

Resonances of No-Self: Anti-Egocentrism in Confucian *Wuwo* (毋我) and Buddhist *Anātman* (無我)

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets the concept of no-self in Confucianism and Buddhism from the perspective of overcoming egocentrism and clarifies the shared practical orientation of these two traditions. Drawing on Confucian commentaries on *wuwo* (毋我, freedom from self-centered partiality) in the *Analects*, it argues that Confucian no-self does not entail the denial of a substantial self but rather the overcoming of private attachment and self-centered partiality (私私). Confucian no-self is therefore understood not as the negation of the self but as a process of moral self-cultivation through which the individual becomes a relational and publicly oriented moral agent. By contrast, the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (無我, no-self) begins with the analysis of the five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*; *wuyun* 五蘊) and develops into the doctrines of the no-self of persons (*pudgala-nairātmya*; *ren wuwo* 人無我) and the no-self of dharmas (*dharma-nairātmya*; *fa wuwo* 法無我). While these doctrines reject substantialist conceptions of persons and phenomena, their primary soteriological function is to eliminate attachment to “I” and “mine,” the root of suffering. This function remains central in Mahāyāna Buddhism, where insight into no-self overcomes the afflictions generated by self-grasping. Thus, despite their distinct philosophical foundations, Confucian and Buddhist conceptions of no-self resonate in their shared practical aim of overcoming egocentrism and fostering ethical concern for others.

Keywords: Confucianism, Buddhism, no-self, *anātman*, *wuwo*, moral self-cultivation, anti-egocentris

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I. Introduction¹

The doctrine of no-self has traditionally been regarded as one of the defining characteristics of Buddhist philosophy and a central marker of Buddhist identity within the broader context of Asian philosophy. It has served as the foundation not only for doctrinal debates within Buddhism but also for the development of sophisticated critiques of the self and anti-substantialist discourse in dialogue with modern analytic philosophy.²

Recently, however, several studies have identified the notion of no-self as a key concept implicit in Confucian teachings. These studies claim that the conception of no-self provides an important hermeneutic lens through which key dimensions of Confucian thought may be reinterpreted. Kwong-loi Shun, for example, points out that no-self in Confucian thought does not carry the same meaning as it does in Buddhism but instead refers to “a process of self-transformation” (Shun 2018, 79). In other words, Confucian no-self does not mean that there is no substantial entity called the self. Rather, it refers to a process through which one’s way of seeing oneself and the world is transformed. Therefore, the “self” to be overcome in Confucian thought is not the self as such but an excessively accentuated form of selfhood—what Shun calls the “emphatic self.” As another example, Doil Kim presents the Confucian concept of no-self as a counterexample to certain modern Western conceptions of moral agency, namely, the assumption that moral agency must be grounded in the strengthening of an egocentric self (Kim 2024, 236–37). Kim conceptualizes Confucian no-self not as a metaphysical doctrine, but as an ethical ideal advocating the elimination of private self-interest (*si 私*)—namely, egocentrism.³ Understood thus, it represents a dispositional

¹ The discussion in this paper has been greatly improved in response to the reviewers’ comments. In particular, the introduction has been completely rewritten to address all of the reviewers’ suggestions. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude for their careful and pertinent reviews.

² For an influential interdisciplinary discussion of no-self in dialogue with analytic philosophy and phenomenology, see Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011.

³ The term “egocentrism” is borrowed from Piaget, who used it to describe a feature of early childhood cognition in which one is unable to distinguish one’s own perspective

attitude that refrains from positing the self as the privileged locus for perceiving the world and relating to others. Through the practice of no-self, the world is no longer distorted by self-centeredness but is instead disclosed as a field of beings, each possessing its own place and intrinsic value.

Confucian thought, which occupied a dominant position in many premodern East Asian intellectual traditions, has often been conventionally associated with being or presence (*you* 有), whereas Daoist and Buddhist traditions have frequently been associated with non-being or absence (*wu* 無) (Chen 2006, 5). The studies mentioned above, however, interpret no-self in terms of the ethical and practical dimensions of Confucianism: the dismantling of egocentrism and the transformation of self within a relational mode of existence. These interpretations bring a neglected ethical dimension of Confucian thought into view. This discussion is also noteworthy in that it offers a critical alternative to autonomous and self-sufficient conceptions of the subject prominent in certain strands of modern Western philosophy. Furthermore, these studies are significant because they prompt a reexamination of the concept of no-self, which has long been regarded as the exclusive domain of Buddhism, within the broader context of East Asian thought.

The comparative insight underlying these studies, however, is not entirely new. Premodern East Asian sources already contain attempts to bring the three traditions into dialogue through the concept of no-self. For example, Eung'un Gongyeo 應雲空如 (1794–?), a monk during the Joseon 朝鮮, stated the following in his “Letter to Layman Jang” (*Yeo Jang Cheosa Seo* 與張處士書).⁴

Each mind is itself Buddha, and each thought is itself true. This is what the Zhuangzi 莊子 means when it says that “the Perfected Person

adequately from that of others (Piaget 1926, 237–38). In the present study, however, the term is used in a broader and somewhat different sense. It refers not to a developmental stage but to a structure of perception, desire, judgment, and action that privileges the self as its organizing center.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis in quoted passages has been added by the present author.

(zhiren 至人) has no [attachment of one's] self (*wuji* 無己), the Spirit-like Person (*shenren* 神人) has no achievement (*wugong* 無功), and the Sage (*shengren* 聖人) has no name (*wuming* 無名).” Therefore, the *Diamond Sūtra* says, “If a bodhisattva (*pusa* 菩薩) has penetrated the Dharma of no-self (*wuwo zhi fa* 無我之法), the Tathāgata (*rulai* 如來) calls that person a true bodhisattva.” In the *Analects*, Confucius is recorded as having severed four things (*juesi* 絕四), with no-self (*wuwo* 無我) placed last.⁵

According to Eung'un Gonggyeo, the teachings of the three traditions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—are all mutually connected, and at their core lies no-self. In other words, he argued that the Way of the Sage, whether in Confucianism, Buddhism, or Daoism, takes no-self as its central teaching. To be sure, as will be discussed below, because the Buddhist doctrine of no-self entails a fundamental ontological insight, it is necessary to examine carefully whether the no-self theories of the two traditions can legitimately be compared on the same conceptual plane. The central issue is therefore to determine whether and to what extent the two formulations converge in practical orientation despite their different philosophical foundations.

Guided by this question, this paper examines Confucian and Buddhist conceptions of no-self through close readings of their respective premodern textual sources.⁶ By comparing these two traditions, it seeks to show that, despite their distinct philosophical foundations, they converge in a shared orientation that may be characterized as “anti-egocentrism.” Anti-egocentrism designates the transformation of an egocentric structure of partial judgment and action across three interrelated dimensions:

- (1) an **epistemic shift** from subordinating the world to one's own perspective toward apprehending it within a relational context;

⁵ 心心即佛。念念即真。是爲至人無己。神人無功。聖人無名。故金剛經曰。通達無我法者。如來說名真是菩薩。論語。孔子記絕四而以無我終之。(EG, H10, 734c)

⁶ Although Daoist thought also contains significant ideas related to no-self, these remain peripheral to the specific comparative task of the present study and are therefore excluded from its primary scope.

