

Ava Jax

PHIL 4750: Topics in Philosophy

Dr. Philip Bold

12/16/24

Self-ish: The Methodology of *Losing Ourselves* in Relation to Ethics

Before embarking into the personally uncharted waters of literary criticism, you should know that I am rooting for Jay L. Garfield. His inspiration for work in cross-cultural philosophy comes from a place of seeing Western philosophy as too narrow (3:AM Magazine, 2018). When a philosophical tradition lacks the desire to engage with other ‘philosophies,’ can over time become incestuous; without consulting other global traditions, and birthing only new thought from the narrow set of generationally, sequential thinkers can lead to deformed ‘Forms’, stunted linear frameworks which at best are misunderstandings of their language, and at worst, can create violent beliefs that reject anything outside the lineage. Garfield makes a founded gesture that in a field such as philosophy within a globalized world (where cultures are necessarily coming into contact with each other via economic and political ongoing) ought to follow suit to avoid getting lost in translation.

Cross-cultural philosophy is important, honorable work. That belief should precede/subsume critique—such as my upcoming critique— under the trusting of my desire to continue forward philosophical momentum, and not to negate. The goal is to highlight potential limitations of the text, not evaluate the author’s ‘shortcomings’.

Garfield makes a point that his work is not historical because “others have [already] done that well,” implying that their comprehensive historical work should be referenced¹, rather than rehashed (Garfield, xii). So from there, he seems to be making four simultaneous moves: one to integrate all conceptions of self to each other (and to do so for no-self), one to contrast the self and no-self, one to argue for no-self over self, and one to posit an ethical benefit to believing in a no-self. Of course, these distinctions have overlapping aspects, but I hope to draw out that there are different underlying mechanisms in this text which may move to the beat of their own drum and have ebbing and flowing agendas.

And so, the cross-cultural work being done in *Losing Ourselves* will be examined and distinguished as synthesizing, comparative, argumentative and ethical. From there, I’m going to start pulling at small threads and see where they lead, which in this case, are a connection with ‘ego’ in psychoanalysis, discussing and extending Garfield’s analogy of the self to stage/screen characters through the Method, and diving into the ‘self-ish’ conceptions of Garfield’s main ethical project, drawing from Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics*. I also find it crucial to briefly broaden into an exploration of what may be misguided in cross-cultural philosophy, drawing a conclusion from convolution of moral relativism that we should be taking our time with this type of philosophical work.

Before beginning, I must express that I share these inclinations/intuitions towards the traditions of ‘no-self.’ As someone already convinced of the Self’s ephemerality, and of the agenda that propels Garfield through these pages, I didn’t have the opportunity to see if these arguments were

¹ Garfield provides such references via convenient footnotes given throughout the book

convincing enough to have changed *my* mind. And so, I do not have an internal sense of this book's efficacy, because there was nothing to convince me of. Not that my personal movement by the piece, or lack thereof, would prove to be solid evidence for anything, but felt worth mentioning.

Also, to quickly address the overall language and tone of the book, Garfield states that this could be for audiences of any background. However, there seems to be an implicit demographic in mind. He addresses explanation limitations by stating that “professional philosophers know where to find more,” that *they* know, and therefore *you* (the reader) do not. Immediately following, he expresses the desire to keep his prose “as uncluttered as possible, so as to make this an easy read,” developing a subtext that the second person audience is not of *this* demographic, and instead, of *those* who would benefit from an easier read. My two cents, in lieu of push back to the following critique, is that in excusing text's limitations on necessarily simple language for novices– I would rebuttal that philosophy should still maintain efficacy in jargon-less presentations: that these ideas can, and ought to breathe well in ‘ordinary’ language, especially since this work is trying to build a conversation.

The following section will discuss synthesis and comparative work done by Garfield, while argument and ethic are omitted from synopsis since my argumentation will follow them as such.

