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To cite this article: Elisa Aaltola (2019) Confronting suffering with narrative theory, constructed selfhood, and control: Critical perspectives by Simone Weil and Buddhist metaphysics, Journal of Disability & Religion, 23:3, 227-250, DOI: [10.1080/23312521.2019.1567296](https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2019.1567296)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2019.1567296>



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Published online: 10 Feb 2019.



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# Confronting suffering with narrative theory, constructed selfhood, and control: Critical perspectives by Simone Weil and Buddhist metaphysics

Elisa Aaltola

<sup>a</sup>Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

## ABSTRACT

According to the narrative approach, illness and suffering are disruptions that test our ability to retell and govern ourselves. For instance, Arthur Frank and Rita Charon argue that it is via narratives, “selves,” and control that the challenges of illness and affliction can be met. The author explores this approach in light of Simone Weil’s philosophy and Zen Buddhist thought, both of which question the primacy of selfhood, control, and discourse. Using disability as a case study, the author argues that both Weil and Zen Buddhist philosophy offer a radical alternative to narrative ethics, worthy of further scrutiny.

## KEYWORDS

Buddhism; disability; spirituality; suffering

## Introduction

Arthur Frank and Rita Charon have offered two similar narrative approaches to illness. In his book *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Frank sought to map out how narratives function as a method of constructing meaning and selfhood amid the disruptions of illness. In her *Narrative Medicine* (2006), Charon explored the notion of “narrative medicine,” wherein the medical practitioner seeks to comprehend the unfolding narratives of her patients. For both, understanding narratives allows for a more considerate approach toward those undergoing illness and suffering, and enables the ill individual to make sense of her condition. The two books offer eloquently reflected perspectives onto telling and receiving stories, and onto narratives’ impact on our notions of illness, frailty, suffering, and ethics.

Yet, both Frank and Charon rest on two central notions—selfhood and control—which are burdened with various philosophical difficulties. In the present article I explore their approach to narratives in light of this criticism, presented in the philosophy of Simone Weil and Zen Buddhist thought.

**CONTACT** Elisa Aaltola  [elanaa@utu.fi](mailto:elanaa@utu.fi)  Turun Yliopisto Turku, 20014, Finland.

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The central question is whether narratives revolved around constructing selfhood and control are the most productive way of facing and making sense of suffering. The type of disability that involves suffering (be it physiological, psychological, or social) will be used as a case example.<sup>1</sup> Thus, instead of illness, I test the narrative approach in the context of affliction and disability.

### **Narratives, selfhood, and control**

Frank criticizes the manner in which the modern era constructed a genetic role for “the sick,” whereby they became a passive, faceless group, which science would penetrate, investigate, and cure. The individuality of patients was lost, and they became representatives of diseases approached via universalism rather than particularism. According to Frank (1995), the post-modern society, on the other hand, goes against this ethos, as individuals want to “reclaim” their own selfhood and illness, and thereby take a hold of and make sense of their own condition. It is here that narratives emerge as important, for storytelling is one method of reclaiming one’s position in the world. Charon (2006) offered similar critique and pointed out how in the 20th century, the rise of social constructivism meant that suddenly “the self” was defined as fragmented and elusive,<sup>2</sup> which again gave rise to the contemporary need for narratives as a means with which the individual seeks to make sense of her own contingency and ambiguity. Thus, narratives act as a way of reaffirming oneself in an era that interrogates identities and selves (Charon, 2006). In both suggestions, selfhood and control emerge as central: via attributing meaning to her own experiences and condition, the individual seeks to actively construct and take control of her social identity and “self.”

With regard to the construction of selfhood, Frank proposes that illness is a disruption, which forces one to restructure one’s beliefs and reorients one’s projects. The act of telling new types of narratives (concerning one’s past, presence, and future), which reaffirm one’s “self,” is a method of doing so. Indeed, Frank underlines that the disruption illness causes is a call to reinvent narratives and one’s “self.” Old stories concerning ourselves no longer suffice, and novel stories are required to find fresh meanings and life-directions during adversity (Frank, 1995). Here, both the act of telling and receiving stories constitutes selfhood, for it is both in “listening to others and telling our own stories” that “we become who we are” (Frank, 1995, p. 77). Thus, our “selves” are formed via both recounting our own tales and paying heed to the stories of others. Ultimately, narratives are nothing less than the primary and necessary method of constituting oneself, and it is precisely because of this that they are so sorely needed during interruptions caused by bodily upheavals<sup>3</sup>: “Stories do not simply describe

the self; they are the self's medium of being... The self is being *formed* in what is told" (Frank, 1995, pp. 53, 55). In this narrative building of "a self," focus is on "personal becoming," and the "commitment to shaping oneself as a human being" (Frank, 1995, pp. 158-160), as we map out new terrains for who we are or want to be.

Charon (2006) follows a similar logic and posits that the key factor in stories of illness is the question "Who am I now?"<sup>4</sup> Like Frank, she suggests that both receiving and recounting illness stories revolve around the construction of selfhood. First, the receiver's "self" is her "most powerful therapeutic instrument" (Charon, 2006, p. 7) capable of attuning to and witnessing others' struggles, and it is shaped by narratives, for hearing the stories of others can spark profound, ethically productive alteration in oneself. The central aim of the recipient, with the most profound influence on her constitution, should be to pay attention to the untold nuances behind the words and in between the lines (Charon, 2006). Second, the teller's "self" is equally shaped and reconfigured by the narrative, as it helps to render events and experiences significant for her own subjective perspective—it tells "herself" to herself. Narratives achieve this partly via transforming time, including our pasts and futures, meaningful: "Narratives teach us where we come from and where we are going, allowing us to understand the meanings of our own lives" (Charon, 2006, p. 42). Therefore, again, stories establish who we are, and they do this via creating meaning around our life events, temporality and experiences.

Thus, Frank and Charon suggest that telling one's own life story is an act of creating one's self. Their starting point is that there is no "self" to be discovered outside of narratives, no pure essence undisclosed by words. Indeed, Frank warns of "The common illusion that there is a single self-entity that each person has and experiences, a self-entity that is, so to speak, out there in Nature" (Frank, 1995, p. 67). Following suit, he argues that one must resist essentializing oneself, as if one possessed a core, which needs to be located—instead of following essentialism, the task is to construct oneself with truthfulness and authenticity. Also, Charon emphasizes that narratives do not reflect events or beings as they are, but instead constitute them. Like Frank, she underlines the constructive nature of narratives on a very elemental level: narratives do not tell events, but rather make them. Thus, she asserts that "The telling does not merely expose or report that which exists prior to the narrating. It produces it" (Charon, 2006, p. 45). Both refer to Paul Ricoeur's (1991) influential concept of "narrative identity," which, together with Paul Taylor's (1989) emphasis on selfhood, has in social sciences paved the way for underlining the significance of hermeneutically interpreting and recounting "the self" (for an analysis of Ricoeur's narrative self, see Laitinen, 2002). The self is neither

independently existent (as if it was an ontological essence within us) nor nonexistent, but rather it is created and constantly reshaped through the interpretations we make and the tales we tell. Here, sociality plays a pivotal role. Charon borrows from Taylor the suggestion that it is via interlocation that “the self” comes into being. Hence, we become who we are via social engagement, amid which we narrate ourselves to others, and pay heed to their self-narrations.<sup>5</sup> Within the psychological approach to narrative identity, this process is depicted as following: “Through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the story-teller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 235).

