemporary situation. The dialogical self is introduced as a fourth model that recognizes the ‘assets’ and ‘shadow sides’ of the former three and configures them into a dialogically structured self capable of addressing the global context.

The traditional model of self is premised upon a distinction between a less valued, earthly existence and a higher-level, spiritual life connected to ideas about an after-world. Here the body and senses are thought to hinder spiritual life; there is a clear moral order and purpose for all beings; there is hierarchy, authority, and dogma as well as an integrated view of the person and nature. As each person understands him/herself to have a role or destiny to fulfill, existence is explained through the will of God and/or fate. From this perspective, persons are not yet ‘self-reflexive’ in that they do not see themselves as important determinants of their futures.

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<sup>9</sup> Classic formulations of this problem can be found in Beck (1999) and Bauman (1998). See MacGillivray (2006) for a history of globalization and Stam (2007) for an analysis of the relationship between psychology and globalization.

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The modern theory of self recounts the individualist theories emerging in the West during the Enlightenment era, which empowered the self with a capacity to know universal laws and control an objective world through the application of scientific principles. It defines persons as rational, autonomous, and self-contained individuals. The modern approach gives way to strict distinctions not only between selves and others, but rationality and irrationality, science and religion, fact and value, and more

Finally, the post-modern account rejects universal truths, master-narratives, and the general emphasis on unity and totality. Recognizing how these are ordered by unwarranted and unequal power relations, the post-modern self prioritizes difference, multiplicity, and local knowledge. Consequently, unlike the modern self that is “organized around a personal essence or inner core, the post-modern self is distributed in a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships” (p. 92). The post-modern subject is ‘decentralized’ in the sense that it has no stable identity or continuity and is instead fragmented, constituted by images and sensations that are diverse and no longer coherently connected.

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka develop the dialogical account as a fourth model, one that draws upon and includes the others in a single, spatiotemporal structure. The key is not to regard the temporal models as purely successive but as operating simultaneously in spatially distributed and dialogically connected relations. More than a theoretical solution however, the dialogical self is also “the result of a *learning process* that takes into account both the assets and shadow sides of the other models” (emphasis original, p. 6). In this sense, the dialogical model is an explicitly moral project, one that gains legitimacy based on its ability to incorporate what is good and exclude what is bad in previous models of self.

With regard to the traditional view, the authors generally oppose the absolute authority, restrictive religious practices, social hierarchy, and limited individual freedoms, arguing that a traditional self cannot effectively cope with the reformed social relations of our time. Whereas traditional societies could coexist peacefully so long as they maintained excluding borders, in the globalizing world, mass migrations, growing transport and communication technology, international economic exchange and political instabilities all motivate persons to cross borders and experience mixed cultural positions. This makes it both impossible and undesirable for persons to make sense of their lives within single moral orders,<sup>10</sup> as this inevitably leads to tensions and conflicts with those who hold opposing views. More open and flexible approaches models of self are necessary to build peaceful relationships.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this assumes that within the great traditions people only made sense of themselves within a single moral order. There is much historical evidence to question this but we do not have the space to pursue this here, see for example Seigel (2005).

At the same time, the shortage of moral structures and the uncertainty produced by globalizing changes leaves persons searching for meaning and purpose through new avenues, and the authors draw upon the popularity of new age, spiritual literatures and related narratives about fate and destiny to demonstrate how this is the case. The idea of a ‘meaningfully ordered cosmos’ is very much preserved in the contemporary era, and any contemporary theory would be insufficient if it were to exclude this aspect of human existence.

The modern view is commended for disbanding rigid social hierarchies and allotting the self a capacity to build its own purpose and life course. This self is autonomous, no longer directed by external powers, capable of reflecting on itself and acting on the basis of its own understanding. These are regarded as positive transformations for having emancipated the self from dogma and authority, but their danger lies in that they risk turning the self into a solipsistic entity, encapsulated within itself and operating without regard for its social and natural context. Indeed, in emphasizing the self’s capacity to determine its world, the modern theory undermines the possibility of a meaningfully ordered cosmos, the belief in destiny, and receptivity to others and the world more generally. The authors explain that, although the self seeks autonomy as a whole, it also yearns to connect with the natural environment and engage in something that is broader than itself (e.g., the experience of union with a social group or a higher power). An adequate theory of self needs to acknowledge these important dimensions.

As the post-modern model<sup>11</sup> rejects the idea of a stable and centralized agent, it offers a heterogeneous conception of self that is deeply entwined with its cultural and historical context. This self is described as a multiplicity of diverse elements dynamically changing with no obvious continuity. Its autonomy is also disrupted by broader cultural, social, and political forces that are seen to constitute the self’s possibilities. This self rejects not only dogma and tradition, but also universal moral laws and ahistorical truths, seeing all as historical, social constructions changing continuously. For Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010), this model captures important transformations happening in globalizing societies and recognizes how these configure the self’s possibilities through social power and dominance. Moreover, it brings to the forefront the otherness in the self, bringing attention to new kinds of ethical implications that may not require an overarching moral order to be convincing.