Synthesis/Comparison in *Losing Ourselves* for atman and anatman

To compare the ‘self’ and ‘no-self’ dichotomy, the myriad of tradition, background, and uses of ‘self’ needed to be distilled down into the one navigable word. Garfield does this cross-culturally, by

claiming that ‘atman’ pretty directly translates to the notion of ‘soul’ in Western philosophies. He helps narrow the operationalized definition by clarifying that a ‘self’ must be persistent and unchanging over time (Garfield 3). Across religious planes, the Christian conceptions of the ‘psyche’ are also thrown in, and seen as “close enough in content... that we can treat them as manifestations of the same broad idea” (Garfield 5). This synthesis also introduces Descartes’ *cogito* as the main framework in which Western philosophy describes a self. Beyond this, there is very little time that has been spent on how they were integrated, which is due to his desire to do the ethical work, and Garfield would likely say that the references and historical work can help flesh this out if the reader so desires.

Now, with my experience with the Eastern traditions being at a survey level, I hold some reservations in glossing over and outsourcing of references. The Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita are rooted in thousands of years of development, and even each themselves have an inherent synthesis tied to the labelling as such. So layered on top of it all is the innate conflation of all Hindu to conceptions of atman to *the* atman, and operationalized for Garfield’s desire for simplicity of the text. This of course is necessary and inevitable on some levels for any attempt at cross cultural philosophy, but we can operationalize while addressing limitations! Chemists are held to standards of pointing out any potential impurities, mistakes within procedure, and limitations of their experiment, but that doesn’t mean we consider their work any less important, especially under their standards! I think philosophy can (sometimes) move less rigidly in its practices than chemistry, but still, shouldn’t sacrifice the humble recognition of where its meaning can be started and stopped.

For non-self, he draws from Indian Buddhist traditions, specifically the work of Candrakirti, David Hume's bundle theory of the self, along with applying neuroscience observations (Garfield 13). My gripes with this synthesis methodology are more or less the same as stated above.

Comparison of Atmanic traditions and their no-self counterparts are polarized on the distinction between a 'self' and a 'person.' Where the self is taken as this immediate, transcendent kernel at our core, personhood is a convenient "socially construct namesake" that is posited on, but not reducible to our psychological processes (Garfield 23). The comparison between these traditions of self and no-self is primarily conducted here, although we do get a glimpse into the Humean arguments for no-self, but they are not in direct conversation with the other side of the fence. Beyond that, the bleed of comparable difference manifests within the argument for a no-self, 'person'-focussed existence, and the ethical reasons to follow as such. The comparative nature of this book doesn't seem to do much work on its own beyond the semantic level, which engages with but doesn't fully internalize the texts it's representing. I personally don't feel confident about the groundwork laid in this text to create space to maintain this argument, which is likely where my suspicions of the book first arises. I will, however, suspend my disbelief around these notions as much as possible to comment on the ethical conjectures for their own sake.

A (short) Tangent on Psychoanalysis

Before diving into further conversation on language, and in light of Garfield's emphasis on tracing etymology, I find it pertinent to pull some terms into focus. Dualism and the subject/object surface in

Descartes, creating the well which Lacanian psychoanalysis subsequently draws from. Freud (quite literally) built his psychoanalytic work around the 'ego,' and consequently, in which conceptions of 'moral' and 'rational' egoism are rooted in. How Garfield uses these concepts, particularly in relation to the 'self,' appears to be influenced by the psychoanalytic tradition and its established uses of the terms. This feels important to keep in mind when the 'self' is talked about as a egocentric notion, as this function isn't necessarily true about the 'self' in non-Western cases. Both the words 'self' and the egocentric 'selfishness' have changed through cultural use, relative to the language games in which they operate, and therefore can no longer be tied together simply by etymological origin.