Next to selfhood, control is also highlighted by both authors. As Frank (1995) points out, we often define ourselves partly on grounds of how well particularly our bodies maintain their control. Illness is a disruption, wherein the body is suddenly out of control, thereby becoming the uneasy focus of our attention, and here the act of telling one’s story functions as a vital manner of regaining governance. Hence, narrating becomes a method of seeking to establish control and order into one’s lived, somatic existence. The presumed need for order does not stem only from illness, but also from our cultural context. Frank warns that because in “postmodern” times we are constantly under the bombardment of different, conflicting viewpoints that push us into indecision over what is “true” or “good,” and because communal beliefs no longer offer the sort of unity and guidance they used to, many struggle to hold on to a sense of continuity and meaning. Sense making becomes ambivalent and disjointed as stories break and are replaced with others, in endless hoops, and the individual in their midst can turn out wholly disorientated. Here, we are written “from the outside,” as for instance the media thrusts in front of us a wide variety of takes on selfhood, ethics and humanity. Reclaiming stories is one answer to this disintegration and loss of direction: the individual takes authorship of her own narrative and “self,” thereby establishing where she wishes to be (Frank, 1995). This places prominence on individual control, as each person governs her own narrative, and thereby her own “self.” Like Frank, Charon (2006) notes that the postmodern world has signaled a loss of control. Simply put, while in the modernist approach, the individual was deemed to exercise control on the outside world, during the postmodern era, the outside world yields control over the individual. The subject narrating her “self” is fighting this loss of authority and the ensuing fear and anxiety—stories become a method of regaining power (Charon, 2006). Their advantage is that they can map out causalities in one’s life (x led to y, y led to z), and as such bring order, meaning and a sense of direction.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, it is through narratives that those struggling with illness can restate their selfhood and claim (some) power over their own lives. In the context of disability and suffering, the approach advocated by Frank and Charon suggests that one is to view both as narrative challenges, whereby the aim is to re-establish one's selfhood, and to take governance over one's sense making and life direction. In the ethos of contemporary identity politics, the disabled individual is to declare her disability and construct her "self" via reference to it, and in this process she is to reclaim power over the cultural and social meanings attached to her condition (for an analysis of disability identity, see Putnam, 2005).

### **Simone Weil: "Unselfing" and loss of control**

Frank and Charon (together with many other advocates of narrative identity) presume that selfhood and control are pivotal for less anguished, meaningful lives and ought to be reaffirmed at times of disruption and suffering. Such a presumption is commonsensical in Western cultures, as it entwines with the well-researched primacy of liberalism and individualism in Western thought with their emphasis on the individual subject and her "free will."<sup>7</sup> Yet, what if one was to relinquish the idea that we have to establish control and selfhood to achieve (at least moderate levels of) eudaimonia or lead "a good life"? Simone Weil's philosophy presents an approach to hardship and suffering, wherein control and selfhood are disposed of. Here, instead of reaffirming "the self" and governance, one is to "unself" and let go of the desire for control.

Weil accentuates the relevance of "attention," a mental state within which we gain a metalevel or second-order perspective onto things. Instead of staying on the first-order level of immediate thoughts and emotions, one takes a step back and seeks to perceive reality without preestablished schema. Such attention comprises of ceasing efforts of sense making, and letting the world and other beings inhabiting it emerge: "Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns" (Weil, 2002, p. 120). One is to resist classifying things, beings and events via readymade beliefs, emotions, or agendas, and instead simply allow them to enter one's awareness: "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object... Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it" (Weil, 2009, p. 62). According to Weil's philosophy, as long as one is searching for explanations, the reality of one's own experiences, the subjectivity of other beings, and the nature of events will not become manifest. This is because explanations are based on prejudgments, which narrow our understanding:

we expect *x*, and will thereby note nothing but *x*. Instead of perceiving reality as it is, independent of our pre-given explanations and judgments, we get stuck in the latter, which again are nothing but constructions and thereby illusions. Weil uses Plato's famous Cave allegory and suggests that explanations are the shadows on the cave's wall, which we focus on while the metaphoric light at the cave's entrance, capable of illuminating the world as it is, often goes unnoted. Via attention, one forsakes the shadows or illusions, and turns toward reality (or God; Weil, 2002, 2009).

Thereby, Weil's philosophy offers a radical challenge to the narrative approach favored by Frank and Charon. The implication is that the constant effort to make sense of one's experiences and life-events via sculpting them into the format of a story can be a source of illusions, which distract one from reality. Again, we expect *x* (say, heroic survival or victimized fragility), and thereby begin to perceive things as *x*: our conceptualizations and narratives become self-fulfilling prophecies, while fresher takes on reality are lost. This challenge is heightened by Weil's critique of selfhood. Significantly, attention begins with setting aside one's dependency on "the self." The most pivotal task is to question the primacy of selfhood and the entwined tendency to conceptualize reality on the basis of particularly self-directed aims, desires, beliefs and emotions. Hence, Weil insists that: "I has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me" (Weil, 2002, p. 118; see also Weil, 2009, p. 62). Indeed, attention necessitates the elimination of "the self," and Weil goes so far as to argue that such elimination ought to be the core of both philosophy and religion: "That is why 'to philosophize is to learn to die', that is why 'to pray is like a death'" (Weil, 2002, p. 20).<sup>8</sup>

Weil claims that "the self" is a construction and thereby also an illusion, the maintenance of which invites us to misrepresent the world and cover it with further illusions. The source of its deceptiveness is its tendency to explain reality via positioning its own interests, insecurities, and motives as the reference point of sense making, and to thus fail to notice that, which is of no utility to it. Thereby, we perceive things, beings, and events via the lenses of our fears, ambitions, and wants, thus projecting our own longings onto the world and failing to acknowledge its independent characteristics: "It is the reality of the self which we transfer into things. It has nothing to do with independent reality" (Weil, 2002, p. 14; see also Weil, 2009, p. 108).

All the astounding variety, beauty and the breathtaking vastness of reality are reduced to the viewpoint of self-directed aims. Such a process is harmful to also our own existence, as the constant construction of selfhood can become an obsession filled with anxiety and fear, whereby we keep defending and cultivating our "selves" to a point where doing so dictates our

mentation: our lives become engulfed by the desperate maintenance of the ultimately fictitious “I.” Hence, placing primacy on selfhood leads to, not only the failure to notice realities outside of one’s own aims, but also restless, fragile and wounded self-obsession. Weil explains, “Every time that we raise the ego ... as high as we raise it, we degrade ourselves to an infinite degree by confining ourselves to being no more than that” (Weil, 2002, p. 33).

