

APA Newsletters

Volume 04, Number 2

Spring 2005

NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHIES

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Chang-Seong Hong, Editor

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Translation as Transmission and Transformation*

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1. Historial context and scope

This is not a general essay on the craft and institution of translation, though some of the claims and arguments I proffer here might generalize. I am concerned in particular with the activity of the translation of Asian Buddhist texts into English in the context of the current extensive transmission of Buddhism to the West, in the context of the absorption of cultural influences of the West by Asian Buddhist cultures, and in the context of the increased interaction between Buddhist practitioner communities and academics in Buddhist Studies. These three phenomena and their synergy are very much a phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, so I am talking about a particular scholarly activity engaging with a particular literature and extended community at a very particular time.

Each of the phenomena to which I advert requires a bit of comment, and each has a role in determining the nature of the activity of translation as it is undertaken at this moment in intellectual spacetime. First, it is important to note that we are in the midst of a massive missionary religious transmission that carries with it a great deal of not specifically religious cultural baggage (including secular philosophy, medicine, art, music, literature, food, etc). Buddhist religious teachers and texts are being exported from Burma, India, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, and Thailand and are eagerly being imported by denizens of North and South America, Europe, Australasia, and Africa. Buddhism is making significant inroads in these new cultural milieus, both in immigrant Buddhist communities and in so-called convert communities. Often, multiple traditions are adopted in the same region simultaneously and find syncretic adherents. In every case, we find, not surprisingly, that the imported Buddhist teachings are adapted as much as they are adopted, and that host cultural forms and ideologies function as a matrix that determines the nature of these transformations and selections.

Unlike past intra-Asian transmissions of Buddhism, the present transmission is very much a two-way street. At the same time that Buddhism is transforming Western culture in countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways, Asian cultures, through the global information economy, tourism, education,

and migration, are being dramatically transformed by ideas and cultural forms deriving from the West. Many of these ideas and practices are, at least *prima facie*, in serious tension with the ideologies and practices central to traditional Buddhist life. Among these, we might count cosmological views, the rejection of rebirth, consumer capitalism, liberal democratic theory, and permissive attitudes towards sexuality. Others may, at first, seem peripheral to the religious and philosophical concerns of Buddhism but, on reflection, touch on areas of life hitherto dominated by traditions grounded in Buddhism. Among these, we might count traditions of medicine, theater, music, dance, and the academic curriculum itself.

While some might regard this cultural globalization as in effect destroying the Asian Buddhist cultures with which it interacts, this is surely incorrect. Buddhist cultures, like all cultures, evolve, and there is no more essential conflict between Buddhism and modernity than there was between Buddhism and medieval Chinese culture, or between Christian culture and modernity. On the other hand, the effect of Western influence in Buddhist Asia is not negligible: it is issuing in the dramatic, rapid transformation of those cultures. Asian Buddhist cultures are not only absorbing Western technologies and popular culture but also Western approaches to Buddhism itself, and this is often mediated by Western Buddhist texts. Dharma centers in Asia offer teachings modeled on those of Western Dharma centers, at which not only Western Dharma pilgrims are found in the audience but also Asian students eager for a more modern religious pedagogy. One often also finds in these Dharma centers Western teachers teaching in English to Indian, Nepali, Thai, or Japanese citizens. The intra-Buddhist multi-traditional syncretism that so often characterizes Western Buddhism is finding its way into Asia, and interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and scripture mediated by Western science, political theory, popular psychology, and philosophy are increasingly familiar to Asian Buddhist scholars, monastics, and lay practitioners.

There was a time, not so very long ago, that the communities of Western Buddhist practitioners and of Western Buddhologists were nearly completely disjoint. Where they overlapped, we often found "closet practitioners" among the academics who dared not confess their religious proclivities for fear of losing professional standing. It was a common view that to confess a Buddhist religious practice would be to be regarded as a missionary, not a teacher or a scholar, or at least as one who could no longer pretend to the scholarly distance and objectivity requisite for serious academic work or teaching. So for those for whom scholarship and teaching in Western academia was at the center of their lives, the closet was the only option.