Setting the Stage for Ethics: Hamlet and Self

Enough dilly dallying in the safe meadow of tangential Freud and now into the *real* weeds of Garfield's ethical project, which despite *Ethics* titling chapter seven, and his mentionings of the ethical project coming in later, actually plants seeds within the third chapter, *What You Really Are*. He sets the stage by analogizing the self and personhood embodiments to the character and the actor playing that role, respectively. This parallel is substantiated on the scaffolding of 'fact' and 'fiction' as cognates, stemming from the same etymologies, yet occupying different sectors of reality (Garfield, 39). Titular role, Hamlet, transcends each production's rendition, in stable existence from actor to actor yet trapped in his theatrical/cultural/written context. Benedict Cumberbatch is granted the ability to embody multiple British protagonists of iconic presence and enigmatic stature, however *he* will never

have the ‘being’ to exist on BBC for decades to come (temporality of ‘being’ in tumblr algorithms still up to debate).

Taking ‘if all the worlds a stage’ literally, Garfield asks us to consider the actors who play the role of Ourselves. For me, the role of Ava has been played by 22 years worth of psychological complexes, whose character traits have been influenced by the plot of the Others casted into my life. Hamlet doesn’t exist outside of his dramatic ‘world,’ and neither do ‘we’ from our fellow *dramatis personae*. Garfield acknowledges the limits of this analogy, but that it should elicit the realization that “we gain a deeper appreciation towards those who help us to become who we are” in our “collective roles” which results in a “deeper understanding of our identities and make[s] us better people” (Garfield, 40). As an actor, many of these distinctions feel intuitive to the analogy, and helpful in understanding how ‘no-self’ operates. Even in the craft itself, the stage necessarily begs for a collective creator and witness, making it much harder to be gripped by the illusion of the individual. However, I resent the idea that since we have *finally* dispelled the myths of self, we are now “facilitat[ing] moral progress” (Garfield, 43). It feels like Garfield has crossed pictures of ‘self’, conflating it with the moral hazard of ‘selfishness.’ Let us take a gander to within the language-game in which Garfield has set up for us.

The Method

There are as many approaches to the character of Hamlet as there are actors to play him. Each brings in different teachings, physical/vocal dispositions, and interpretations of the theatrical/cultural/written context. A controversial approach to contemporary character study is

Strasberg's 'the Method,'² in which the "use of one's own life experiences in the creative imagination infuses each choice with genuine thought, desire, sensation, action and feeling resulting in psychologically in-depth behavior" (Strasberg). Basically, an actor blends his own personhood (and the experiences attached in conscious memory) to the character. In the deconstruction of presentation and representation, fusing a person and self, the goal is to produce an emotionally compelling performance. Without getting bogged down in intricacies, the Method has been critiqued when actors let the negative traits of the character bleed into mistreating the surrounding people when off-stage/screen.³

The crucial distinction in my comparison here lies in that the ethics are not directly related to the Method itself, but rather, a certain application or understanding of the acting paradigm which produces 'selfish' actions. This is not to excuse the Method, or to say I wholly agree with this analogy to the ethics of 'self,' but rather, to point out that the approach to acting (or self-actualization) isn't congruent with its ethical ramifications: there may be family resemblances, but overall they are still different language games.

Garfield's Ethics and the *Lecture on Ethics*

² The Method first originated from Russian actor/director, Stanislavsky, who developed his technique from 1888-1938 ("The Definitive Guide to Method Acting"). However, in this case, it is more apt to reference the American development of the Method under Strasberg, as it more directly relates to the contemporary discussion of the techniques' implications.

³ Famous reference of such behavior is in claims to Jared Leto's behavior while acting as the Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016), in which he allegedly 'never' broke character and harassed his co-cast, but now I fear I've reached the disintegration of this analogy and wish to return to solid ground, and thank you for humoring me.