The solution, according to Weil, is to “unself.” Hence, radical humility, the loss of self-directedness, is an act of restoring a connection to reality: “We have to be nothing in order to be in our right place in the whole” (Weil, 2002, p. 36). One is to deconstruct selfhood, and thus let go of the belief in its supremacy. Doing so is, for Weil, a necessity, as the causal integrity of reality, the flowing and nature of events, will only become apparent after we cease being consumed by self-construction and the sorts of explanations and pre-judgments it creates (see also Pirruccello, 2002). Unselfing requires detachment from one’s own agendas, ego-oriented fears and ambitions, and prefixed schema, signaled by a refusal to continuously, in the Nietzschean spirit, “become what we are” and take part in the constant process of self-making. Halting the construction of selfhood leads, thereby, to a type of emptiness—the site of self-construction is now silent and vacant, a void. It is this void, which allows reality (or indeed goodness or God) to seep in, as the latter can only enter our consciousness when there is space for it, and when the constant hubbub of explanation and edifice has fallen silent: “The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil, 2009, p. 65). We no longer project, and our desires no longer color the world. In this state of freedom, we become capable of fresh perception and clarity, and do nothing less than awake to realities within and outside of us.<sup>9</sup> What Weil is suggesting is a state of total selfless humility, which allows us to become empty enough to notice and engage with the world.

Here, forgiveness is pivotal. According to Weil, we keep inventing images of ourselves and others, and demanding them to match reality. We must “forgive the debt” we assume others to owe us, and we are to engage in similar forgiveness in relation to ourselves: “I am also other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness” (Weil, 2002, p. 9). Such forgiveness, again, leads to letting go of control. When we become empty, humble, and forgiving, we cease aiming toward governance, and instead consent to reality—as the world enters us, we offer our existence to it without seeking to establish authority or manifest potency (Weil, 2002, 2009). There is nothing to govern; no need to demand others to be what we wish them to be, or to force oneself into a constructed image. Therefore, with

forgiveness, control becomes unnecessary, and indeed emerges as a destructive element.

Significantly, in the process of unselfing, also letting go of time is required. Both orientation toward future and living via the past are entwined with “the self” and its affirmation. In short, the future defines the self’s desires, and the past defines the self’s fulfillments. Both must be made redundant so as to abolish the dominance of selfhood. Thus, Weil (2002) posits that “The renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations” (p. 19). Indeed, Weil emphasizes that also time is only a human construction, as we create it on the grounds of our regrets, fears, hopes, or thereby desires—time is self-directed. As a consequence, when relying on it and seeking to define ourselves through its presumed unfolding, we become ever more unreal: “Time which is unreal casts over all things including ourselves a veil of unreality” (Weil, 2002, p. 52). Finally, as a further element of unselfing, Weil warns us of the dangers of prioritizing the act of telling ourselves via language, and reading the language of others. According to her, misinterpretations are a constant danger, and narrating oneself—next to being grounded on the illusion of selfhood—is all too easily aimed at misleading and conquering the reader (Weil, 2002). Weil admits that one cannot escape reading reality, and indeed attention revolves around seeking accurate readings (see also Pirruccello, 2002); yet, one must remain wary of the dangers of language, telling and receiving.

Thus, whereas Frank and Charon centralize “the self” and control, and suggest that narratives are required for their constitution, Weil posits that “the self” is a dangerous illusion, that one is to let go of control, and that narratives all too often mislead. Moreover, whereas Frank and Charon maintain that narratives help us to create meaning around time, Weil suggests that one is simply to let go of explanations and cease focusing on time. While for Charon and Frank narratives serve a positive role in our grasp of the human condition, ethics, and suffering, following Weil, their tendency to revolve around selfhood, control, preset readings, and time renders them a potentially destructive and even a violent method, which diminishes understanding concerning also suffering and moral commitment. In their place, emptiness, humility and forgiveness are advocated as the chosen attitudes to human travails. In sum, from the Weilian perspective, the narrative account would benefit from placing less emphasis on self-construction and governance, and more emphasis on the possibility of at least moderate realism, wherein we (in varying degrees) can attentively engage with rather than self-directedly build reality, and which underlines humility instead of power.

With regard to disability, the Weilian approach would urge one to let go of efforts to reclaim oneself. Instead of identity politics, it would ask the

disabled individual to embrace forgiveness toward both herself and others, and to practice radical humility instead of declarations of proud selfhood. Striving toward control over one's condition and preoccupation with disability identity would no longer be relevant, as the latter would emerge as an illusion, and a potential source of obsessed anxiety. Indeed, in the Weilian logic, one would presuppose no norms for human existence, and thus "able" and "disabled" as categories would become less relevant. The aim would be to let go of also focus on time and narratives that revolve around maintaining disability identities, and to cultivate "attention," thereby prioritizing one's comprehension of inner and outer realities over one's temporal sense of (disabled) self.

### **Zen Buddhism and meaningless suffering**

Zen Buddhist philosophy offers a third route to human struggles equally critical of the narrative account, but also capable of manifesting the frailties in Weil's approach. To offer a very simplistic sketch of Zen Buddhist philosophy, everything is in a state of impermanence: everything passes, including our pains, loves, and moments of fear and happiness. Impermanence means that our "selves" are not only transient, but also non-existent (Carpenter, 2012; Davis, 2017).<sup>10</sup> There is no "core" to our being, no fixed viewpoint or constitution—human beings have no essences, and also our constructed selves vanish as soon as they were made. Instead of searching to discover who we are, or desperately constructing a self, we are to begin from accepting that we have no permanence. As long as we resist this, and seek to hold on to permanence, we will feel anxiety and fear of losing what we so stubbornly hold on to, and this sparks our suffering. Letting go of both the essentialist and constructivist reaffirmation of selfhood is, thereby, vital for ceasing suffering.