Members of the community of practitioners, on the other hand, were concerned to obtain liberation from cyclic existence for themselves or for all sentient beings and often pursued that goal through devotional practices and recitations

of whose content and philosophical underpinnings they had little real understanding. To be sure, there have always been those for whom developing a deep understanding of the texts and doctrines of Buddhism was a central concern. The point is that this was far from universal. Indeed, it appears that this academic approach to Buddhism has been growing dramatically in recent years, largely because of the interaction to which I refer here. Nonetheless, it remains true that, at least in the earlier years of Buddhist transmission to the West, for many Buddhist practitioners in the West, just as for many of their coreligionists in Asia, their practice involved a set of actions and recitations taken to be soteriologically efficacious independent of any cognitive grasp of their significance. Study of doctrine, philosophy, and language was not always a salient feature of Western Dharma centers.

All of this has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Dharma centers of all Buddhist sects and lineages host teachers; offer classes in Buddhist philosophy, canonical languages, and ritual arts; and generally take their mission to involve educating their membership in order to facilitate spiritual transformation. Often, the speakers and teachers at these centers are, in fact, academic specialists in Buddhist studies, and a very large proportion of the texts studied in these contexts are translations or textbooks prepared by such academics. On campus, more and more Buddhist Studies scholars who happen also to be Buddhist have come out of the spiritual closet. No longer are those who profess faith immediately suspect as scholars, just as Christians are free to teach Christian religion or philosophy without a presupposition of a failure of objectivity. Not surprisingly, we also see increasing collaboration between campus-based and Dharma center-based academic programs, with teaching burdens shared and students receiving credit for studies in Dharma centers.

Why is this relevant to translation? For precisely this reason: translations are not merely completed by translators. They are read; they are read by particular readers; they are read for specific reasons; they have determinate effects on their readers; they are often chosen because of (possibly incorrect) views about what those readers want or need to read and about the probable effects of those texts on those readers. In the present context, we must then ask, “Who is reading the texts we translators are producing, and what effects are these texts having on the transmission of Buddhism to the West and on the Asian cultures into which they inevitably percolate?”

2. Who is translating? What is being translated?

The translation of Buddhist texts was once the exclusive province of academic philologists. Translations were almost always complex affairs involving critical editing of original material, the comparing of multiple editions of the source text, and compiling of extensive lexicons, and were texts aimed almost exclusively at other academics and, indeed, at other translators.¹ To translate was principally to participate in a dialogue with other translators about translation. The result is that the present community of translators benefits from rich philological scholarship, extensive discussion about how to render particular terms and locutions, and a healthy diet of success and failure from which to learn. Texts chosen for translation were texts deemed important objects of study by philologists, that is, typically texts thought to be historically significant for the development of Buddhist literature. This is a reasonable criterion given the role that these translations played in the nascent scholarly enterprise of Buddhist studies. But it is orthogonal to criteria such as philosophical depth, poetic beauty, frequency of study in a home tradition, importance for spiritual practice, etc.

The community of translators of Buddhist texts is now much broader, with a correspondingly broader set of agendas and target audience. The academic philologists are still at it and are still producing a substantial set of important scholarly editions. But texts are being translated by scholars who think of themselves very differently as well—philosophers and religious studies specialists, who are not so much concerned with specifically linguistic or text-historical and text-critical issues as they are with the philosophical or religious content of these texts, their cogency, spiritual significance, and so on. These texts often are presented with less scholarly apparatus than those of the professional philologists but often with substantial essays on the texts or issues they raise. Their audience is often broader, comprising not only other academics but undergraduate or postgraduate students and an interested, educated, nonacademic audience prominently, and significantly, including Buddhist practitioners for whom these texts might have religious significance and use. This is significant precisely because it is at this point that translation becomes most clearly implicated in transmission. Scholars who are producing these texts are not engaged only, or even primarily, in a professional conversation with one another, though, to be sure, this is still very much an aspect of their activity. They are now producing the body of texts taken as canonical by the current generation of students of and practitioners of Buddhism in the West.