- (2) an **ethical orientation** that regulates desire so as not to privilege the self; and
- (3) a **practical process of self-transformation** that reconfigures the relationship between self and others;

With this conception of anti-egocentrism in view, Sections II and III examine Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman*, respectively.⁷ Section IV then analyzes premodern texts that sought to reconcile the two traditions through no-self and considers the possibility of reconstructing such reconciliation in a contemporary form without effacing their distinct philosophical foundations. The purpose of adopting this expanded conception of anti-egocentrism is to establish an analytical framework that moves beyond comparisons based on superficial similarities between the two traditions. Accordingly, this paper does not seek to synthesize the Confucian and Buddhist traditions into a unified philosophical framework, nor does it attempt to render a definitive judgment on either. Rather, it follows what Doil Kim characterizes as a deliberate philosophical reconfiguration—one that seeks to secure a place for East Asian philosophy within modern ethical discourses shaped by certain theories of autonomous and self-sufficient moral agency. Through this comparative inquiry, the present study seeks not only to clarify the philosophical points of convergence between Confucianism and Buddhism but also to open new avenues for ethical reflection from a genuinely cross-cultural perspective.

II. No-self (*wuwo* 毋我) in Confucianism: Moral Self-Transformation and Decentered Agency

The “four severings” (*sijue* 四絕) mentioned by Eung’un Gongyeo 應雲空如 refer to the following passage in the “Zihan 子罕” chapter of the *Analects*:

⁷ When the two traditions are discussed together, this paper refers to the Confucian notion of no-self as *wuwo* and its Buddhist counterpart as *anātman*. This terminological convention is intended to preserve the conceptual specificity of each tradition without presupposing either their identity or their incompatibility.

The Master severed four things: he had no personal intention (*wuyi* 毋意), no insistence on necessity (*wubi* 毋必), no obstinacy (*wugu* 毋固), and no self (*wuwo* 毋我).⁸

This passage praises the perfection of Confucius's character by saying that he "had no self." How, then, did later Confucian thinkers interpret this statement? As the commentarial tradition examined below shows, they did not generally take Confucian no-self to mean a theoretical denial of an enduring self. Rather, they understood it as an ethical and practical orientation through which self-centered modes of thought, judgment, and action are restrained and ultimately overcome. In other words, *wuwo* (毋我) is linked to the distinctively Confucian ethical ideal of overcoming self-centered desires and, by extension, to the actualization of this ideal through concrete individual practice. This understanding can be confirmed in the commentarial tradition on the "four severings" mentioned above even in the earliest extant commentaries on this passage:

[Commentary by He Yan 何晏 (193–249):] "No personal intention" (*wuyi* 毋意) means that because he took the Way (*dao* 道) as his standard, he did not act arbitrarily. "No insistence on necessity" (*wubi* 毋必) means that when he was employed, he acted, and when he was set aside, he withdrew; therefore, he did not insist on any fixed outcome. "No obstinacy" (*wugu* 毋固) means that because he did not hold rigidly to what was right or what was not right, he did not act stubbornly. "No self" (*wuwo* 毋我) means that he only transmitted the ancient tradition and did not place himself in the position of creating something on his own. Although he lived among others, he did not make himself different from them. Because he followed only the Way, he did not possess his body as his own private possession.⁹

[Commentary by Xing Bing 邢昺 (932–1010):] People commonly seek to distinguish themselves through their own creations and thereby assert

⁸ *Analects* 9.4: 子絕四: 毋意, 毋必, 毋固, 毋我. Throughout this paper, 毋 is retained when quoting *Analects* 9.4, whereas 無 is retained in quotations from later Confucian commentaries. Both are romanized as *wu*.

⁹ 毋意, 以道為度, 故不任意. 毋必, 用之則行, 舍之則藏, 故無專必. 毋固, 無可無不可, 故無固行. 毋我, 述古而不自作處, 羣萃而不自異, 唯道是從, 故不有其身. (ZC, 4.1)

possession of their own persons. Confucius, however, only transmitted the ancient tradition and did not place himself in the position of creating something on his own. He mingled with the crowd, softened his brilliance, and became like dust, without displaying himself. Therefore, he did not treat himself as his own private possession.¹⁰

He Yan and Xing Bing understand “self” (*wo* 我) in terms of self-display and the private appropriation of one’s person. According to these commentaries, the core of no-self lies in subordinating private judgment and self-display to the Way, an attitude exemplified by Confucius’s practice of “transmitting without creating” (*shuer buzuo* 述而不作). Because Confucius took the Way as his standard, he did not make arbitrary judgments. He remained detached from whether he was employed or set aside according to circumstances, and he did not cling to a fixed outcome. Because he did not establish a fixed position on what was right or wrong, he did not act stubbornly. He neither displayed himself nor set himself apart from others, nor did he treat his person as something privately his own. In other words, no-self meant refraining from asserting one’s own views, following the Way transmitted from antiquity, and “concealing one’s brilliance and living among others” (*heguang tongchen* 和光同塵) without making oneself conspicuous. Confucian no-self therefore calls for moving beyond a private standpoint, so that judgment and action are guided by the Way rather than by self-centered concerns.

Does this mean, however, that Confucianism advocated no-self from the beginning? Apart from the passage from the *Analects* discussed above, explicit references to no-self are difficult to find in early Confucian texts. Nor was no-self generally presented as a defining feature of Confucian thought in later periods. Nevertheless, later Neo-Confucians not only employed the language of no-self more explicitly but also developed its philosophical implications in a more systematic manner. Whereas Han and Tang commentators primarily interpreted the overcoming of the private self in terms of ethical self-restraint and appropriate conduct, Neo-Confucians of the Song–Ming periods

¹⁰ 人多制作自異, 以擅其身。孔子則述古而不自作處, 羣眾萃聚, 和光同塵, 而不自異, 故不有其身也。 (ZC, 4.1)

situated this practice within broader accounts of moral cultivation, human nature, and the cosmological order.¹¹ In these Neo-Confucian commentaries, no-self is treated not merely as a matter of behavioral discipline but as integral to the cultivation of sagehood. This tendency is clearly illustrated by two remarks preserved in Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) *Collected Commentaries on the Analects* (*Lunyu jizhu* 論語集註).

[Commentary on the *Analects* 8.5:] Mister Xie (Xie shi 謝氏: Xie Liangzuo 謝良佐, 1055–1103) said: “Not regarding what is abundant as belonging to oneself and what is deficient as belonging to others, and not insisting that success belongs to oneself while failure belongs to others—this can hardly be done by anyone who has not nearly reached no-self.”¹²

[Commentary on the *Analects* 15.24:] Mister Yin (Yin shi 尹氏: Yin Dun 尹焞, 1071–1142) said: “. . . Confucius taught him by means of the method of seeking humaneness (*ren* 仁). If one extends this to its utmost point, even the sage's no-self does not go beyond this [that is, reciprocity (*shu* 恕)]. Would it not therefore be fitting to practice it to the end of one's life?”¹³

These remarks associate no-self with a humble disposition and with reciprocity (*shu* 恕) that refuses to privilege one's own attainments and judgments over those of others. Especially the statement in the first passage that Yan Hui had “nearly” (*ji* 幾) reached no-self can be understood as implying an attempt to distinguish the levels of moral achievement.¹⁴

¹¹ Neo-Confucian discussions of no-self developed within an intellectual environment profoundly shaped by sustained engagement with Buddhism. This influence should not, however, be understood as a simple one-way derivation, since Neo-Confucian systematization also drew on intellectual resources internal to the Confucian tradition. A fuller historical account of this interaction lies beyond the scope of the present study. For further discussion of this topic, see Tiwald (2018) and Makeham (2018).