According to the Zen Buddhist view, suffering also stems from the yearning for control, which, again, spurs from belief in our potency and selfhood. It is when we wish for control, and hold onto "a self," that suffering ensues. The Buddhism scholar Amber Carpenter (2012) clarifies, "For such creatures as we feel ourselves to be, not to act but to be acted upon is to suffer. We suffer when we are unable to determine our environment or conditions" (p. 38). Indeed, complete loss of control may appear "hellish and deeply inhuman" (Carpenter, 2012, p. 40). Yet, it is precisely this need for rather than absence of control, which sparks our miseries. Since we all exist in a state, where full control is impossible, search for such control remains desperate, and human existence becomes colored by states of anxiety, fear, insecurities, and other anguished, wounding experiences. Thus, human lives are littered with what appears "inhuman," and the most

common response is to re-establish the existence of the controlling “self” all the more eagerly, but this will only lead to more suffering—both in ourselves, and in those around us—for in so doing, we get evermore obsessed by control and thereby evermore terrified when we fail to find it<sup>11</sup> (Carpenter, 2012). The answer provided by Buddhist philosophy is to accept that we have no control, for being embodied creatures comes with being tied to causalities, wherein a free will, capable of exerting governance, is quite impossible.<sup>12</sup>

The Zen Buddhist take on illness and suffering differs drastically from that offered by Frank and Charon. Existence is suffering—one cannot escape it. It is built into our being, and accepting it will paradoxically lessen its grip. One way to accept suffering is through letting go of selfhood and the desire for control. Instead of reaffirming “selves” and searching for control over illness or other upheavals, one is to accept the nonexistence of selves and the impossibility of full governance. Consequently, like Weil’s philosophy, the Buddhist account can be viewed as antagonistic toward the narrative approach. Narratives tend to entwine with the search for permanence: they are built around seeking a given good, whether this be enduring happiness or the discovery or construction of lasting selfhood, which again is a mark of being attached to the false idea of permanence. Also narratives’ search for meaning implies the notion of permanence, as meaningfulness tends to entangle with the belief that meanings are “out there,” existent and fixed. The fixation on permanence renders narratives potentially deeply consoling, but herein lies also their danger. Indeed, according to Carpenter, narratives can serve as false consolations, which “promise everything is somehow right and redeemed in the end, after all” (Carpenter, 2012, p. 45), and which rely either on “the self” or God as a cure for all plights. In so doing, narratives risk creating “little pockets of meaningfulness around us, within which suffering makes sense” (Carpenter, 2012, p. 45), and as such they help to spur belief in essences (e.g., “the good ending” or “the real me”). Ironically, the very thing, which is meant to console us, becomes a source of suffering, as it makes us attached to impossible fantasies. Hence, what for Charon and Frank is positive (making sense of our struggles via self-based narratives), emerges within the Buddhist approach as an ill-advised project grounded on the illusion of perpetuity, which again is bound to cause us more (not less) suffering. In contrast, after acknowledging impermanence, one no longer looks for the assurances of self-based meaningfulness quite so compulsively, and the need for narratives lessens (Carpenter, 2012).

Therefore, Zen Buddhism shares Weil’s criticism of selfhood, control, and ultimately, narratives (indeed, Weil was influenced by Buddhist thought, and made explicit references to it; see Weil, 2002). Yet, there are

also important differences between the two, which stem from Weil's take on suffering. According to Weil, in a state of raw suffering or what Weil terms "affliction,"<sup>13</sup> the misapprehensions of "the self" and its desires become manifest in their ignorance, and one suddenly notes how "the self" is an illusion: "The chief use of suffering ... is to teach me that I am nothing" (Weil, 2002, p. 111). Affliction disrupts everyday thoughts and emotions, and it is this disruption, via which reality seeps in as one's perception is cleared from illusions. Thus, it is suffering, which leads to the type of emptiness, through which the world can enter us: "Each time that we have some pain to go through, we can say to ourselves quite truly that it is the universe ... that is entering our body ... Suffering alone gives us contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world" (Weil, 2009, pp. 78–79). Following suit, affliction enhances one's capacity for attention: it leads to the thinning of self-directed contents of the mind, thus facilitating greater lucidity. Ultimately, via severe suffering, one may also get glimpses of transcendental realms, such as "goodness" or God (Weil, 2009).<sup>14</sup>

Hence, like Frank and Charon, also Weil recognizes suffering's disruptive force and seeks to locate meaning in and around it. To some extent echoing Frank's "quest story,"<sup>15</sup> she argues that suffering can be a transformative event, as it can teach us attention—the meaning of suffering is situated in its ability to awaken metaphysical illuminations. Weil thus positions suffering as a cultivating tool, with which to leap toward transcendental epiphanies, and thereby she tries to find significance within it. As a consequence, even though Weil resists selfhood and control, she appears attached to discovering permanent "truths," and contra Buddhism, argues suffering to be a transformative, meaningful state. In contrast, according to Zen Buddhism, the precise point is to alleviate suffering via letting go of the meanings we force onto it and the world. This is a crucial difference. As Ann Pirruccello (2002) summarizes: "Weil wants to cultivate suffering, while Dōgen [a Zen Buddhist monk from the 13th century] wants to cultivate our inherent harmony with the world" (p. 494).

Zen Buddhist philosophy thereby goes further than Weil by suggesting that suffering may not be the type of disruption one ought to find meaning from, nor a gateway toward "truths" and (by implication) permanence. In Buddhism, there is neither permanent, transcendental reality nor fixed truths external to our mentation and experiences (Holder, 2018). As Carpenter points out, religions (and it should be noted that Weil was a mystic philosopher greatly influenced by Catholic thought) tend to view suffering as a transformative phenomenon, whereby struggles of the body connect us to a spiritual, transcendental level (Carpenter, 2012; see also Morris, 1991). Buddhism offers a highly distinct approach, where "pain

itself is not an avenue to illumination, a source of insight into and confirmation of our true, nonphysical nature” (Carpenter, 2012). Instead, the logic of suffering is quite the opposite, for “insight into the fact that there is in us no ‘real’ self to seek should transform pain and suffering into means for the elimination of suffering” (Carpenter, 2012). In short, suffering does not offer illuminations and thereby reaffirmation of our “selves” and external truths, but instead it is the very act of noting the nonexistence of “selves” and external truths that liberates from psychological suffering.<sup>16</sup> While Weil accentuated that selfhood is an illusion, she failed to fully escape its grip: in her search for transcendental meaning in suffering, she implicitly assumes “a self” under spiritual transformation, capable of finally noting the permanent “truth.” Thus, despite the profundity and richness of her philosophy, she is still attached to desires for perpetuity.

Thus, the Zen Buddhist answer to Charon’s and Frank’s account on the disruptions of illness and suffering would be the following: their insistence on constructing selfhood and control is unwise, for paradoxically that very insistence can cause significant suffering and further disruptions. Yet, also Weil, despite of offering similar critique, fails in understanding that creating meaning out of suffering is unproductive. “Suffering as transformation” appears to be yet another narrative on affliction, aimed at making sense of our miseries and (ultimately and implicitly) reaffirming perpetuity. Instead, we are to simply accept impermanence, causality and emptiness, and in so doing flow outside of our attachments to selves, governance, meaning, and narratives.

In the context of disability, the Zen Buddhist approach would urge one to cease all efforts to render disability into a permanent “essence” that defines oneself, and similarly it would persuade one to stop making it “meaningful” via, for instance, narratives that underline the sort of epistemic transformation that seeks truthful permanence. Moreover, efforts to fully and potently govern one’s condition and identity emerge as unproductive and merely lead to more anguish. From the perspective of Zen Buddhist thinking, instead of identity reclamations, disabled individuals would benefit from letting go of the attachment to given, fixed identities and stories constructing them. One would not be attached to ability or disability, nor preoccupied with consolation, but instead would embrace how even one’s abilities and disabilities fluctuate and alter, and do not determine one’s existence.