Yet, despite these important contributions, the post-modern account thwarts the self’s “active search for values and truths that can be exchanged and possibly shared by different cultural communities” (p. 95). In the modern view, it is ethnocentrism, whereas in the post-modern view, it is relativism that generates these consequences.

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<sup>11</sup> Since the 2000’s it has been very difficult to know just what “post-modern” refers to, a problem that is also found in a certain ambiguity in Hermans’ and Hermans-Konopka’s account.

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More generally, the post-modern model fails to recognize the self's 'centralizing' tendencies, which refer to its attempts to integrate its diverse positions and/or include positions that retain sufficient degrees of stability.

In sum, what is needed is a theory of self that can retain the purported assets of the diverse models of self and adequately address the issues presented by the changing global context. The dialogical self is thenceforth proposed as the most appropriate theoretical as well as practical and moral response to the call, commended for its ability to incorporate the 'basic' needs for stability, continuity, autonomy, and moral order in light of decentralizing pressures, unstable power relations, mixing cultural relations, and overall uncertainties that characterize the world today.

On a structural level, a 'prominence thesis' allows for the simultaneous co-existence of the diverse models of self in a single dialogical system. Specifically, Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) view the different phases as distinct positions in a multi-voiced self, wherein at any given time, one or another of these phases becomes prominent, and all the rest become suppressed or neglected. The prominence thesis also explains how positions from the past are never completely removed from the self's repertoire but are "*backgrounded, with the possibility of becoming, under facilitating conditions, prominent in a later phase*" (p. 104, emphasis original). The contemporary self is thus bequeathed with diverse historical models of being and is called upon to rely on them to navigate an increasingly culturally diverse and uncertain context. Therein lies the self's practical and moral imperative: to respond to the call in the most adequate way given the contemporary global context.

As mentioned, there are at least five responses possible to global uncertainty, of which the dialogical one is considered by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) as the most adequate. Importantly, dialogue is *not merely* communication, since it comprises "a moral aim and developmental purpose" (p. 174). It comprises "an activity that is desirable and valuable when people want to learn from each other and from themselves in the service of a further development of self and society" (p. 174). To specify how this is the case, the authors identify 'good dialogue' with the following features:

(a) it is innovative; (b) it has a sufficiently broad bandwidth; (c) it recognizes the existence of misunderstanding; (d) it creates a dialogical space; (e) it takes into account the alterity of the other and also the alterity of the different parts of the self; (f) it takes into account the existence of power-differences; (g) it has an eye for the differences between dialogical genres; (h) it has the potential to participate in a broader field of awareness and leaves room for silence. (p. 174)

The authors deem "respect for alterity" as "the moral feature of dialogue par excellence," referring to alterity as "the otherness of the other and its recognition as intrinsically valuable" (p. 183). Dialogue is regarded the 'pre-eminent form of

relationship’ that accounts for alterity, in that it involves accepting and developing differences between selves and others—both with actual others and others-in-the-self (p. 183). In our view, the significance of this aim is evident in the way it constitutes all aspects of good dialogue.

As a whole, good dialogue is one that engenders further dialogue through open, respectful, and democratic relations with others. Starting with (a), “dialogue is *innovative* when the participants are able and willing both to recognize the perspective of the other party in its own right” (p. 175, emphasis original). Second, a sufficiently *broad bandwidth* (feature b) requires dialogue to “be open to a range of different positions” (p. 177) necessary to produce meaningful collaborations and new developments in dialogue. Third, good dialogue must *acknowledge misunderstandings* (feature c) because dialogue “becomes possible only when parties involved in interchange acknowledge that there are more possible perspectives from which a particular topic can be considered” (p. 180). Fourth, good dialogue opens a *dialogical space* (feature d) wherein “participants are open to each other’s experiences, although these may be very different from their own” (p. 181).