¹² 謝氏曰: 不知有餘在己, 不足在人; 不必得為在己, 失為在人, 非幾於無我者不能也. (ZC, 5.1)

¹³ 尹氏曰: . . . 孔子告以求仁之方也. 推而極之, 雖聖人之無我, 不出乎此. 終身行之, 不亦宜乎? (ZC, 23.1)

¹⁴ According to Zhu Xi's interpretation, *Analects* 8.5 refers to an evaluation of Yan Hui:

Yan Hui's mind knew only that moral principles were inexhaustible and did not perceive any division between things and the self; therefore, he was capable of being like this.

顏子之心, 惟知義理之無窮, 不見物我之有間, 故能如此. (ZC, 5.1)

Yet these remarks primarily establish the normative place of no-self within the Neo-Confucian ideal of sagehood; they do not fully explain the moral-psychological process through which such a state is realized. Zhu Xi's interpretation of the "Four Severings" addresses this question by describing the sequence through which private intention develops into fixed expectation, obstinate attachment, and, ultimately, the private self.

[Commentary by Zhu Xi:] "Wu" (毋) is written as "wu" (無) in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). "Intention" (*yi* 意) means private intention (*siyi* 私意), and "necessity" (*bi* 必) means insistence on a fixed outcome. "Fixity" (*gu* 固) means obstinate narrow-mindedness. "Self" (*wo* 我) means the private self (*siji* 私己). These four are linked to one another as beginning and end: they begin with intention, move on to necessity, remain in fixity, and finally arrive at self. In general, intention and necessity always precede the event, while fixity and self always follow the event. Once one reaches self, intention arises again, and material desire draws one along, so that the cycle continues without end.¹⁵

Zhu Xi's commentary presents a moral-psychological sequence in which the private self is gradually formed and reinforced. The proximate beginning of this sequence is "private intention" (*siyi* 私意), which arises before a course of action has been fully determined. At this stage, intention has not yet developed into overt action or fixed attachment; it is, rather, an initial orientation toward interpreting a situation from the standpoint of one's private concerns rather than in accordance with the Way. As this orientation intensifies, it becomes "necessity" (*bi* 必), that is, an insistence that events ought to unfold according to a predetermined expectation. The world is thereby subordinated to what one takes to be the required outcome.

Once an event has occurred, the same self-centered orientation persists as fixity and eventually consolidates into the private self. Fixity (*gu* 固) refers to becoming bound to a judgment or choice already

¹⁵ 毋史記作無是也。意私意也。必期必也。固執滯也。我私己也。四者相為終始，起於意，遂於必，留於固，而成於我也。蓋意必常在事前，固我常在事後。至於我又生意則物欲牽引循環不窮矣。(ZC, 4.1)

made, such that one can no longer respond appropriately to changing circumstances. It is therefore not merely a matter of strong will or desire but a rigidity of judgment and action that may generate further conflict and distortion.

The final point of this entire process is the “self” (*wo* 我). As discussed above, in Confucian thought, “self” does not refer primarily to an ontological self. Rather, it refers to the “private self,” which judges and acts from a self-centered standpoint. This implication becomes visible within the context of one’s relation to others and one’s relation to the Way (*dao* 道). A self-centered understanding of the world once again amplifies desire and repeats the same circuit of intention, necessity, obstinacy, and self (*yi-bi-gu-wo* 意-必-固-我). When Zhu Xi says that “material desire draws one along, so that the cycle continues without end,” he is referring precisely to the formation of this closed circuit of private desire within the individual.

The opposite of this cycle is Confucius’s “four severings” (*sijue* 四絕). Because Confucius had no private intention, he had no insistence on necessity; because he had no insistence on necessity, he had no obstinacy. Finally, by departing from self-centeredness—by having no self (*wuwo* 毋我)—Confucius brought his moral character to perfection. Seen in this way, no-self can be understood as a defining disposition of sagehood. “No personal intention” (*wuyi* 毋意), “no insistence on necessity” (*wubi* 毋必), “no obstinacy” (*wugu* 毋固), and “no self” (*wuwo* 毋我) are not simply a list of separate items. They constitute a strategy of self-cultivation that breaks this chain. If intention does not become private, necessity does not arise; if necessity is absent, fixity is not formed; and if fixity is absent, the self does not harden. From this perspective, the four severings constitute a practical strategy of anti-egocentrism: they prevent private intention from hardening into a fixed and self-reinforcing structure of judgment and action.

This understanding of Confucian no-self as a form of moral self-realization is articulated more explicitly in the following passages from Zhu Xi’s *Questions on the Analects* (*Lunyu huowen* 論語或問):

“No-self” means becoming broadly one with things rather than confining one’s concern to one’s own person.¹⁶

What is called “no-self” simply means that there is no self-interested division between oneself and others. How could it ever mean mistaking oneself for others, or mistaking others for oneself?¹⁷

These passages explain no-self in terms of an expansive unity with things and the absence of private divisions between oneself and others. According to Zhu Xi, no-self means realizing a great oneness with things; it does not mean completely erasing the distinction between oneself and others. Confucian no-self is, after all, the overcoming of private partiality, and it refers to an ethical relation in which private divisions between oneself and others no longer determine judgment. This is connected to Zhu Xi’s model of self-cultivation in the theory of mind and nature, which preserves the individual as a moral subject while preventing that individual from being trapped in a self-centered circuit. Confucian no-self may therefore be understood as closely related to the practical orientation expressed in the formula “overcoming the self and returning to ritual proprieties” (*keji fuli* 克己復禮). As a movement away from self-centeredness, it provides a common framework for several distinctively Confucian ideas and virtues.

The foregoing textual analysis also provides the basis for contemporary reconstructions of Confucian no-self as an ethical ideal. The interpretations of Confucian no-self advanced by Shun and Kim, as mentioned in the Introduction, build on a line of interpretation developed by Neo-Confucian thinkers, especially Zhu Xi. Both interpret no-self not as the ontological disappearance of the subject but as a transformation of moral perception and agency achieved through the overcoming of private partiality.

Shun defines no-self as an “ethical outlook” by analyzing such themes as “anger that preserves the function of moral judgment,” “the self as experienced within an interconnected whole,” and “acceptance

¹⁶ 無我者，大同於物不私一身也。 (ZQ, 9.4)

¹⁷ 所謂無我者，但為無彼我之私耳。曷嘗誤以我為人而認人為我哉？ (ZQ, 18.7)

of fate or mandate” (*ming* 命) (Shun 2018, 100). He emphasizes that the state of no-self is fundamentally a way of seeing the world and one’s place within it, that is, an ethical vision. The core of this vision lies in “two dimensions—the disappearance of oneself and the incorporation of others into oneself” (Shun 2018, 102). On this account, Confucian no-self is realized when one ceases to place oneself at a privileged center and recognizes others as equally real.