### **The politics of embodied compassion**

Would ceasing the projects of reclaiming one’s selfhood and self-governance not lead into a lack of social and political change with regard to, for instance, disability? That is, would the Weilian and Zen Buddhist

approaches not replace identity politics with an apolitical stance? Not necessarily. One alternative route to a political change in how we treat ourselves and others is compassionate embodiment.<sup>17</sup> Here, one accepts suffering and in so doing notes that all beings are affected by it—once we acknowledge that life comes with pains and afflictions, we acknowledge that also others struggle with them. This, again, ignites a sense of moral responsibility, as one begins to aim toward the alleviation of the suffering of all living, sensing creatures. Indeed, accepting impermanence, no-self and suffering leads to ethical concern toward others, as it “provides the basis for the reeducation of the emotions, so that they are not sources of additional suffering in ourselves and in others; and it reorients our relation with others” (Carpenter, 2012, p. 50; see also Davis, 2017). In short, as long as one tries to fight or define suffering via attachments and desires related to selfhood and control, one is enclosed into one’s own atomistic cell, and once one accepts suffering, one becomes other-oriented, capable of expanding care toward others. In Zen Buddhism, acceptance of suffering sparks nothing less than compassion as a moral guideline (Carpenter, 2012; Davis, 2017). Here, moral concern can feed political change, as alleviating the sufferings of others becomes also a social goal. Thus, identity politics is not the only method of constructing a society capable of supporting the flourishing of its inhabitants, and indeed the no-self, no-control stance facilitates perhaps particularly radical social and political change via highlighting the relevance of compassion. For instance, social policy concerning disabilities would, by implication, highlight communal care that stems from universal compassion, directed equally toward all living, sentient individuals.

This may sound idealistic, but it finds a very practical and tangible basis. For Zen Buddhist philosophy, it is our embodied fragility that forms the key source of universal compassion, for it is particularly as somatic creatures that we can relate to the sufferings of others.<sup>18</sup> To map out the Zen Buddhist take on embodied compassion, it is worthwhile to point out how it differs from Weil’s approach to somatic reality—this also brings us back to the dangers of creating meanings out of suffering.

Weil underwent various physical struggles, ranging from general fragility and sickness to intense headaches. Bodily upheavals and suffering were, thereby, a part of her everyday existence. Yet, her insistence on affliction’s transformative nature meant that she chose to make these struggles worse by voluntarily taking part in hard labor, and by ultimately starving herself to death at the age of 34. As argued by Ann Pirruccello, behind these systematic acts of bodily self-punishment, one can notice aching layers of shame. From various biographical notes (e.g., Weil’s belief that she is “disgusting”), emerges a desperate lack of acceptance of her own frail embodiment and moral worth (Pirruccello, 2002). Although Weil greatly

underlined the role of universal, moral love,<sup>19</sup> the type of compassion central to Buddhism was absent in Weil's relation to her own somatic hardship. If anything, Weil appeared to feel harsh, punishing shame toward her own body, which led her to insist that no one should feel self-compassion. As Pirruccello points out: "She claims one has no right to feel compassion for oneself... the body is regarded as vile; the flesh is wretched; the body is a tomb that should be used to kill the carnal part of the soul; and Weil is full of contempt and revulsion for herself" (p. ●●●). Such shame is poignantly evident in Weil's tendency to remove herself from social engagement: she avoided human touch and argued that she is destined to be alienated and alone. Perhaps most sorely, she believed already at a young age in her "absolute unworthiness" (Weil, 2009, p. xvi). Despite the beauty of her philosophy, she was an isolated human being, who remained ashamed of herself to a point of seeking death (her self-starvation, although possibly linked to anorexia, was partly motivated by her solidarity with concentration camp victims, and thus even in love and compassion, she sought to punish herself). Arguably, Weil's attitude to embodiment stemmed to some extent from the meanings she built around suffering. Notions of transformation and endorsing rather than accepting suffering led her to a lack of compassion for her own bodily presence. The type of meaning she sought from her bodily struggles thereby engulfed her capacity to be gentle toward and accepting of herself.

The Buddhist account offers a significantly stronger foundation for feeling compassion toward our own embodiment, and thereby enables a distinct basis for compassion toward also others. The route to compassion begins with acceptance of one's own body, and from practical alignment with it, whereby we become aware of our bodily rhythms (Davis, 2017). Instead of feeling shame or undergoing self-torment, one holistically accepts one's bodily peculiarities, and adjusts one's emotions and thoughts to flow with the body's movements. It is also the accepting focus on the body, which liberates from needless suffering and teaches compassion (Davis, 2017; Mazis, 2016). We accept our causal, impermanent, somatic dimensions, and through them notice how much we share with others, since also they are physical, causal and transient. Via the body, one ultimately joins all that exists, and thus gains a somatic, compassionate connection with the world (humans, trees, squirrels, lakes) surrounding us (Mazis, 2016). Thus, whereas Weil struggled with accepting her own frail, bodily constitution, Zen Buddhism underscores how the body is a source of gentleness, wonder, and mindfulness, and indeed the very gateway toward equanimity and compassion. As argued by the Zen scholar Glen Mazis (2016): "To be a body ... is to be open to a depth of sense that wonder can sound but never fathom" (p. 65).

Hence, Zen philosophy takes somatic acceptance as the starting point for compassion. Here, letting go of notions of selfhood and meaning are once more pivotal. First, it is only when one insists on “a self” that the suffering body can become a point of shame, control and loneliness. Mazis (2016) expresses regret over the manner in which Western cultures often render the body into a possession, which one sculpts, instead of viewing it “as our way into experiencing interconnectedness and interdependence with all other beings” (p. 54). Rather than positioning the body as something, which sets the boundaries of one’s selfhood, one ought to approach it as a form of “enmeshment in a larger whole” (Mazis, 2016, p. 54).<sup>20</sup> Mazis draws parallels with Dōgen’s Zen Buddhism and phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for in both, mindedness is primarily embodied, and takes place *as* a body. Moreover, the body exists only in relation to other bodies, and thus what we perceive to be “ourselves” are actually the myriad interconnections with the world. As the borders of our subjectivity become relative, belief in the atomistic “self” is forsaken, and a more holistic account takes a hold, wherein we as creatures are constituted by our interrelations with others. Thus, we are to envision seemingly absurd events such as walking with mountains, for in so doing we “know our own walking as the walking of the myriad beings who are with us and within us” (Mazis, 2016, p. 61). Second, efforts to locate meaning in suffering may misguide. Instead of theoretical sense making, one is to engage in experiential, bodily practice, which consists of, for instance, concentrating on one’s breathing in sitting meditation (Finnigan, 2017; Wirth, 2016).<sup>21</sup> Zen Buddhism goes “beneath and beyond thinking” (Wirth, 2016, p. 8) by returning to the body, focus on which may lead to forms of awareness that come before cognitive states. Indeed, such attention does not direct itself toward the external world or transformative meanings, but begins from the body. Thus, “The reality of truth embodiment of the Buddha is not something purely noumenal or ‘out there’... but is rather the body itself—in other words, the totality of phenomenal existence” (Schroeder, 2016, p. 41). One is not to simply theoretically ponder on metaphysics, or to search for higher meanings, but to—in everyday, practical tasks—pay heed to one’s bodily tides, disruptions and moments of concord with complete acceptance.