We have been considering the *scholarly* interlopers in the philologists' preserve. But there are other interlopers as well. Buddhist societies or individual practitioners are producing their own translations. Many of these appear with no scholarly apparatus at all and even with no attribution to particular translators.² Their audience is certainly not the scholarly world but practitioners. When these translators produce texts, they are self-consciously *transmitting* Buddhism to their intended audience. Translation has always been an inextricable part of the transmission of Buddhism, and we should not be surprised to see the activity undertaken in this way in the present context. But it also forces us to ask just how much the translation by scholars of Buddhism is also part and parcel of the transmission process, whether or not this is the intent of these translators.

When we ask what is being translated by these translators, the kind of answer we will find will be different. Texts are chosen here for their soteriological efficacy, for their importance for rituals in the traditions in which these translators practice, or because of their role in the relevant teaching lineage. We thus see bookshelves filling with a disparate set of Buddhist texts, translated using a disparate set of methodologies, aimed at a variety of audiences, translated in pursuit of a variety of agendas.

All of this has implications for the nature of the current transmission, inasmuch as transmission, as we have noted, is always dependent upon and deeply influenced by translation. The heterogeneous set of texts translated and the heterogeneous lexicons and methodologies of translation encourage both an intra-traditional syncretism and a robust sense of the autonomy of the translated texts from their source material. Syncretism is encouraged by the sheer appearance at the same time of texts from so many different traditions and the voracious appetite for texts of any kind among the Buddhist readership. It is simply inevitable that the interested practitioner will be reading Theravada, rDzog chen, dGe lug pa madhyamaka, Zen, and Pure Land Buddhism within a short span and blending the insights and views of these traditions in creative ways. Autonomy is encouraged by the fact that the language and methodology through which texts are presented often renders them so clearly Western objects of study, while

nonetheless canonical Buddhist objects. The result of these two kinds of influence is inevitably the emergence of a new Western Buddhism with multiple roots and the acceptance of a Western Buddhism as an authentic continuation of the Buddhist tradition. More of this below.

3. Translation as transformation

Some naïve readers might read a translation and believe that they are thereby reading the text that was translated. But nobody involved in the translation business could ever take this view seriously. When we read a translation, we are reading a text in a target language composed by a translator or a team of translators who were reading in the source language. To be sure, different translators call the reader's attention to their presence and agency to different degrees, some occluding their presence in a presentation that suggests the presence of the source text, others calling constant attention to their choices and methodology. But whether or not the translator acknowledges this act of transformation, translation is always an act of this kind.

When we translate, we transform in all of the following ways: we replace terms and phrases with particular sets of resonances in their source language with terms and phrases with very different resonances in the target language; we disambiguate ambiguous terms and introduce new ambiguities; we interpret or fix particular interpretations of texts in virtue of the use of theoretically loaded expressions in our target language; we take a text that is to some extent esoteric and render it exoteric simply by freeing the target language reader to approach the text without a teacher; we shift the context in which a text is read and used. No text survives this transformation unscathed. Let us consider each transformation in turn.

In many respects, the task of the translator is not to succeed but to fail in as few or in as minimally egregious ways as possible. When we take a term from a canonical Buddhist text, it will inevitably bear lexical and metaphorical relations to a host of other terms in its home language—whether that be Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, or Chinese. It will also have what we might, for lack of a better term, call its “core meaning” in the context in which it occurs—the center of semantic gravity we need to preserve in translation. In general, it is impossible to preserve both this semantic core and the complex set of peripheral semantic relationships born by the term in question when we choose a term in our target language.

Let me take an example, chosen almost at random, only because it occurred in a translation I read today. The Sanskrit term *prapañca* has a root that connotes multiplicity, variation, etc. As it is used in Buddhist psychology and philosophy of mind, it denotes the mind's tendency to create ideas and experiences that have nothing to do with reality, to spin out of control, to fantasize, to superimpose its own fantasies on reality. We have chosen to translate this as *fabrication*, which does a good job of capturing the core idea of creating a falsehood, of making things up. Many other translators (including the one I was reading this morning) translate this as *proliferation*. This does a good job of capturing the meaning of the root of the term, as well as the metaphor it involves, but in English provides little of the core. And, of course, there is no English term that captures both components of the meaning of this term. So we are forced to a choice. We can betray the core or betray the root and connections to other terms in the language. To translate a text of any scope is to agonize over countless such decisions.