So while I've danced around references to Wittgenstein, let us introduce his *Lecture on Ethics* as a way to examine potential missteps in Garfield's work, along with bridging this into his more explicit ethical project. Take this example:

"This universe, unlike the one that motivates egoism, gives one no reason for special self-regard, or to distinguish between the moral standing of others in virtue of their relationships to oneself" (Garfield 121)

From this statement, Garfield is arguing that we ought to believe in a no-self, because it allows us to evade the illusion of a universe in which egoism exists, in which gives us an inherent personal bias to the world. If we were to adopt no-self and evade this illusion in its entirety, we would embody a socially-focussed *modus operandi* by its nature. Here's a connecting response from the Wittgenstein's work:

"Thus it seems that when we are using the word right in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not right in its trivial sense, it's something similar, and when we say "This is a good fellow," although the word good here doesn't mean what it means in the sentence "This is a good football player" there seems to be some similarity. And when we say "This man's life was valuable" we don't mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewelry but there seems to be some sort of analogy." (Wittgenstein, Lecture)

Let these serve as reminders. Taking the atman (self) as inherently allegorical, even if it is understood as a *real* picture of the world, is a better understanding of its use in the work of religion. The same idea applies to anatman (no-self), in which, despite seeming to dissolve illusions, exists on the same allegorical plane as atman.

"Abandon[ing] the self to abandon egoism" is a very narrow understanding of 'self' -- which Garfield admits to-- but implicitly applies to the broader notions of 'self' in the atmanic religions he's explicitly drawing from (Garfield 117). Egoism, in particular the subset of moral egoism, hits on the notion of all desire and action returning to the centric self, which alienates the 'other.' Atman is a 'self' in which can be transcended to, exists as a 'oneness' of the universe acting *moreso* on a holistic side, whereas moral egoism is atomistic.⁴

Applying an ethical theory to religious theory feels like trying to dissolve granulated sugar in powder; here we mistake two "teacups" for a more compatible comprehension of the information. For Garfield to claim the belief "that the illusion that we are selves undermines ethical cultivation" feels like he's making an ethical claim about religious practices (Garfield, xii).

"My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language." (Wittgenstein, Lecture)

⁴ Less central, but this notion also oversimplifies moral egoism, which can manifest in more subversive manners than this, embedding itself into a false altruism, for example (loosely), and show the separation of action and intention addressed in deontologically rooted ethical systems.

This is why conflating self with selfishness is a misunderstanding of religious language, and a misapplication of ethical language. Both aim at talking about something “supernatural” or “transcendent” in which our words can only work around– which isn’t to say that we can’t make ethical conjectures about *aspects* of religion, but that those conjectures are limited by their absoluteness.

Here is where I find the distinctions of movement (synthesis, comparative, argumentative, and ethical) important: the interpretive and evaluative functions of this book are indeed distinct, and doing both makes Garfield’s work step on its own toes. In attempts to position the ethics of not maintaining a self, unselfish atmanic actions are steamrolled in the conversation.

Moral Relativism (Don't Cry Uncle Just Yet!)

For an end, we’re going to take a step back to a broader view. The field of cross-cultural philosophy, in its intentional/comparative dialogue and, well, accepting Eastern traditions as equal to their Western counterparts, is relatively new to Western philosophy. However, the fascination with culture and morality in relation to philosophy isn’t as new as the particular comparative element of the cross-cultural field(Zalta). Since cross-cultural philosophy is relatively younger, it hasn’t had the time to establish its own foundational roots, nor flesh out its own processes and frameworks specific to its unique space it occupies. And so, I’m sure in some ways *Losing Ourselves* has drawn from these culturally “aware⁵” trains of thought, and may have hit the same potholes. I’m highlighting this not to

⁵ Aware in the sense of solely acknowledging the existence of other cultural trains of thought, not in the empathetic sense of cultural consciousness, as it is sometimes used.

detract from direct engagement with *Losing Ourselves*, but rather, to highlight my personal thoughts on ways that the dialogue continuum(which Garfield's work falls onto) could take future strides.

Moral relativism deserves a seat at the table because it is a long-standing conversation in which propels an ethical theory across cultural traditions, necessarily. In short, moral relativism acknowledges that there are "deep and widespread moral disagreements" positing a "metaethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons (Zalta).

I'm less interested in the normative position that could be taken, and more so in how this kind of idea complicates the work and language of ethical theory further than this book seems to have a handle on. This isn't to say that Garfield can not or should not make an ethical claim, but that this book is treading deep waters of limitations in what it can do to interact with all these works. This density of context creates a deep fog around this book that's worth acknowledging, *even if* the book can be elucidating on some other level, though simply calling the book a "non-professional philosopher's" introduction is certainly not the solution either.