Therefore, one is to neither fear nor seek suffering, but to note it, and when this combines with a selfless, holistic attunement to somatic existence, compassion extends toward both one’s own experiences and those of others. Crucially, again, narratives around “the self” are set aside. Mazis (2016) underlines how instead of words, one is to pay heed to the “non-discursive communications between beings and within each being” (p. 58). He argues that in Western cultures, there is “an unending pressure and

frustration to have to constantly and vainly attempt to produce ourselves and to burnish this sense of self” via, for instance, narration (Mazis, 2016, p. 59). Instead of seeking to narrate suffering to construct meaning and “a self,” the aim is on dwelling within and through the body, and noticing that which escapes words. Following suit, Dōgen suggests that: “Put aside the intellectual practice of investigating words and chasing phrases, and learn to take the backward step that turns the light and turns it inward” (Schroeder, 2016, p. 51).<sup>22</sup> Here, it is silence rather than words, which opens the door for a more nuanced understanding and moral recognition.

The moral, social, and political potentialities of compassion are thus linked to somatic acceptance. By implication, social policy regarding disability would depend on something quite radical: the complete acceptance of personal struggles and bodily differences, together with recognizing our enmeshment as embodied beings. “Disability” would no longer be an identity that categorically separates from “the norm,” and instead compassion would stem from holism—appreciation of how all individuals entwine with and constitute each other, and how “disability” and “ability” thereby linger in all of us. It would be via complete acceptance of our bodies and their interrelations that moral and political decision-making would become compassionate—toward both oneself and all others.

The disability scholar Darla Schumm (who also identifies as a disabled individual) has approached disability from the Buddhist perspective and combined it with feminist ethics of care. According to Schumm, such a combination “views disability not as an isolated or individual experience of limitation and inadequacy, but rather as an opportunity for a deeper understanding of impermanence and interdependence through expressions and experiences of compassion” (Schumm, 2010, p. 135). She highlights interconnectedness and impermanence as the foundations for compassion toward all (both the abled and the disabled), and also underscores the importance of political action that seeks to eradicate the injustices which cause suffering—thus, she locates political potential within the Buddhist stance. However, despite the many merits of her approach, there are some important differences between it and this paper. Most importantly, Schumm correlates her approach with Frank’s quest story and thus reaffirms some belief in selfhood and the narrative search for meaning (in her pursuit of “quest,” she also faintly echoes the Weilian belief in transcendental transformations; Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2007). This may not do full justice to the Zen Buddhist account. Indeed, Buddhism falls into various schools of thought, among which Zen philosophy is one of the most eager to accentuate emptiness—there are no higher meanings, and thereby no selves undergoing grand, storied, archetypal “quests.” It is this that renders the type of somatic compassion it underscores so radical: there are no

consolations, no greater meanings into which to escape, but only the ever-changing “this,” shared by all.

### **A critical conclusion**

While Frank and Charon urge one to make sense of bodily struggles via narratives that construct selfhood and control, Weil suggests that one is to let go of these notions. Yet, also she aims to explain interruptions and affliction via references to transcendental illuminations, thereby reaffirming belief in permanent “meanings” and “truths.” As a third alternative, Zen Buddhist philosophy resists efforts to create selfhood and control from, and locate meaning in, suffering. Focus is on complete acceptance: everything is in its place as it is (Itagaki, 2016; Schroeder, 2016). The suggestion is that with letting go of selfhood, control, and constant sense making, a state of liberation or releasement occurs (Schroeder, 2016, p. 48) and one gains a compassionate, somatic, and holistic take on oneself and others. The body offers an alternative to narratives, as one simply awakes to its pulses, changes, and cycles.

In the context of disability, this means that instead of prioritizing narrative identity politics, with which to actively reclaim and govern one’s identity or selfhood as a disabled individual, and narrative ethics, with which to find meaning, disability is accepted as a particular form of embodiment echoed to some extent in everyone. Instead of obsessing with selfhood, control, meaning and narratives, it is via attentively and acceptingly being in one’s body that compassion toward oneself and others, and moral understanding with regard to bodily differences and disabilities, grows. Disability and ability, and all the shades beyond and in between, become inevitable parts of human existence, which one accepts and somatically lives through and with, thereby becoming more compassionately attuned to what our bodies communicate, how our experiences express themselves also beyond words, and how we are all interrelated to each other in most complex ways that escape fixed definitions such as “ability” or “disability.” As Schumm points out: “Human beings are a small part of a complex ever-changing web of causality where all things are irrevocably intertwined. There is no separate medical or spiritual pathology that individuals can simply discover, diagnose, treat, and eradicate in oblivious independent isolation” (Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2007, p. 14). Hence, there are neither atomistic “selves” nor categorically separable social or physical identities, but rather shared embodiment capable of guiding us toward acknowledging and supporting vulnerable others.

Intriguingly, all three approaches—the narrative account by Frank and Charon, the metaphysical account by Weil, and the somatic approach

offered by Zen Buddhism—accept that “the self” is a construction and thereby an illusion. “The self” is not found but created. The difference stems from how to relate to its illusionary nature. For Frank and Charon, the very act of construction affirms our agency (we create our own meanings), and for Weil it simply pushes us deeper into the incapacity to note reality. Here, a metaphilosophical rift is evident: Frank and Charon follow the Wittgensteinian ethos underlying social constructivism, according to which our language creates our world, while Weil advocates the type of philosophical realism, which presumes that the world exists independently and can be known “as it is.” Thus, Frank and Charon focus on the constructing individual, whereas Weil is yearning to access the reality behind that individual. Relatedly, while Frank and Charon posit that control nourishes one’s agency (if everything is a construction, the most fruitful thing is to build knowingly, and to thereby take control of what one becomes), for Weil, the aim is to consent to the world or “truth,” and to let go of the act of building. The Buddhist approach differs from both in its effort to steer away from selfhood and “truth.” Thus, we are neither to embrace constructivism, nor to follow strong realism, but rather the emphasis is on becoming aware of our own somatic existence—here, embodiment forms an alternative to constructions of selfhood and the search for external truths.