Kim’s study proceeds in a similar direction. He argues that no-self is a condition for fully realizing righteousness (*yi* 義) and principle (*li* 理), which are core values of Confucianism. For this reason, Confucian no-self becomes a way of thinking that makes possible a form of moral agency different from the Western model. According to Kim, the ethical meaning of no-self becomes clearer through humility (*qian* 謙) and impartiality (*gong* 公). Humility is not simply self-restraint, but an attitude of fundamental self-transformation while impartiality is not simply public-mindedness in the civic sense, but to an impartial and publicly oriented outlook. By loosening self-centered attention through these virtues, one attains a mode of reciprocal illumination in which self and others are “simultaneously illuminated” (Kim 2024, 243) and can therefore be seen more fully as they are.¹⁸

Confucian no-self is therefore best understood as a form of moral self-transformation continuous with the broader Confucian concern for self-cultivation. Here, the negative element *wu*—written “毋” in the *Analects* and more commonly “無” in later commentaries—does not denote ontological nonexistence, nor does *wo* (我) refer to a metaphysical self. Rather, Confucian no-self is best understood ethically as selflessness: the overcoming of self-centered partiality and the cultivation of an other-regarding and publicly oriented form of moral agency.

Within the framework of anti-egocentrism developed above, Confucian no-self may be understood as a process of moral cultivation that breaks the self-reinforcing circuit of private desire. By interrupting the progression from private intention to fixed expectation, obstinacy, and

¹⁸ The phrase derives from Cheng Yichuan 程伊川 (1033–1107) and literally means “illuminating both things and self” (*wuwo jianzhao* 物我兼照). See Kim (2024, 253).

ultimately the private self, it changes both how one acts toward others and how one apprehends persons and things. The self no longer serves as the privileged standard by which they are judged and valued. It remains the subject of moral agency, but its judgments and actions are reoriented toward relational and public concerns.

III. No-self (*anātman*) in Buddhism: Between Ontological Analysis and the Practice of Liberation¹⁹

The previous section examined the Confucian idea of no-self, focusing on the passage from the *Analects* cited by Eung'un Gongyeo 應雲空如. Before analyzing the passage from the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*; *Jīngang jīng* 金剛經) that he also cites, however, it is necessary to clarify the broader doctrinal framework within which Buddhist no-self developed. Unlike its Confucian counterpart, Buddhist no-self encompasses questions concerning the nature of the person, the ontological status of phenomena, and the practical path to liberation. Therefore, this section begins with the early Buddhist analysis of no-self before turning to its development in Mahāyāna thought, which provides the doctrinal context for the passage cited by Eung'un. For example, the *Discourse on the Characteristic of no-self* (P. *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*; *Wuwo xiang jing* 無我相經), a discourse preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas, explains no-self as follows:

Monks, material form (P. *rūpa*; se 色) is not self. If material form were self, it would not lead to suffering (P. *dukkha*; ku 苦), and one could say of material form, "Let my material form be thus; let my material form not be thus." But because material form is not self, it leads to suffering, and one cannot say of material form, "Let my material form be thus; let my material form not be thus."

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, Indic terms in this paper are given in Sanskrit. In citations from certain early Buddhist scriptures, however, Pāli forms are used in accordance with the language of the source text and are identified by the abbreviation "P." Where necessary, Chinese equivalents are also provided in Chinese characters.

[In this manner,] Feeling (P. *vedanā*; *shou* 受) is not self Perception (P. *saññā*; *xiang* 想) is not self Mental formations (P. *saṅkhārā*; *xing* 行) are not self Consciousness (P. *viññāṇa*; *shi* 識) is not self²⁰

A similar passage can also be found in the Connected Discourses (*Saṃyukta Āgama*; *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經):

Whatever material form exists—whether past, future, or present; internal or external; coarse or subtle; good or ugly; far or near—all of it is not self, does not exist as an entity separate from the self, and does not stand in a relation of mutual inherence with the self. The same is true of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.²¹

Here, the analysis of no-self examines what is conventionally called “I” through the five aggregates (*pañcaskandha*; *wuyun* 五蘊). None of these can legitimately be identified as self, possessed as belonging to the self, or regarded as containing the self. What is conventionally designated as the “I” is understood as a conditioned, ever-changing configuration of the aggregates. The point of this analysis is not to replace the self with the aggregates as a new substance, but to terminate the cognitive process of identification through which these conditioned phenomena are possessively appropriated as “I” and “mine.”

The early Buddhist analysis of no-self thus has an ontological implication: conditioned phenomena are impermanent and dependently arisen and therefore cannot function as an independent and enduring self. Events arise through converging conditions rather than from an underlying substance. From a contemporary philosophical perspective, this may be described as an anti-substantialist analysis, insofar as it refuses to posit an enduring essence behind conditioned phenomena. At this stage, the difference from Confucian no-self

²⁰ rūpaṃ bhikkhave anattā. rūpaṃ-ca h’idaṃ bhikkhave attā abhaviṣṣa, nayida.m rūpa . m ābādhāya saṃvattēyya, labbhettha ca rūpe, evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu eva.m me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣīti. yasmā ca kho bhikkhave rūpaṃ anattā, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati, na ca labbhati rūpe, evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahoṣīti . . . vedanā anattā . . . saññā anattā . . . sa.mkhārā anattā...viññā.na.m anattā. (SN, 22.59)

²¹ 諸所有色，若過去若未來若現在，若內若外，若麤若細，若好若醜，若遠若近，彼一切非我不異我不相在，如是觀察，受想行識亦復如是。(SA, fasc. 2, T2.7c)

remains pronounced: early Buddhist no-self is articulated through an analysis of the status of the five aggregates, whereas Confucian no-self is primarily framed as a transformation of moral agency.

With subsequent doctrinal developments in Buddhism, however, the analysis of no-self is extended beyond the person to the phenomena that constitute experience and the world. What is denied is not their conventional occurrence but their independent existence and inherent nature. This perspective is especially prominent in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, which exerted a strong influence on East Asia. Let us now examine the passage from the *Diamond Sūtra* cited by Eung'un Gongyeo:

Subhūti, there is truly no dharma that can be named a bodhisattva. Therefore, the Tathāgata says, “All dharmas (*fa* 法) are without the mark of self (*woxiang* 我相), the mark of person (*renxiang* 人相), the mark of sentient being (*zhongshengxiang* 衆生相), and the mark of lifeholder (*shouzhexiang* 壽者相).” Subhūti, if a bodhisattva says, “I shall adorn the Buddha-field,” that person is not to be called a bodhisattva. Why? Because what the Tathāgata calls the adornment of the Buddha-field is not adornment; therefore, it is called adornment. Subhūti, if a bodhisattva has penetrated the Dharma of no-self (*anātman-dharma*; *wuwo zhi fa* 無我之法), the Tathāgata calls that person a true bodhisattva.²²

This passage is a representative section of the *Diamond Sūtra* that explains the mode of being of the bodhisattva and the essence of practice from the perspective of no-self. Here, the declaration that “there is truly no dharma that can be named a bodhisattva” rejects the substantialization of the bodhisattva as an independently existing being with a fixed identity. “Bodhisattva” is instead a conventional designation inseparable from the practice of nonattachment and emptiness (*śūnyatā*; *kong* 空). The passage therefore denies the substantialization not only of the practitioner but also of the prac-

