

## WHAT IF THERE WERE NO SELF?

by Lester J. Start

February 3, 1989

Kalamazoo College, Chapel Address

My text is from the first gospel, Matthew 16:24-25. The verses read: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

I propose to take this text seriously and literally, and together with the insights of the Buddha and Aristotle consider with you what it might mean really to deny the self. And so I've proposed the question, "What if there were no self?"

Of course, on the face of it, it seems a silly question. There is the story of the freshman who got bogged down in his introduction to philosophy course. He had reached the section on the self, or the problem of personal identity (as the jargon goes). He had read Hume who convincingly argued that one can never experience the self or mind, only thinking or thoughts. Then he read something about Kant's transcendental unity of apperception above or behind the clanking categories of the mind. This didn't help. Then he remembered how his high school counselor had told him that he would find himself in college. And he was beside himself with despair. So he went to his professor, told him about his doubts and problems, confessed he wasn't himself, and wondered in his confusion whether he had a self at all. "Tell me," he asked, "Do I or don't I?" The professor replied in good Socratic fashion with another question. "Now just who is it who wants to know?"

As I said, it seems like a silly question, the kind philosophers ask. But many thinkers have asked it very seriously. What is the self? What if there is no such thing?

I've mentioned Hume's skepticism, but he doesn't really count. He suffered from a kind of intellectual tunnel vision, and there was a lot he didn't see.

A more recent philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, who inspired much mid-century thought, seriously defined the self as nothingness. This is what is referred to in his great work **BEING AND NOTHINGNESS**. Self, he said, is essentially consciousness; consciousness is intentional, it is always of something else. Self is nothing in itself, nothing. For self is freedom as well, and to be free is not to be objectified, reduced to a thing.

How uncomfortable it is to be fixed by the stare of another, how intolerable it is to be labeled, used or abused as a mere object. How sad it is to see oneself merely in terms of a fixed role or routine.

Thomas Wolfe in one of his novels tells of a young man who is a dreamer of dreams and the despair of his elders. One day he gives up his dreams, gets a job and settles down. At last he has

found himself, say his elders. Alas, he has lost himself, says the novelist, lost his vision, his freedom.

But let us go back to the readings of the great ones. The Buddha, Aristotle, and Jesus all seemed to have taken the question seriously. Now why?

For the Buddha, the teaching of the not self is basic. He was concerned to meet the terrible problem of suffering in the world. He taught that all existence involves suffering, that suffering is caused by desire, and that suffering could be cured only by doing away with desire. Moreover, all desire has as its focus the notion of an ego self that stands apart as a separate entity from the process and flow of existence. Where there is no self, there is no suffering. Children know this intuitively when they respond to teasing with "I don't care." Only when we realize that there is no self apart from the physical and mental processes that make up our being can we really let go and find peace.

Now Aristotle's problem was different. He was concerned to show how truth can be known. His approach is always functional; a thing is what it does. For example, an axe is a tool that cuts wood. The soul is what the body does; if the eye were the body, seeing would be the soul. But there is a hierarchy of functions, the highest of which Aristotle calls mind or the active intellect. It is this which in Christian theology after Aquinas has been traditionally associated with the soul.

Now Aristotle has this amazing notion that this mind (our true soul or self) is nothing at all before it thinks. It is pure potentiality. But it is potentially everything it thinks. Like the blank tablet which has nothing on it until it is inscribed, the mind is nothing until it thinks. But as the place of the forms, those ideal Platonic conceptions that are the goal of the highest thought, the mind has the potential ability to grasp the whole world of ideas, the whole realm of truth.

Aristotle's aim is to insist that knowing is a kind of seeing, *theoria*, in which truths can be known without any personal slant. There can be, therefore, no admixture of body, no interpretive mental machinery, no substantial self, if truth is to be seen pure. Aristotle, not "Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare."

Now how does this fit in with the Buddha? When Buddhism moved into China from India, one branch merged with the traditional Chinese religion of Taoism to form the school of Ch'an or Zen. This is the form of Buddhism most familiar to Westerners because of its influence on Oriental art. And Zen aesthetics is amazingly close to Aristotle. The painter of the landscape, in meditative preparation, must in a sense be that landscape before it is depicted so that the self does not emerge to distort it.

If Aristotle did not have the same concerns as the Buddha about suffering, again, his concept of happiness is not very different. It has nothing to do with desire satisfied. Happiness is in the Greek "*eudaemonia*", having the right spirit within you, and it involves the proper subordination of desire, the calm endurance of vicissitude, and the absorption of the self in a larger context of mind.

How does Jesus fit into all this? He was not a philosopher. He never even went to college. This was a problem for the apostle Paul when he preached in Athens, the philosophical center. As he said, the Greeks found the preaching of the cross foolishness, and there is no record of his founding a church in Athens.