But are we to completely avoid notions of selfhood and control? Are we to give up narratives on suffering altogether? For lingual, story-telling, experiential agents, wholly eradicating these concepts is problematic, and we may need stories, together with some sense of control and experienced unity of “self” to thrive as human animals. Indeed, numerous empirical studies manifest the therapeutic fruitfulness of narrative identities, and narratives’ usefulness in times of suffering has also been evidenced. In sum, those individuals, who are capable of offering complex and considered accounts of their ordeals tend to manifest higher wellbeing and more psychological maturity (King & Hicks, 2007), and the ability to search for positive transformations is equally linked to happiness and maturity (King & Hicks, 2007; for an overview, see McAdams & McLean, 2013). Moreover, the felt capacity to exercise control and enhance one’s agency predicts increases in mental health (Adler, 2012; see again McAdams & McLean, 2013). Thus, telling oneself may expand one’s mental flourishing. Concurrently, losing a sense of the “continuum” of one’s existence (the self as changing and yet continuous), together with losing a sense of having at least some impact on what happens to oneself, can have devastating psychological consequences. It is a very different matter to experiment in Buddhism than to be plunged, due to psychiatric or intellectual disabilities, into a forced loss of continuity. Furthermore, social discrimination can

forcibly erode one's ability to maintain a cohesive sense of self, or to have impact on one's existence—here, for instance the social subordination of disabled individuals can rob them out of the chance to actively present “a self” in the societal realm (or alternatively, it may force stereotypic “selves” and narratives onto disabled persons). Also, such socially induced loss of self can have destructive consequences, and from this perspective, the Weilian and Buddhist suggestions may appear evermore alienated from what it may feel like to not have “a self.”

Yet, also caution with this criticism is required. Establishing the causal direction of wellbeing and narratives is not always easy (perhaps mental health leads to more considered stories, not the other way around), and narrative identities also come with their problems, such as the potential increase of conflicts between individuals with highly different narratives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Furthermore, one may become obsessed with reaffirming one's selfhood (Ricoeur, 2007) to a point where narratives are anxiously constructed to gain social approval and recognition (for discussion, see Laitinen, 2002). Therefore, narratives can also disorientate and wound us, and their benefits may—at least in given instances—remain relatively superficial. Most importantly, and perhaps due to its radicalness, the other method—that of questioning the primacy of selfhood, control, and narratives—has not been adequately explored. Being pushed into a loss of self can be utterly painful, but what if one, or one's supportive others, adopted the Buddhist perspective and ceased fighting against the loss, thereby awaking to the idea that “selfhood” and “control” are not the epicenters of existence, morality, wellbeing, or even productive politics?<sup>23</sup>

One obvious solution is found from a compromise between narrative selves and nonnarrative no-selves. The suggestion here is that a sense of personal continuation, relative control and contextual narratives can serve a secondary role, built on constant awareness of their limitations, illusionary nature and impermanence. Thereby, perhaps narratives, selves and notions of control are not to be wholly resisted, but rather rendered relative and less significant. Meanwhile, nondiscursive, somatic and attentive modes of living with experiential commotions may deserve primary focus, and in many cases can offer a far more attuned orientation for affective existence, inclusive of moral and political change.

I conclude the article with an example of what such a compromise might appear like. Sometimes disability—be it physical, psychiatric, or intellectual—can in itself entwine with a positive loss of self, which includes also notable levels of compassion; thus, there are many disabled individuals, who are living manifestations of Buddhist philosophy. I shall here focus on one such case. Kimmo Oksanen (2015), a Finnish journalist, has written an autobiography of his disability. Oksanen's face was destroyed by a life-

threatening illness, which led him permanently and severely scarred. In his account, Oksanen details the frequent hospital stays and the challenges he met, and talks also of intense physical pain, severe loneliness, shame, bitterness and depression. After multiple years and surgeries, he finds himself wholly alone and dejected; he yearns for physical tenderness, and yet feels too unattractive to find company, and for a while, alcohol and impulsive rages become his escape.

Yet, despite of hardships that appear far too numerous for one person to cope with, ultimately Oksanen holds onto a reflective, highly compassionate perspective, which in many ways resembles both the Weilian and Buddhist stances on suffering. Admits details of physical and mental anguish, Oksanen describes observing a butterfly, until its shape and colors are imprinted onto him—he also recounts how he himself is mixed with the earth and entwined with its rocks, plants and grains of sand: “I was one expression of stardust, next to billions and billions of others” (Oksanen, 2015, p. 252). Thereby, Oksanen expresses intense somatic connection with the world. Moreover, he keeps expressing compassionate concern for the fates of other individuals. Quite strikingly, throughout his personal struggles with an utterly painful condition, Oksanen is predominantly worried over what happens to others. He keeps repeating how many are far worse off than he is, and points out how there are 1.5 billion people in the world without clean water, children and poor people suffering and dying—“What are my worries in comparison to them?” (Oksanen, 2015, p. 230). The roots of such moral concern and compassion are somatic, as he describes how we all are embodied creatures, and how differences are ultimately minuscule. Oksanen has thereby gained a holistic take on the world, colored by somatic interconnections and compassion. He repeatedly reminds the reader of how for everybody, it is love and accepting warmth, which are the key ingredients of a good life.

Also the motif of no-self is present. In line with Weilian and Buddhist thought, Oksanen posits that what we call “the self” is not obvious or majestic, but ultimately minuscule. Thus, he relativizes the importance of selfhood. Indeed, letting go of self-directedness, and the wish to hold on to a fixed selfhood, are the reoccurring themes in Oksanen’s book. He talks of lighting a fire in a dark, metaphoric cave, which serves as an illustration of his journey from the fixed perimeters of “the self” toward the realities of others, and here he bears striking similarities with Weil, who repeatedly refers to Plato’s famous Cave allegory as a manifestation of how “the self” is an illusion. According to Oksanen, we are to let go of preoccupation with the fictitious “self,” and turn toward our interconnections with and compassion for others: “When he walks through the mirror Narcissus may regret his whole past life, how he lived only for himself, his illusionary take

on reality, and how alone he now was without his self-love... Beyond the mirror image begins the world of other people” (Oksanen, 2015, p. 230). Meanwhile, Oksanen’s face becomes a concrete metaphor for his selfhood and identity. His past self was engraved onto and lived through his face, and was lost with that face. He states how “the self” was egoistic and ignorant of the needs of others: “When I should have been looking at the other, I looked at myself” (Oksanen, 2015, p. 232). With the face, also “the self” was destroyed. “For the first time he left himself,” he states (p. 241), and speaks of “the self” as a barrel, which had restricted his ability to understand others. Ultimately, it is “love” that he discovered outside the barrel (Oksanen, 2015).