The important point here is that, in either case, when we render the term in English, we have *transformed* the text. For the question we are addressing is not, “Is the meaning of

prapañca fabrication or proliferation?” We know at the outset that in Sanskrit it is *both* and that anyone reading the text in Sanskrit receives this full range of resonances. That is what word meaning is like. It is never discrete and, for that reason, never fully translatable. This is the phenomenon of *déference*, the fact that we can never specify the meaning of any one word without specifying the meanings of all of the words to which it is semantically related, and so on *ad infinitum*. The consequence is that translation is always *possible* but always also *partial*. We can always find a term or a circumlocutory phrase that captures a great deal in the target language of the source term, but there will never be a term that shares *all* of the relevant semantic connections. So we make difficult choices, always betraying something important in the original text in order to produce *something* in the target language. *Traduttori Traduttori*. My colleague, who chooses *proliferation*, has transformed this text from one that is about the fabrication of a false reality to one that is just about the mind spinning out of control. I, who choose *fabrication*, have transformed the text from one that is about the mind spinning out of control and drawing distinctions and imposing a range of categories that have no basis in reality to one that is just about falsification.

The converse, of course, is also true. *Proliferation* and *fabrication* have their own core meanings and sets of lexical and metaphorical resonances that take them each even further from those of *prapañca*. The former recalls reproduction, fecundity, elaboration; the second, mendacity, but also construction. Any reader of either English text that results, whether s/he is reading for scholarly or religious purposes, is reading a specific, new text that bears only an etiological relation to a text that once contained the word *prapañca*. Multiply this by the tens of thousands of such decisions that determine the content of a complete translation, and we see that the texts read in translation are distant indeed from those composed in their source languages.

This can have surprising consequences in a global academic community. For many of our Asian colleagues, and many of the lay students of Buddhism in Asian countries, are fluent readers of English. Often, the source texts we choose to translate are forbidding technical documents in their source languages, replete with technical terms and archaic constructions and terminology. Often, those source languages are nearly as opaque to the scholarly or lay Asian reader as they are, respectively, to the scholarly or lay Western reader. A text written in Sanskrit or in Chinese in the sixth century was no more intended for a contemporary Indian or Chinese reader than it was for a contemporary Canadian, after all, and even classical Tibetan is a difficult language for contemporary Tibetans. But when we translate, we aim for clarity and for a readable modern idiom. That idiom will often be more accessible to our Asian colleagues and student readers than is the original text, and so we find that contemporary Asian Buddhist readers are reading a great deal of Buddhist doctrine in English. I was interested, for instance, to see a Tibetan colleague preparing to teach a class on the Tibetan and Sanskrit editions of *Mālamadhyamakakārikā* and its canonical commentaries by reading an English translation and commentary on that text. “It's so much clearer in English,” he said to me. And I noted that many young Tibetans at a recent Kalachakra tantric initiation in India were reading from the English translation of the rite of initiation because the Tibetan was incomprehensible to them. Hence the new “Western Buddhism” emerging on a platform of Western translations is being re-exported into Asia.

Many terms that occur in Buddhist texts are ambiguous, and these ambiguities are often critical to the way they function in the source texts. When we translate into English,

we often have available no terms that preserve these ambiguities and, perforce, disambiguate. Let me choose again one among thousands of good examples: the word *dharma* can mean in Sanskrit *doctrine*, *truth*, *virtue*, or *phenomenon*. Just what term in English can convey *that* semantic range? And this is not a case of simply homonymy, as that between *bank* (financial institution), *bank* (riverside), and *bank* (a pool shot). In this case, the root is one (meaning *to hold*), and this is properly regarded as a single lexical item, with all of these uses recognizably connected. When we translate into English we disambiguate. We choose one of these target English terms thereby occluding the others that may well be in play. It is no longer obvious that something is *dharma* (*virtuous—holding one to the right way*) precisely because it is in accord with *dharma* (*doctrine—that to which one should hold on*) and the *dharma* (*truth—that which holds reality in the mind*) about *dharma* (*the phenomena—that which are held together, and which hold properties*). When we choose, we have transformed a text, disambiguating the original and introducing an entirely new range of determinate meaning.