Fifth, both the need to recognize power relations (feature e) and that of acknowledging different speech genres (feature f) are necessary for creating appropriate conditions for dialogical exchange. Finally, even feature h, which ascribes good dialogue the ability to engage in a ‘broader field of awareness and leave room for silence,’ is recognized for its potential to advance dialogue, since participation in a broader field helps the self develop a more receptive attitude, “resulting in an open self that is more willing to accept the alterity of the other parties than when participants are experiencing themselves as separated from them” (p. 189). Silence in turn is an indispensable feature of this field of awareness, for in its ability to generate a space for bringing together divergent positions, it too is conducive to dialogical innovation.<sup>12</sup>

Taken together, the aim of good dialogue is to generate flexible, open, and tolerant relations, which are desirable because they allow for dialogical innovations and facilitate dialogue more generally.<sup>13</sup> Put differently, good dialogue seeks to balance the self’s basic needs for continuity and stability with the needs to recognize and

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<sup>12</sup> Silence is likened to a “non-verbal form of dialogue” which differs from typical turn-taking, which involves speaking and listening, in that these successive transitions are viewed closely together and allowed to coincide. Most succinctly, as part of a broader awareness, silence operates as “a deeper kind of dialogue” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 190) that allows persons to experience themselves as part of something broader than themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Achieving this aim is not straightforward, however, for in its search for stability and continuity, the self tends to subordinate the alterity of the other to dominant self-positions that comprise its identity. Indeed, recognizing the other comes with some ‘identity costs,’ for the alterity of the other regularly destabilizes the self’s identity and challenges its pretention for certainty. To recognize alterity thus requires that the self develop a level of ‘tolerance for uncertainty,’ which the authors argue “should be a central part of ‘alterity-learning’” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 184).

incorporate alterity and uncertainty. Striking such a balance through productive dialogical relationships constitutes the very aim of ‘alterity-learning,’ and is achieved when selves grow open to uncertain and unfamiliar dimensions both of others and themselves. These constitute the merits of the dialogical self that ostensibly make it the most adequate moral response to the contemporary global situation. The dialogical self incorporates the assets of previous models of self and reduces its shadow sides: it recognizes identity, continuity, and stability at the same time that it accepts its multiplicity, discontinuity, and instability; it maintains autonomy and self-determination despite its historical constitution and its engagement in a broader order; finally, in the face of mixed cultural contacts, growing uncertainty, and unfamiliar others, the dialogical self is open to uncertainty and seeks to incorporate others without compromising their unique positions.

### **General Discussion**

It should be obvious by now that the dialogical self constitutes a particular kind of moral program that differs markedly from the Buddhist perspective. In our view, the differences between these two perspectives are too basic for any swift incorporation of Buddhist ideas into dialogical theory, as any attempt of this kind requires exporting Buddhist concepts from the onto-ethical theory that renders them comprehensible. Does this mean that no dialogue is possible between Buddhist and dialogical theories? We do not suggest this either.

Our position is that Buddhism can contribute to DST as an alternative perspective in its own right, one that needs to be addressed on its own epistemological terms. This requires abstaining from quick appropriations of Buddhist concepts into the dialogical framework and instead allowing Buddhism to illuminate—and question—the basic tenants of DST. Only in such a way could the unique insights of Buddhist philosophy make an original contribution to developing dialogical theory. In what follows, we exemplify what we mean by this process by employing the Buddhist onto-ethical theory as a lens for scrutinizing the dialogical self’s moral assumptions. We conclude that a Buddhist lens allows us to question the universality of the dialogical program as well as its adequacy for addressing human suffering.<sup>14</sup>

Already our discussion of good dialogue pointed to the moral tenants in DST. However, viewing these from a Buddhist perspective helps clarify in what ways this dialogue is a uniquely Western project. First, Buddhism brings to our attention how the very structure of the dialogical self is built from Western theories, in that the traditional,

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<sup>14</sup> We are not claiming that it is necessary to rely on Buddhism to identify the moral assumptions that we discuss; alternative perspectives or reflexive inquiry could potentially lead to some very similar conclusions. However, our analyses are generally concerned with demonstrating how alternative perspectives ought to be taken up so that they effectively inform dialogical accounts.

modern, and post-modern positions are all derived from Western history, literature and culture more generally. These constructions are taken for granted in the dialogical model, assumed as basic psychological constructs bequeathed to all contemporary individuals and constituting the range of possibilities for selfhood. As Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) elaborate, the moral task for the self is to strike a balance among the traditional, modern, and post-modern positions without exaggerating any one of them. This is the task of good dialogue, which appropriates the assets of previous positions while drawing out their undesirable ‘shadow sides.’

Second, the Buddhist stance brings into relief how good dialogue is unquestioningly premised upon Western values. Good dialogue seeks continuous innovation, for which it requires freedom and space to voice diverse positions, as well as respect for alterity and acknowledgement of differing power relations. These aims presuppose Western emphases on progress, democracy, and autonomy, which are not apparent in the Buddhist view. This is not to say that Buddhists necessarily disagree with these values but that the two accounts set out a different series of emphases for addressing the human condition.