In sum, Oksanen presents an account of disability marked by compassion, acceptance, somatic interconnectedness, loss of self and loss of control. His words and experiences epitomize Weilian and Buddhist themes. Indeed, in line with the latter, Oksanen (2015) talks of the need to cultivate attention, until one’s perception becomes more nuanced and fine-tuned, and reality grows exponentially richer. In this process of becoming more attentive, he begins to sense goodness everywhere, ranging from the wind to the chirps of birds. Oksanen summarizes the results of this attentive and somatically interrelated perspective eloquently: “Soon the whole world and universe were alight with color and vibrancy” (p. 241). Indeed, according to him, the world shines with light and beauty. His expression finds striking similarity in Zen Buddhist thought, as detailed by Mazis (2016): “We and the myriad beings are through and within each other and exist by becoming manifest in this moving, shining forth” (p. 63).

Yet, Oksanen also expresses all of the above via narration. Moreover, despite of criticizing a fixed “self,” he still refers to himself as a continuous, tangible being, and despite of accepting loss of control, yearns to write, thereby manifesting intention and agency. He both has selfhood and control, and does not have them. It appears that his story manifests a perfect compromise between the extremes of full selfhood and potent control on one hand, and complete lack of continuity and agency on the other. The implied lesson is that we can write, and tell our tails—as long as we remember that “we” are constantly changing conceptual constellations, that our potency is always limited, and our words secondary in relation to somatic, experiential, and compassionate interconnectedness with the world and other beings.

## Notes

1. Of course, disability can also be relatively free from suffering; therefore, the suggestion here is not that all disabled individuals suffer because of their disability. Rather, the aim is to explore how to address suffering when it does occur.

2. Charon claims that contemporary notions of “self” tend to highlight ambiguity and movement between subjective emotions and social status. Often, life stories are perceived to reveal more about the latter, and hence have become tools of explaining social and political power relations (thus, an individual woman’s autobiography may be seen to reflect gender politics). One can also ponder, to what extent autobiographies of disabled individuals are interpreted as social rather than individual commentaries, and what the wider implications of this are.
3. According to Frank, the task is to tell a good story, whereby we feel wonder at ourselves, and seek to tell ourselves truthfully.
4. Here, she follows Charles Taylor, who argued “Who am I?” to be the central question of human existence, capable of locating our commitments and values (Charon, 2006).
5. It is noteworthy that while both endorse constructivism, both also presume values such as “truthfulness”—stories are to authentically reflect one’s situation and characteristics. Since one can tell oneself falsely or truthfully, the implication is that one’s self does exist independently of the act of telling. Hence, the constructivist account brought forward by Frank and Charon struggles with inner tension: on the one hand, it underlines the created nature of “selfhood,” and on the other, it seems to presume a more essentialist stance. This inner tension reveals the stubbornness of our belief in selfhood, as even those, who underline its illusionary nature, may still unintentionally hold on to it.
6. Charon recognizes that the search for full control (manifested, for instance, in scientific narratives) is not always fruitful, and that one ought to respect also unfathomability and un-governability. Yet, the aim toward relative control remains.
7. This individualism applies also when identity politics is linked to a communitarian rather than a libertarian ethic. Hence, Frank (and Taylor) endorse a communal approach to social and moral life; yet their manner of highlighting the prominence of selfhood implies the primacy of the individual.
8. It is noteworthy that Charon offers a wholly opposite view, as she suggests that selfhood stands at the epicenter of all thinking: “Philosophical, religious, scientific, and humanistic traditions contribute to and culminate in our complex and evolving notions of the received and created self” (Charon, 2006, p. 68).
9. Weil speaks, in the Platonic vein, for realism—yet, of course, it can with good grounds be argued that concept-pure take on reality is difficult if not impossible to attain.
10. The emptiness of all things is central to Buddhism, and no-self is derived from it (Itagaki, 2016).
11. As Carpenter notes, this is the road chosen by Stoics, who sought to conquer suffering with the control provided by reason.
12. Interestingly, Frank and the Buddhist account agree on the fact that loss of control ignites horror. However, their remedies to the situation are contrary, for whereas Frank accentuates the re-establishment of “the self” and control, Zen Buddhist philosophy suggests that one is to give up the phantasies of selfhood and governance.
13. For Weil, affliction is a more severe form of suffering, relentless, and humiliating.
14. This entwines with Weil’s belief that vulnerability is an integral part of existence: “The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence” (Weil, 2002, p. 108).
15. In Frank’s typology on narratives of illness, the quest story positions illness as a point of positive alteration. The ill individual makes sense of her condition by rendering it into a catalyst for change: illness becomes a tool of a Phoenix-like transformation.

Now, there are also evident and important differences between Weil's account and "quest stories." While in the latter, one gains a greater sense of oneself and self-governance, in the former, one aims to let go of such yearnings (even when these aims may fail).

16. As pointed out by John Holder, what emerges as central is the "ethical transformation through a gradual retraining of the mind, not knowledge of (or escape to) a transcendental reality" (Holder 2018, p. 59).
17. Buddhism emphasizes four immeasurables, which are lovingkindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity (Finnigan 2017). All of these are entwined with moral regard for others.
18. Also Frank highlights the importance of a positive body-relation and talks of the importance of a "communicative body-self," which recognizes shared embodiment and vulnerability, but Buddhism goes much further than this. A significant difference stems from the primacy of selfhood: while Frank argues that the body is to be brought into the realm of "the self," Buddhism seeks no such thing.
19. Weil (2002, 2009) highlighted the importance of morality: for her, "goodness" was the ultimate reality, and she underscored the relevance of attention and love toward the plights and sufferings of others.
20. According to Mazis, it is precisely the possessive, boundary-establishing approach to embodiment that comes with suffering. The mistake is to follow the Cartesian, dualistic stance on bodies and the material world as "objects," which one takes distance from. Such a stance fails to note our embodied lives and interconnectedness with all that exists. Mazis clarifies: "There is no 'the body' 'possessed' by a human being—there is only a moment in the circulation of continual arising of grass, trees, fences, and walls that moves within and through human embodiment as an activated experience of cleared perception, feeling, and consciousness" (Mazis, 2016, p. 56).
21. Pirruccello emphasizes how the Buddhist sitting practice has much to offer to Weil's philosophy on attention. As we simply sit still and adopt a non-discriminating, nonjudging manner of being ("non-thinking"), the body learns to read reality with less self-directed bias: "There is awareness of sounds, feelings, thoughts, and so on, but, again, there is no attitudinal position taken toward them. This mode of awareness is induced not by reflection, nor by the will to cut off mental activity, but by the somatic form or mode itself— sitting" (Pirruccello, 2002, p. 491). The body is recognized as an affective center, which constitutes and colors mentation, and it is via training it that one can gain a more lucid grasp of existence (Pirruccello, 2002, p. 491).
22. The task is to learn how to be "fully in the moment," when consciously living through and in the body. (Itagaki, 2016; Schroeder, 2016). Mazis (2016) quotes Dōgen: "Real existence is only this exact moment" (p. 64).
23. As someone who has undergone such forced psychological loss, both the acute anguish and dangers of it, and the need for Buddhist directions, appear to me as experientially evident.

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