Sometimes our translation choices amplify these effects in virtue of the fact that the terms we choose are theoretically loaded in particular ways. For sometimes we are translating highly theoretical texts using technical terms. Translation demands that we translate these into technical terms in our target languages. But, as any student of the philosophy of science is aware, technical terms derive their meanings from the theories in which they are embedded. The Buddhist technical terms we find that our source text thus have their meanings determined by the ambience of a Buddhist theory of mind or of the external world, or ethics; the meanings of the Western technical terms we have at our disposal are determined by their own very different theoretical ambience. For example, when we translate the Sanskrit term *ākāra* as *representation*, we do a pretty good job. But not a perfect job. For the Sanskrit has a very imagistic component to its meaning, while *representation* is deliberately neutral between imagistic and verbal connotations. *Representation* involves *re-presentation* and hence suggests something standing in for something else. *Okāra* might be present even though there is no object for which it stands. And so on. A text so translated has been transformed and is now read alongside other Western discussions of representation, such as those of Kant, Schopenhauer, or contemporary cognitive scientists.

A Tibetan colleague once told me that he finds the Western approach to texts quite bizarre for the following reason: in the Tibetan tradition, a text is conceived as a support for an oral tradition. One reads a text with a teacher; the text is an occasion for the transmission of an oral lineage, and most of what is important, what is to be learned, is in that oral transmission. He compares the Western reader fixated on the written object and reading it alone with someone who goes into a library, sees books on tables, and studies the grain of the wood in the tables. Importantly, Buddhist texts are composed with this model of reading, transmission, and study in mind. Translations of Buddhist texts, however, are aimed at Western readers. When we produce such a text, a condition on its success is that a reader can pick it up, read it, and, if suitably qualified by intelligence and relevant background, understand it. Alone. A text that fails this test is not a candidate for publication, and if the text we produced unadorned does not accomplish it, we festoon it with introductory essays, running commentary, copious footnotes, etc. in order to bring it into line with the expectations of a Western reader. And, as we have seen, this may have unintended consequences even back in the Tibetan community!

This, of course, is a further transformation, and in a different hermeneutical dimension. We have taken a source object designed to be understood only in the context of an extensive oral commentary imparted by a highly qualified teacher to a selected student and transformed it into a target object designed to be accessible to any educated reader. Note that this transformation is not simply textual. In translating in this way, we are creating a new Buddhist textual culture. In particular, we are making it possible for students or practitioners of Buddhism to engage with its literary tradition independently of a teacher or an authority—to choose what to read, and, in bringing these texts into Western literary practice, to choose how to read, how to interpret, and what of each text to accept or to reject. This is a profound transformation not only of these texts but of the engagement with the textual tradition that is so central to Buddhist culture. We are creating, in the act of translation, a new Buddhism.

4. So, what are translators doing?

Translators of Buddhist texts are hence not merely involved in an innocent process of passing texts from one hand to another. We cannot pretend that translation is an activity independent of transmission, or that the transmission in which we are implicated is one in which what is received is identical with that which is given. Instead, we are creating a set of texts that will be foundational to the emergence of Western Buddhism. These texts will be recognizable descendants of Indian, Tibetan, and Chinese texts, but they are Western texts in Western languages. This set of texts is strangely heterogeneous and disjoint, and so will be the Buddhism constructed upon this foundation. That is, we are not seeing all of the texts of any one tradition, or by any one author, or in any one genre translated. Decisions about what to translate and when are made according to the whims of translators, dissertation directors, Dharma centers, a variety of teachers, and even movie actors.³