²² 須菩提，實無有法名為菩薩。是故佛說一切法無我無人無眾生無壽者。須菩提，若菩薩作是言，我當莊嚴佛土。是不名菩薩。何以故？如來說莊嚴佛土者，即非莊嚴，是名莊嚴。須菩提，若菩薩通達無我法者，如來說名真是菩薩。(DW, T8.751b)

tice and goal attributed to that practitioner. The four marks (*catur-lakṣaṇa*; *sixiang* 四相) may be understood as overlapping modes of substantializing personal identity: the self as an independent subject, the person as a bounded individual, the sentient being as an enduring living entity, and the life-holder as a continuous identity persisting through time. The final sentence cited by Eung'un Gonggyeo—"one who has penetrated the Dharma of no-self is called a true bodhisattva"—identifies insight into no-self as indispensable to authentic bodhisattva practice. A true bodhisattva is thus one who has relinquished attachment to the four marks and realized emptiness.

Mahāyāna Buddhism extends the analysis of no-self beyond persons to the phenomena that constitute experience and the world. This is usually summarized through the terms "no-self of persons" (*pudgala-nairātmya*; *ren wuwo* 人無我), also called "emptiness of self" (*ātma-śūnyatā*; *wokong* 我空), and "no-self of dharma" (*dharma-nairātmya*; *fa wuwo* 法無我), also called "emptiness of dharma" (*dharma-śūnyatā*; *fakong* 法空).²³ No-self of persons is a critique of the subject that is ordinarily experienced as "I" or as a "sentient being" (*sattva*; *zhongsheng* 衆生). In this formulation, the sentient being is defined as a provisional being established through the combination of the five aggregates, and it is explained as not possessing an independent and permanent inherent nature. What we call "I" is a conventional designation for the conditioned continuity of the five aggregates; no independent and permanent subject stands behind them as their possessor or controller. This follows the early Buddhist doctrine of no-self. In this respect, no-self of persons functions as a teaching that criticizes the tendency toward substantialization inherent in ordinary self-experience. Although we ordinarily experience ourselves as a

²³ Introductory explanations of *pudgala-nairātmya* and *dharma-nairātmya*, such as those discussed above, often appear in East Asian Buddhist writings. For example, see *Compendium of the Meaning of the Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章), composed by Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523–92):

二無我者，一人無我，二法無我。人無我者，經中亦名眾生無我，亦名生空，亦名人無我，亦名人空，亦名我空。眾生法成生，故曰眾生，生但假有，無其自性，是故名為眾生無我。眾生性相，一切皆無，說之為空，寄用名人，無我與空，義同前釋，性實名我，陰中無我故曰我空，法無我者，亦名法空。自體名法，法無性實，名法無我。諸法性相，一切皆無名為法空。此即二種，俱名為空，齊號無我。(DY, fasc. 1, T44.485b)

continuous and identical subject, Buddhism regards this identity as conventionally established rather than independently existent. In this respect, no-self of persons preserves and systematizes the central insight of the early Buddhist analysis of no-self.

What distinguishes much of Mahāyāna thought is not the abandonment of no-self of persons but the extension of the analysis to the constituent dharmas themselves. Here, “dharma” (*fa* 法) is a concept that includes not only the five aggregates but also the phenomena that constitute the world. No-self of dharma maintains that all such constituent elements also lack an independent and self-sufficient inherent nature. In other words, not only is the sentient being conventionally constituted, but the dharmas through which it is constituted likewise lack independent and self-sufficient existence. From a contemporary philosophical standpoint, this may be interpreted as a radical form of anti-substantialism, since even the constituent factors of experience are denied independent and self-sufficient existence. In this context, no-self does not simply concern the absence of an independently existing “I”; it extends to the critique of inherent nature in all phenomena.

If these two types of no-self function as Buddhist critiques of the substantialization of the self and the world, how can they be meaningfully compared with Confucian no-self, which operates primarily as an ethical strategy of self-cultivation? The key lies in recognizing that Buddhist no-self performs inseparable analytical and soteriological functions. Its ontological critique of substantial identity must therefore be understood in relation to the liberative work it performs by dismantling self-grasping and affliction. In East Asian Buddhist terms, no-self belongs not only to ontological analysis but also to the theory of practice and realization (*xiuzheng lun* 修證論). The practical dimension should not be separated from the ontological analysis; rather, the latter must be understood in terms of the liberative function it is intended to serve. In particular, the afflictions (*kleśa*; *fannao* 煩惱) that arise from the view of self (*ātma-dṛṣṭi*; *wojian* 我見) provide a point of comparison with the problem of the “emphatic self” discussed above. For example, the Ekottarika Āgama (*Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含經) contains the following passage:

When that person gives rise to such unwholesome thoughts, six kinds of views immediately arise, and these in turn give rise to wrong views (*mithyā-dṛṣṭi*; *xiejian* 邪見). When the view “there is a self” arises, that person immediately fixes upon that view as true. When the view “there is no self” arises, that person likewise fixes upon it as true. That person establishes both the view “there is a self” and the view “there is no self,” and within this again gives rise to fixed views.

Again, while observing one’s own body, that person gives rise to such views: speaking of oneself, yet failing to see the true self. Again, that person gives rise to such views: speaking of no-self, yet failing to see no-self, and in between these produces yet another view.

At that time, that person again gives rise to this wrong view: “What is called myself is this present world, and it will also be so in the next world. It will always exist in the world, will not decay or disappear, will not change, and will not move or shift.” This is called the cluster of wrong views.

Wrong views, calamity, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, and afflictions all arise from this. They cannot be healed or relinquished and ultimately serve only to increase the root of suffering. Therefore, this is not the path of the renunciant (*śramaṇa*; *shamen* 沙門), nor is it the path leading to the ultimate cessation (*nirvāṇa*; *niepan* 涅槃).²⁴

The significance of this passage lies in its refusal to turn no-self itself into a dogmatic view. Both “there is a self” and “there is no self” become sources of bondage when grasped as fixed propositions. No-self therefore functions here as a therapeutic teaching that dismantles attachment to views rather than replacing one fixed position concerning the self with another.