As we know, Jesus' main concern was to summarize the tradition of the law and prophets into two commandments — love of God and love of one's fellow man. He shared the Buddha's concern for human suffering. He knew that the desire for, the clinging to the ego, was wrong. He who will save his life shall lose it. But whosoever will lose his life for the vision Jesus presents shall find it. This is the paradox. Only by denying the ego self can the larger self emerge. And only by denying the ego self can we bear to bear the cross of human suffering and endure. This is the Buddha-like message of Jesus. And only as we are open to his example in love is the creative love of God at work in us. So goes the Christian teaching. And Aristotle speaks mystically of the highest reaches of mind as the intellectual love of God.

But enough of these parallels and comparisons. If we take seriously the convergence of these views, if we take seriously the injunction of Jesus to deny the self, what does this mean practically?

First of all, there is a clear and obvious implication to reject selfishness in all forms and to extend concern and compassion to others. But on a national level we have seen escalation of greed, sleaze, and indifference to suffering. The political cartoonist Danziger pictures the "grate" society of America, people huddled on steam grates with the White House in the background. The movie "Wall Street" flaunts greed as a virtue. Corporate takeovers are aimed at greater profits for the few rather than better production for the many.

We can look closer at home, here in the college community. The old ideal of education for service withers away, and the value of training for a career emerges instead — and this is usually measured in terms of money, not inherent satisfaction. The history of the K plan reflects this trend. When first conceived, it was planned that one off-campus quarter be devoted to volunteer service projects, another to career exploration. Because it seemed that one quarter should be kept free, the two quarters were combined. For years it was known as the career-service quarter. Now, of course, it is recognized as career development. Also, back then it was proposed that every student be required to participate in some extra-curricular activity - sports, theater, music, paper, whatever - to involve everyone in some enterprise larger than one's own concern with oneself. Perhaps such participation cannot be required, but encouraged. And it is good to see healthy programs in these areas on a volunteer basis, as well as participation in special causes such as habitat for humanity. It shows a healthy college, and helps answer the question what to do on weekends.

There is another serious fundamental ethical implication involving the self. The academic enterprise as a community of knowledge, a fellowship in learning, entails integrity and intellectual honesty. If one ever violates that ideal by cheating for one's own self-advantage, one violates not only the honor code but the community itself. If one cheats successfully, it is because others do not, and one is thereby using and abusing the integrity of others. A basic moral

principle implied here is that one should never use others as a means to one's own selfish ends. And what do you think our degree would be worth if it were known that it's easy to cheat one's way through K? This is a community concern.

Secondly, there are intellectual implications to this view of the denial of self. Sometimes one says, "I would hate to believe that" or "I'd like to believe this". But truth is not what I wish it to be. And it is not the case that I can have my truth and you, yours, that truth is whatever I claim it to be as true for me. When John Dewey proposed the pragmatic theory of truth, what is true is what works, Bertrand Russell accused him of cosmic impiety! His point: truth is not something to be manipulated for one's pragmatic benefit. Truth is not relative to one's selfish interests.

There is a positive implication to this as well. Consider again Aristotle's words: the mind is nothing before it thinks, but potentially everything it thinks. What a mind-boggling idea! What possibilities it suggests!

It suggests that it is a mistake to think of education just in terms of one's personal vocational interests or major. Liberal education is aimed at freeing the mind of narrow and parochial views of what is or is not important. The mind is a wondrous power if Aristotle is right. It is capable of constant curiosity, infinite growth.

Liberal education fosters this spirit. It is essentially the inculcation of a life-long habit of mind, as Cardinal Newman said, a habit of continuing curiosity into all sorts of things human and divine. The mind is a wondrous power, but only if freed from preconceived notions of what the self deems worth knowing. And this liberation is what a real college is all about.

Finally, there is a most important metaphysical implication in this view of the denial of self. The self is no thing. It is no ghost in the machine of the body. It is no machine, either, however sophisticated and computer-like. It is instead a process, a movement, change. Are you the same person you were a year ago? I hope not. The self is an energy that finds itself, defines itself, in its relationships with others, with the world about us, and with whatever power or presence there is that undergirds it.

We do not stand isolated as empty bottles in the rain. We flow into one another. We are all one body, as Paul said. We are part of a whole. And as Aristotle suggests, we are as great as the ideas and ideals we relate to, or as small as the things that annoy us. We are part of one great process of changing reality, as the Buddha taught. We are children of God, said Jesus, and our true being is in Him.

At the conclusion of his book on the VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, William James defines religion as the sense that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its significance, and that union or relation with that reality is our true end. If so, this is why there can be no separate self.

Some years ago my wife and I, on our way to Japan, were visiting some old friends in Honolulu - a most interesting couple. He and I had taught philosophy together long ago. He was an Indiana

Quaker and she a Chinese-American Buddhist. Together they had five daughters, each of whom was more brilliant and beautiful than all the others. We were saddened to learn that Marion was terminally ill. They insisted we stay some time with them. We were old friends.

And in spite of the illness the house was a center of activity, humor, and joy. There was no sadness. I do remember a young boy, a nephew, struggling with this event of approaching death, asking, "Aunt Marion - but where will you be when you die?" "My dear," came the serene reply, "I shall be everywhere."

There is an old Greek adage attributed to the legendary wise men of Greece. Know thyself - Gnothi Sauton. It is a good adage. Know thyself - but be sure that self is not too small.