As we translate, not only is a new Western Buddhist canon appearing but a complex negotiation of terminology is occurring as a cacophony of translators propose alternative approaches and terminologies. In this sense, the current wave of translation is very different indeed from previous waves of translation in the history of Buddhist transmissions: The Tibetan translation effort was highly organized and regimented, governed, and systematized by a royal translation council, with carefully vetted teams of Indian and Tibetan translators, and all translations were carefully edited for uniformity and conformity to official norms by committees of scholars. The result is a highly uniform canon written in a kind of code for Sanskrit. The Chinese translation effort was, like the current case, a more individual and disorganized affair. But it differs in that only Mahāyāna texts were translated, and we do not see the kind of efforts to provide critical editions, introductory essays, etc., that we do in the West, and so not the kind of ongoing debate between translators. But, as we have seen, this cacophony is more than a war of words, for each word we choose comes with a theoretical background, a set of lexical kin, and a new context in which to set the Buddhist texts a reader assimilates. So, translators are also choosing the theoretical matrices that will determine the way Buddhism is understood and adopted in the West.

5. Translation and the trope of authenticity

In any discussion of the transmission of Buddhism, it is impossible to avoid a discourse about “authenticity” and what it means for a formulation of Buddhist doctrine or a practice to be authentic. Often, this trope is simply a cover for sectarian wrangling; a way of valorizing a particular, typically conservative, policy; or for settling intramural quarrels. But, at certain times,

questions about authenticity become interesting, and a time when such radical change is occurring so quickly, and on so many fronts, is surely one such time.

It is tempting to think that the translation activity I have been canvassing is new, or revolutionary, or involves a kind of betrayal of “authentic” Buddhism. If this is true, “authentic” Buddhism has been betrayed from the beginning, for translation has been part of the transmission of Buddhism from the beginning, and it is impossible to translate without transforming. A central doctrine of Buddhism, we all know, is the impermanence of all phenomena, and, as we all know, impermanence must be understood as a middle path: no phenomenon is immutable, but no continuum terminates. Instead, any extended phenomenon is a constantly changing continuum of causally connected, but distinct, events. Buddhism is not immune from its own ontology. Authenticity can only be understood in these terms, and the transformation through translational transmission is part and parcel both of maintaining the longevity of the continuum not in spite of but because of its constant change and adaptation.

How, then, should we understand authenticity in a sense relevant to the transformative transmission of Buddhism to the West and relevant to a consideration of the authenticity of the translations that underwrite that transmission and that catalyze that transformation? There are different understandings of authenticity to which we might turn. *Mahāyānas trāḷaḷkāra* treats as authentic any teaching that leads to the alleviation of primal ignorance. This is problematic in at least two ways: first, it relies upon the effect on the recipient of the teaching as a criterion of authenticity: If I fail to be awakened despite hearing a s̄tra spoken by Ākyamuni Buddha himself, does this undermine the authenticity of that teaching? Secondly, it is either overbroad or circular: surely, remarks made by those with no relation to the Buddhist tradition can assist in the alleviation of ignorance. These should not thereby constitute Buddhist teachings unless one takes their soteriological efficacy as evidence that they must have been inspired by the Buddha, in which case the circularity is uncomfortable.

Others insist on a direct lineage from Buddhavaccana, leaving open two important questions: Just what constitutes Buddhavaccana, and what kind of lineage is relevant? Though these problems are notoriously troubling, I think that we gain some purchase on the question here. First, let us rethink the proper subject of authenticity. Too much of the debate about authenticity focuses on texts, teachings, or explicit discursive or ritual practices. This is the wrong place to focus. For one thing, many of the texts we are considering here are composed not by Ākyamuni but by later Indian, Tibetan, or Chinese scholars. Instead, let us focus on insights, on realizations. Here, we might imagine a lineage stretching to the historical Buddha. But only if we are relaxed about the notion of lineage. It is unlikely that all lineages involve unbroken personal transmission, though many surely do. It would be unreasonable, though, to stake the authenticity of a teaching on the question of whether there was a resurrection of interest in a text that had lapsed for, say, a generation. Transmission can, after all, be textual as well as personal, if appropriately supported.