Afflictions arise because one does not understand that all things arise provisionally through conditions. Suffering arises when conditioned and impermanent phenomena are grasped as independently real, permanent, or possessable. Central among these forms of attachment is the appropriation of experience in terms of an enduring “I.” Once the

²⁴ 彼人起此不祥之念，便興六見展轉生邪想，有我見審有此見，無有我見審興此見，有我見無我見於中起審見。又復自觀身復興此見，於己而不見己，復興此見，於無我而不見無我，於中起此見。爾時，彼人復生此邪見：我者即是今世，亦是後世，常存於世而不朽敗，亦不變易，復不移動。是謂名為邪見之聚。邪見災患憂悲苦惱，皆由此生而不可療治，亦復不能捨，遂增苦本，由是不為沙門之行涅槃之道。(EA, fasc. 34, T2.740b–c)

aggregates are appropriated as “I,” external objects are correspondingly appropriated as “mine.” This division structures the world in terms of attraction and aversion, thereby generating craving, hostility, and action. Conversely, relinquishing attachment to “I” becomes central to the practitioner’s path. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra; Dazhi du lun), which played a central role in the formation of the East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, identifies self-grasping as the root of affliction:

Attachment to “I” is the root of all afflictions. First, one attaches to the five aggregates as “I”; next, one attaches to external things as “mine.” Because one is bound to what is mine, desire and aversion arise toward objects, and conditioned by desire and aversion, various actions arise. When the Buddha said that “there is no agent,” it was in order to break attachment to self (wo 我) within all dharmas. Again, when he said that “the eye does not come from anywhere when it arises, nor does it go anywhere when it ceases,” he was teaching that the eye is impermanent. Impermanence is suffering, and suffering is neither self nor what belongs to self. Because there is no self and nothing that belongs to self, the mind has nowhere to attach itself among all dharmas. If the mind has nowhere to attach itself, the bonds of affliction do not arise.²⁵

This passage makes the practical and soteriological function of no-self explicit. Here, the ontological critique of self is placed within an explicit soteriological sequence: self-grasping conditions possessiveness, possessiveness gives rise to desire and aversion, and these in turn generate karma and suffering. The statement that “there is [a karmic result, but] no agent”²⁶ therefore serves not merely as an ontological claim but as a practical intervention into the tendency to attribute action to a substantial “I.” Likewise, the scriptural statement that “the eye does not come from anywhere when it arises, nor does

²⁵ 我是一切諸煩惱根本，先著五眾為我，然後著外物為我所，我所縛故而生貪患，貪患因緣故起諸業。如佛說「無作者」則破一切法中我。若說「眼無所從來，滅亦無所去」則說眼無常。若無常即是苦，苦即是我非我，我所。我我所無故，於一切法中心無所著。心無所著故則不生結使。(MPPŚ, fasc. 31, T25.295a)

²⁶ 有業報而無作者。(SA, fasc. 13, T2.92c) This passage appears several times in the *Samyukta Āgama*.

it go anywhere when it disappears”²⁷ does not deny the existence of the sense organ. Rather, it is meant to show that the eye is an impermanent process without fixed inherent nature. Recognizing the eye as impermanent reveals its vulnerability to suffering; what is impermanent and subject to suffering cannot legitimately be regarded as self or as belonging to self. As a result, the mind can no longer find an object to which it may attach itself; and because there is no attachment, the bonds of affliction do not arise. This sequence of reasoning shows that no-self is not merely a doctrinal proposition but is located within a practical chain of cognition that cuts off attachment.

This practical interpretation of no-self has also been emphasized in contemporary scholarship on early Buddhism. Lim Seung-taek, for example, characterizes its earliest form as “practical no-self with a therapeutic and practice-oriented character” (Lim 2017, 102). More specifically, Lim argues that early Buddhist texts deploy no-self therapeutically to negate various forms of self-view (*P. attavāda*), rather than presenting it primarily as a metaphysical analysis of the self.²⁸

As a contemporary extension of this framework, Buddhist dependent origination may also illuminate the social conditions underlying individual achievement. From the perspective of dependent origination, abilities and achievements cannot be attributed exclusively to an isolated individual, since they arise through bodily endowments, education, economic resources, social institutions, and countless forms of cooperation. It is therefore difficult to isolate any purely individual contribution from the broader conditions that make it possible. Ordinary cognition, however, tends to obscure this conditioned structure by treating abilities and achievements as exclusively “mine.” It thereby reinforces the belief in an independently existing “I,” together with the notions of “mine” and “my abilities,” which then provide the basis for

²⁷ 眼生時無有來處，滅時無有去處。 (SA, fasc. 13, T2.92c)

²⁸ Similar practice-oriented interpretations appear in contemporary English-language Buddhist teaching. Goldstein presents insight into no-self (*P. anatta*) as a release from identification with “I” and “mine,” through which suffering is diminished, and life becomes more fluid and open. Armstrong likewise argues that relinquishing self-clinging opens the way to liberation and the cessation of suffering. See Goldstein (1995) and Armstrong (2001).

comparison with others. This corresponds precisely to conceit (*māna*; 慢), one of the fundamental afflictions taught in Buddhism.

Buddhist accounts of conceit further show how self-grasping operates through comparative judgments of superiority, equality, and inferiority. Such comparison becomes afflictive when conventional distinctions are reified as relations among independently existing and possessive selves.²⁹

Within the framework of anti-egocentrism developed above, Buddhist *anātman* may be understood as a transformation that begins by loosening attachment to “I” and “mine.” Since such attachment gives rise to craving, aversion, and conceit, insight into no-self interrupts the process through which self-grasping develops into karma and suffering. This transformation concerns not only conduct but also the way in which persons and phenomena are perceived. Rather than regarding them as independent and enduring substances, the practitioner comes to see them as conditioned and dependently arisen. Buddhist no-self is therefore anti-egocentric not simply because it encourages unselfish behavior, but because it alters the cognitive and affective structure through which experience is organized around a substantialized self. Its epistemic, ethical, and practical dimensions are inseparable, and all three are grounded in an anti-substantialist analysis.

What is particularly noteworthy is that Confucian and Buddhist no-self, despite their different intellectual foundations, can be inter-

²⁹ For the full list of the conceit in Buddhism, see:

The inflated thought of one who thinks, in comparison with someone inferior, “I am superior,” or in comparison with someone equal, “I am equal,” is conceit (*māna*; 慢). Thinking, in comparison with someone equal, “I am superior,” is excessive conceit (*atimāna*; 過慢). Thinking, in comparison with someone superior, “I am superior,” is conceit beyond conceit (*mānātīmāna*; 慢過慢). Taking the five aggregates to be “I” or “mine” is self-conceit (*asmimāna*; 我慢). Claiming, when one has not attained it, “I have attained a superior achievement,” is overestimating conceit (*abhimāna*; 增上慢). Thinking, in relation to someone extremely superior, “I am only slightly inferior,” is inferior conceit (*ūnamāna*; 卑慢). Claiming, when one lacks virtue, “I have virtue,” is wrong conceit (*mithyāmāna*; 邪慢).

於劣於等如其次第謂己為勝謂己為等令心高舉總說為慢。於等於勝如其次第謂勝謂等總名過慢。於勝謂勝名慢過慢。於五取蘊執我我所令心高舉名為我慢。於未證得殊勝德中謂己證得名增上慢。於多分勝謂己少劣名為卑慢。於無德中謂己有德名為邪慢。(AKBh, fasc. 19, T29.101a)

preted within a shared horizon of anti-egocentrism. Confucian *wuwo* seeks to overcome private partiality through moral cultivation of Confucian virtues, whereas Buddhist *anātman* loosens attachment to “I” and “mine” through an anti-substantialist analysis of persons and phenomena with the five aggregates and the emptiness of dharmas. Their convergence therefore does not imply an identical account of reality. Rather, it appears at the practical level, where both traditions identify the self-centered appropriation of experience as a distortion of one’s relations with others and the world.