Third, as a contrasting moral project, the Buddhist position contests the assumed universality of the dialogical self’s moral imperatives, providing an alternative model of self with its own moral obligations. The Buddhist position on selfhood is neither traditional, modern, post-modern, nor dialogical. While it may share with the traditional model a belief in a universally ordered cosmos, the Buddha deliberately undermined rigid social structures. Next, while Buddhism questions the status quo and grants persons the capacity to determine their futures, it is dissimilar from the modern view in that Buddhism is deeply critical of stability and continuity. With regard to the post-modern view, Buddhism too refuses the unity of the subject, but at the same time it sees value in the pursuit of truth. These critiques may bring Buddhism closest to the dialogical position, yet Buddhism admits neither an *I* nor dialogue to grapple with existential questions. Instead, it focuses on embodied ethical motivations that give rise to thoughts, that perpetuate our speech, and that direct our overall habits, asking that we transform unwholesome tendencies to wholesome ones given how they produce diverse moral consequences.

Finally, Buddhist ethics challenge the dialogical view not merely because they offer a different perspective that goes unaccounted for in discussions of DST. Rather, the sophisticated account of dependent arising implies that a more profound self-transformative program is necessary for alleviating human suffering. The roots of human discontent are not grounded in the challenges of the contemporary global context but in the ethical motivations characteristic of the human condition. Our natural desires for continuity and stability—discussed both in Buddhism and DST—are viewed from the Buddhist perspective as unwholesome tendencies that need to be contested and transformed. Thus, whereas DST accepts our basic tendencies and seeks to ‘strike a



balance' between their demands and those of the global context, Buddhism undermines the inevitability of these propensities and insists that they be transformed through the cultivation of wisdom, loving kindness, and charity.

Taken together, the Buddhist psycho-ethical program calls into question the universality of the dialogical perspective both in terms of its global relevance and the adequacy of its moral imperatives. Observing the dialogical self from a Buddhist lens, it is unclear to us whether the moral imperative 'to dialogue,' is sufficient for alleviating the problems of the human condition, regardless of its deep commitment to respecting alterity. We do not intend to resolve this issue here, nor are we suggesting that dialogical self scholars ought to address this by adopting a Buddhist theory of self.<sup>15</sup> Rather, our point was to show in what way the Buddhist perspective can be drawn upon to illuminate DST. In our view, to engage Buddhism respectfully in dialogue means allowing its alternative stance to disturb the certitudes of the dialogical model.

### Conclusion

This paper was initiated by an invitation to consider 'how Eastern philosophies could help illuminate and inform DST.' As mentioned, DST as a whole seeks to bring different perspectives together not to merge them into unified accounts but allow them to transform one another in dialogical relations. Accordingly, one way of answering this question could have been to bring Buddhism and DST into 'dialogue' in the way that this is understood in DST—where different positions take turns voicing their perspectives; respecting alterity is a basic aim; dialogue seeks continuously innovative accounts, etc. We were cautious about too quickly incorporating Buddhism into these 'rules of dialogue' however. Instead, we sought first to understand Buddhism on its own terms, studying the rules of *its* game so that only later could it serve to potentially illuminate the dialogical account.

Based on our study of Theravāda Buddhism, it was evident that this tradition offered a strikingly different understanding of psychological life, one whose basic concepts could not be separated from their Buddhist onto-ethical theory. The operations of *vedanā* or *kun long*, for instance, would lose their sense were we to divorce them from their onto-ethical contexts and equate them with Western conceptions of feelings or drives, respectively. Thus the question of just how Buddhism and DST could be meaningfully engaged deepened and demanded a more careful analysis. Our thesis was not to forgo dialogue but to make use of the differences observed in the Buddhist account, employing these to illuminate some of the moral assumptions writ in the DST program.

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<sup>15</sup> Nowhere do we claim that DST should adhere to a Buddhist ethics, or alternatively, that Buddhism ought to adhere to an ethics like the DST. Instead, we are doing a comparative analysis of DST and Buddhism to demonstrate some of the commonalities and differences between the two approaches.

Ultimately, although we are generally supportive of the dialogical aim to respect alterity, the Buddhist perspective reveals to us how the imperative to produce ‘good dialogue’ is a particularly Western idea that, when assumed as a universal moral good, can in fact silence alternative cultural perspectives. Integrating Buddhism into the dialogical platform prematurely would risk reducing Buddhism to the moral aims inherent in good dialogue before actually understanding the priorities of the Buddhist view. Hence we argue that alternative cultural perspectives cannot be readily appropriated *into* the dialogical account but must be understood on their own terms, in light of their particular epistemological contexts. To engage Buddhism in dialogue requires first listening to it attentively and understanding its moral position before assuming it can be integrated with the dialogical view. To return to the opening quotes, we agree with the Dalai Lama’s efforts to foster dialogue between Western psychology and Buddhist insights; however, we also side with Staal who maintains that researchers ought to be cautious so that their dialogues with other traditions do not end up imposing Western ethics onto other cultural perspectives.

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