I find this to parallel the common critiques against Peter Singer's iconic and controversial ethics paper, *Famine Affluence and Morality*, which calls on people Western culture to embrace our imperative role as global arbiters, despite psychological and physical distance from foreign affairs. In this Utilitarian strand of thought, there are certainly noble things to draw from. If we as individuals can produce individually-powered change, then perhaps we *ought* to do that. However, Utilitarianism is a Western notion, derived from Individualistic cultures. As such, ethical frameworks, such as Singer's, place the emphasis on what an *individual* should do, rather than ever really addressing

systemic oppression directly.⁶ A central critique of this individualistic thinking is also how it can start pointing towards metaphysical nihilism, paralyzing or deactivating people because the only way to conceptualize ethics is *by* doing something as an individual that produces the most ‘good’ (an ephemeral and illusory form). This would then make the ‘good’ infinite and the Individual infinitely small, who despite the difficulties in which they could focus on in their individual lives, decides they want to transcend and help others, now is told that it will not shape the cosmogonic whatsoever.

How that *all* ties back to Garfield is that although he advocates for an inherently social existence, upon the values of collectivity, interdependence and, his ethical system is *still* operating from a standpoint of Western, individualized ethical system! By writing only in the language games of classical logic of Chapters 4 and 5, or toying with Kant to deconstruct the ‘Self’, but never showing how that manifests through Candrakirti’s tongue means that the prose, the language, and therefore Garfield’s description of the worlds are not aiming at a top-down, cross-cultural conjecture. Okay, now you can cry uncle.

Conclusion

From this process of examination and critique, I feel though I’ve walked away with a better appreciation of Garfield’s work and the traditions of ‘self’ that I’m not naturally inclined to. In this paper, we posed four distinct movements that run through *Losing Ourselves*, following the lines of

⁶ This is something I find quite ironic about Utilitarianism in general, since it’s claim to fame is being as universally applicable as possible, yet somehow evades talking about the overarching systems which can contextualize how people take action, even and especially in colonizer/global power countries, like the United States.

synthesis and comparative motion, watching as they cut some corners for the sake of brevity and clarity. Then, we briefly discuss psychoanalysis and use of the word ‘ego.’ We then dove into the ethical work, pushing Self/Hamlet to their analogous endpoints, by challenging it with a different metaphorical constitution within the Method. Expanding into the crux of the ethical project, and the missteps of dissolving sugar in powder. Finally, we opened up the metaethical door to moral relativism, letting it point out how Garfield’s ethics only engage within a Western ethical system.

Although Garfield’s mission was of positing an ethical argument for living with ‘no-self’, the heart of it seems seated in his “hope that this short book stimulates some of [his] readers to go deeper into this question [of self] in conversation with the texts (Garfield, xiii).” I find hope in *that* for this book, despite my methodological hesitations. Cross-cultural philosophy, still in its infancy, and aimed at bridging traditions with millennia of history/language differences, acts like a ‘teacup while a gallon of water is poured over it.’ It will not hold it all, we shouldn’t expect it to. So, while we mend the chips and find a coaster, we can continue to engage with this work, remembering that these things take time, so take time.

Works Cited

Garfield, Jay L. *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

"The Definitive Guide to Method Acting." *Backstage*, 19 May 2020,

<https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-method-acting-65816/>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024.

"The 3:AM Magazine Interview." *3:AM Magazine*, 9 Jan. 2018,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180109235705/http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/buddhist-howls/>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024. (An interview with Jay. L Garfield)

Strasberg, Lee. *What Is Method Acting?* The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute,

<https://strasberg.edu/about/what-is-method-acting/>. Accessed 18 Dec. 2024.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Lecture on Ethics*. Translated by C.K. Ogden, 1929.

Zalta, E. N. (Ed.). (2023). *Relativism*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/#MetMorRel>