IV. Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman*: Beyond the Limits of Historical Reconciliation

Premodern East Asian thinkers often emphasized the essential affinity between Confucian and Buddhist no-self. As the discussion of Eung’un Gongyeo in the Introduction suggests, this was not an isolated claim unique to him. Baekpa Geungseon 白坡巨璇 (1767–1852), a Joseon-period Buddhist meditation master, likewise argued for the fundamental sameness of Confucianism and Buddhism in his *Statement on Establishing an Association for Meditative Practice* (*Suseon gyeolsa mun* 修禪結社文):

There are not two Ways under Heaven, and the sages do not have two minds. Confucianism takes the five constant virtues (*wuchang* 五常) as the pivot of the Way, and these are the same as the five precepts (*wujie* 五戒) of Buddhism. Not killing (*bu shasheng* 不殺生) is humaneness (*ren* 仁); not stealing (*bu toudao* 不偷盜) is righteousness (*yi* 義); not engaging in sexual misconduct (*bu xieyin* 不邪淫) is ritual propriety (*li* 禮); not drinking alcohol (*bu yinjiu* 不飲酒) is wisdom (*zhi* 智); and not speaking falsely (*bu wangyu* 不妄語) is trustworthiness (*xin* 信). Only the wording differs; the meaning is the same.

Confucius said, “He had no personal intention, no insistence on necessity, no obstinacy, and no self.” The *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易) also says, “Stopping at the back” (*gen qi bei* 艮其背); this is precisely “having no self” (*wuwo* 毋我). It also says, “Walking in the courtyard”

(*xing qi ting* 行其庭); this is “having no person” (*wuren* 毋人). Since there is neither self nor other, what fault could there be? . . . Buddhism says, “With no self and no person, one cultivates all good and thereby attains enlightenment.” This may be said to be as if the words came from the same mouth.

Moreover, what Confucianism calls bright virtue (*mingde* 明德) is precisely what Buddhism calls the wondrous, pure, luminous mind (*miaojing mingxin* 妙精明心). What is called “quiescent and unmoving; when stimulated, it thereby penetrates” (*jiran budong, gan er sui tong* 寂然不動, 感而遂通) is precisely what Buddhism calls “constant quiescence and constant illumination” (*changji changzhao* 常寂常照). Again, the statement “Only after one has it in oneself can one demand goodness from others; only after there is no evil in oneself can one correct the evil of others” (*you zhuji ranhou, keyi ze ren zhi shan; wu e yu ji ranhou, keyi zheng ren zhi e* 有諸己然後, 可以責人之善, 無惡於己然後, 可以正人之惡) is no different from what our Buddhism calls “cutting off evil, cultivating good, and benefiting sentient beings” (*duan e xiu shan, raoyi youqing* 斷惡修善, 饒益有情).³⁰

Baekpa Geungseon begins from the premise that both Confucianism and Buddhism ultimately return to a single Way at the level of sagehood. Within this framework, he uses the *Analects* and the *Book of Changes* to establish correspondences with Buddhist teachings. By aligning the five constant virtues with the five precepts, he argues that Buddhist precepts possess the same ethical structure as Confucian virtues. He then brings together the four severings of the *Analects* and an interpretation of the Gen hexagram (*gengua* 艮卦) in the *Book of Changes*, placing them alongside the Buddhist theory of no-self. Through this juxtaposition, he interprets the Confucian tradition as containing a practical orientation that restrains attachment to self and dissolves the opposition between self and other.

³⁰ 天下無二道, 聖人無兩心。儒以五常而為道樞, 即佛之五戒也。不殺, 仁也。不盜, 義也。不淫, 禮也。不飲酒, 智也。不妄語, 信也。但文異而意同也。夫子曰: 毋意毋必毋固毋我。易又云: 艮其背, 毋我也。行其庭, 毋人也。無我無人, 何垢之有? 佛之言曰: 無我無人, 修一切善, 即得菩提, 可謂如出一口也。又儒之所謂明德, 即佛之所謂妙精明心也。所謂寂然不動, 感而遂通, 即佛之所謂常寂常照也。所謂有諸己然後, 可以責人之善, 無惡於己然後, 可以正人之惡者, 與吾教所謂斷惡修善, 饒益有情者, 何以異乎? (SE, H10.546a)

However, Baekpa's argument of no-self does not primarily concern the ontological analysis of persons and dharmas examined above. Rather, he approaches it through the practical framework of bodhisattva conduct, emphasizing the overcoming of self-centered distinctions and the cultivation of goodness for the benefit of others. In the following paragraph, he likewise equates Confucian bright virtue and "quiescent and unmoving; when stimulated, it thereby penetrates" with the Buddhist "wondrous, pure, luminous mind" and "constant quiescence and constant illumination." This comparison presents Confucian moral self-cultivation and Buddhist practice as functionally convergent, without demonstrating that they share an identical philosophical foundation.

Comparable attempts to align Confucian and Buddhist teachings appear in earlier sources. The Northern Song Confucian scholar Liu Anshi 劉安世 (1048–1125), for example, stated the following:

The words of Confucius and the Buddha serve as beginning and end for one another. Confucius's statement, "He had no personal intention, no insistence on necessity, no obstinacy, and no self," and the Buddha's statement, "There is no self, no person, no sentient being, and no life-holder," are arranged in such a way that their order and structure seem to have come from one person. It is only because Confucius took the three bonds (*sangang* 三綱) and the five constant virtues (*wuchang* 五常) as the Way that he merely opened a subtle clue to the teaching that "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" (*se ji shi kong, kong ji shi se* 色即是空, 空即是色), allowing people to awaken to it for themselves. The mind of Confucius is precisely the mind of the Buddha. If there were no three bonds and five constant virtues under Heaven, calamity and disorder would arise, and human beings would be brought to extinction. How could this be the mind of the Buddha? Therefore, the minds of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are all one; only their institutional forms and teachings differ from one another.³¹

³¹ 孔子佛氏之言，相為終始。孔子之言母意母必母固母我，佛之言無我無人無眾生無壽者。其言次第，若出一人。但孔子以三綱五常為道，故色空空之說，微開其端，令人自得耳。孔子之心佛心也。假若天下無三綱五常則禍亂，又作人無唯類矣。豈佛之心乎。故儒釋道其心皆一，門庭施設不同耳。(RT. fasc. 2, X86.601b–c)

Liu Anshi advances a reconciliatory interpretation in which Confucian and Buddhist teachings express a common moral intention through different doctrinal and institutional forms. According to this view, the passages from the *Analects* and the *Diamond Sūtra* are both understood as being based on the theory of no-self, and Liu interprets them as converging in their effort to overcome attachment to self, although the texts themselves emerge from different doctrinal contexts. Liu maintains that Confucius only hinted at the Buddhist teaching of emptiness because he regarded the ethical framework sustaining social order as central to the Way. This interpretation presents Confucian and Buddhist no-self as practically continuous despite their doctrinal differences. These statements may be read, at least in part, as efforts to establish the philosophical and ethical legitimacy of Buddhism within a Confucian intellectual environment. They accomplished this by placing the two traditions within a shared discourse of the Way, moral cultivation, and freedom from self-centered attachment. The no-self foregrounded in these passages is primarily practical rather than explicitly ontological: it concerns the transformation of self-centered attitudes and conduct.

Of course, premodern accounts that drew connections between Confucian and Buddhist no-self cannot necessarily be regarded as conclusions reached through rigorous and systematic philosophical analysis. Such interpretations frequently relied on verbal and functional correspondences without adequately distinguishing the doctrinal histories and philosophical structures of the concepts being compared. Consequently, the distinct doctrinal and philosophical contexts of Confucian and Buddhist no-self were often obscured as attention centered on their ethical and practical similarities. From a contemporary philosophical perspective, these attempts may therefore appear reductive, remaining at the level of broad correspondence rather than penetrating the deeper doctrinal structures of the two traditions. Nor can the logical leaps involved in bringing together concepts that arose from substantially different intellectual contexts primarily on the basis of their ethical utility be overlooked.

Despite these limitations, the premodern search for common ground between Confucian and Buddhist no-self provides an important

point of departure for the present study. These interpretations may not have sufficiently distinguished the doctrinal histories and philosophical structures of the two traditions, yet they recognized that Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman* could be brought into comparison through their shared concern with the transformation of self-centeredness. Their significance therefore lies not only in their historical role in facilitating dialogue between the traditions, but also in the comparative possibility they disclose.

A contemporary comparison can build on this insight while examining more carefully both the convergence and the differences between the two traditions. Confucianism formulates the problem of self-centeredness primarily in terms of private partiality, whereas Buddhism addresses attachment to “I” and “mine” through an analysis of persons and phenomena. Both, however, seek to interrupt processes through which the self becomes the privileged center of desire, judgment, and action. The Confucian progression from private intention to fixed expectation, obstinacy, and self-assertion may thus be compared, without being equated, with the Buddhist progression from self-grasping to craving and aversion, karma, and suffering. Confucian *wuwo* reorients moral agency within a relational and impartial horizon, while Buddhist *anātman* transforms experience through the recognition that persons and phenomena are dependently arisen and empty of inherent nature. The two traditions may therefore be interpreted within a shared horizon of anti-egocentrism, not because their doctrines are identical, but because both seek to transform self-centered thinking and acting.

V. Conclusion

Taken together, the foregoing analysis shows that Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman*, although grounded in different philosophical traditions, share a practical orientation toward overcoming self-centeredness. This paper has characterized that orientation as anti-egocentrism. Such convergence does not imply doctrinal identity. Confucian *wuwo* transforms private partiality while preserving the subject

of moral cultivation, whereas Buddhist *anātman* approaches self-grasping through an anti-substantialist understanding of persons and phenomena.

In the Confucian tradition, no-self does not ordinarily signify the denial of a substantial self. It refers instead to the transformation of the private standpoint from which judgment and conduct become centered on one's own concerns. The commentarial tradition extending from He Yan and Xing Bing to Zhu Xi interpreted the four severings of the *Analec*s as closely connected forms of freedom from self-centeredness. Within Neo-Confucianism, especially in Zhu Xi's thought, the implications of no-self were further systematized and philosophically elaborated: private intention gives rise to rigid expectation and obstinacy, eventually consolidating the self-centered standpoint designated by partial self (*wo* 我). *Wuwo* may therefore be understood as a form of moral cultivation that interrupts this self-reinforcing process and reorients the moral subject beyond private partiality.

Buddhist *anātman*, by contrast, arises from an analysis of the conditioned character of personal existence and is subsequently extended in Mahāyāna Buddhism to the phenomena that constitute experience. Its philosophical and practical implications, however, cannot be separated. Grasping at "I" and "mine" is both a mistaken way of apprehending existence and a source of affliction. No-self thus functions not merely as a claim about the nature of reality but as a therapeutic teaching that loosens the structure of attachment organized around a substantialized self. The Buddhist analysis of conceit further shows that self-centeredness persists not only through possession and desire but also through the tendency to define oneself comparatively in relation to others.

Premodern East Asian thinkers had already recognized a practical affinity between these two conceptions of no-self. Their attempts at reconciliation were not always based on precise distinctions between the doctrinal structures of Confucianism and Buddhism, and they sometimes drew broad equivalences from verbal or functional similarities. Nevertheless, their search for common ground provides an important point of departure for the present comparison. By translating the two traditions into a shared moral vocabulary, they disclosed the

possibility of understanding no-self as a transformation in the way human beings relate to themselves and to what lies beyond them.

Contemporary reconstruction can develop this insight beyond repeating the limitations of premodern reconciliation. It can acknowledge that Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman* offer different explanations of the self while examining the practical direction in which those explanations lead. From this perspective, their common ground lies neither in a shared ontology nor in the equation of their doctrines, but in their effort to loosen the dominance of a self-centered standpoint. Anti-egocentrism therefore provides a comparative framework that preserves philosophical difference while clarifying a meaningful practical convergence.

Further research may deepen this framework by examining more closely how the Confucian opposition between *si* 私 and *gong* 公 relates to Buddhist accounts of self-grasping and non-appropriation. The historical settings in which premodern thinkers constructed these correspondences also require more detailed investigation. Such work would make it possible to refine the comparison while resisting the reduction of either tradition to the terms of the other. The comparison between Confucian *wuwo* and Buddhist *anātman* should therefore be understood not as an attempt to erase their differences, but as a way of showing how distinct philosophical traditions can converge in the practical transformation of self-centered existence.

ABBREVIATIONS: Premodern and Canonical Texts

- AKBh.** *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*Apidamo Jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論). T29, no. 1558.
- DW.** *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Jingang bore boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經). T8, no. 235.
- DY.** 淨影慧遠. *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章 (Compendium of the Meaning of the Mahāyāna). T44, no. 1851.
- EA.** *Ekottarika Āgama* (*Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含經). T2, no. 125.
- EG.** *Eung'un Gongyeo* 應雲空如. *Eung'un Gongyeo Daesa Yumangnok* 應雲空如大師遺忘錄 (Posthumous Record of Great Master Eung'un Gongyeo). H10, no. 245.
- H.** *Hanguk bulgyo jeonseo* 韓國佛教全書 (Complete Works of Korean Buddhism). Edited by Institute of Electronic Buddhist Texts. Seoul: Dongguk University Press.
- MPPŚ.** *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* (*Dazhi du lun* 大智度論). T25, no. 1509.
- RT.** Zhu Shi'en 朱時恩, ed. *Jushi fendeng lu* 居士分燈錄 (Record of the Transmission of the Lamp among Laypeople). X86, no. 1607.
- SA.** *Samyukta Āgama* (*Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經). T2, no. 99.
- SE.** *Baekpa Geungseon* 白坡巨旒. *Suseon gyeolsa mun* 修禪結社文 (Statement on Establishing an Association for Meditative Practice). H10, no. 237.
- SN.** *Samyutta Nikāya*. In *The Samyutta-Nikāya of the Sutta-Piṭaka*. 5 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1970–1976.
- T.** *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Buddhist Canon Compiled during the Taishō Era). Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.
- X.** *Manji Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō* 卅新纂大日本續藏經 (Newly Compiled Extended Edition of the Japanese Buddhist Canon). Edited by Kawamura Kōshō 河村孝照. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975–1989.
- ZC.** Zhu Xi 朱熹. *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集註 (Collected Commentaries on the *Analects*).
- ZQ.** Zhu Xi 朱熹. *Lunyu huowen* 論語或問 (Questions on the *Analects*).

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