I am arguing that we should treat as that which is to be transmitted not texts but insights and realizations, and that these should be regarded as authentically Buddhist to the degree that they derive from a lineage of textual or oral transmission that has its ground in the insights and realizations of the Buddha. On such an understanding of authenticity in the Buddhist tradition, authenticity denotes not the *identity* of

a view, text, or formulation with something the Buddha or an appropriate acārya said but, rather, the fact that an insight is salutary, soteriologically efficacious, and causally grounded in a transmission originating with the Buddha.

So, while it is tempting to think of translators as traitors, perhaps we are loyal after all. We are traitors only to a mythical original, mythical because its originality is cast as permanence and immutability. But this treason is nothing but the embrace of the heart of Buddhism—impermanence and the recognition that reality makes sense only in its context. We have an enormous responsibility as transmitters of Buddhism, a responsibility that forces a certain care and reflectiveness in our practice. But we must remember that that responsibility is not to preserve a permanent past but to manage transformation in a productive way, facilitating change that we can only hope follows a trajectory that, because of the effects these texts and the practices they engender have on future students and practitioners of Buddhism, is recognizably as authentic as were any of the past trajectories followed by the transformation of Buddhism.

* Thanks to the members of the Smith College Kahn Institute on TransBuddhism: Translation, Transmission and Transformation, 2003-2004 for the stimulating discussions that provided the matrix for these thoughts. Special thanks to fellow translators Peter Gregory, Andy Rotman, Tom Rohlich for sharing their insights on the craft of translation and to Nalini Bhushan, Connie Kassor, and Ji-Eun Lee for astute comments. Thanks also to Mario D’Amato for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Endnotes

1. See, for instance, any of the great works by de Jong, May, Frauenwallner, Steinkellner, or Le Valle de Poussin.
2. See, for instance, the editions prepared by the Padmakara translation group, including their translation of Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatāra* with Mipham’s commentary (2002) and their translation of Āntideva’s *Bodhicāryāvatāra* (1997).
3. My colleague and I were recently informed by a leading translator of Tibetan texts that whether it would be considered appropriate for us to translate a particular text would depend on a decision by Richard Gere!

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Has Strawson Refuted Dharmakīrti?

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There are thoughts, but no thinkers; there are mental states, but no minds; there are moments of consciousness, but no subjects of consciousness. This view is defended by most Buddhist philosophers; much of the Buddhist tradition regards it as absolutely central both to correct philosophical understanding and to the way to enlightenment. According to Buddhists, our whole relation to the world, our actions and reactions every minute of our lives, are conditioned by our powerful conscious and subconscious attachment to the idea of a self, and all our selfishness and all our suffering are rooted in this attachment, which should therefore be undermined by cultivating the realization that selves do not really exist. Nor are the Buddhists unique in rejecting belief in a self; Parfit has arrived at a position much like theirs, and similar views may be found in the writings of some recent Continental thinkers. But when ordinary people, freshmen for instance, are confronted with the denial of the self, they frequently have the intuitive response that this position is not just implausible but inconceivable.

Analytic philosophers often share this intuition. Merricks dismisses the no-self view as "exotic (and perhaps demonstrably impossible)."¹ Similarly, Sidney Shoemaker writes: "I suspect that...it will be impossible to have a reduction of personhood and personal identity without having a reduction of mentality as well."² Several analytic philosophers have tried to support this intuition with demonstrative arguments, which, if successful, might show that the Buddhist view is indeed logically or metaphysically impossible. Shoemaker has offered such arguments, but the most powerful critique of the no-self view is found in the work of P. F. Strawson and has been developed by E. J. Lowe. In this paper, I will first show that the Buddhist tradition has the resources to answer Shoemaker's arguments against the possibility of thoughts without a thinker. My goal will be a modest one: I will simply reject the claim of impossibility by showing that, despite Shoemaker's arguments, there is a consistent perspective that accepts thoughts and rejects thinkers. Then I will investigate whether Dharmakīrti, the great Indian Buddhist epistemologist, could have provided a defensible reply to Strawson's more fundamental critique. Here, I will be more ambitious: I will try to show that there is an answer to Strawson that can be independently motivated, that the assumptions required to block Strawson's argument are not only possible but plausible.

Though all Buddhists agree in rejecting the real existence of persons and of selves, their ontological views vary quite dramatically in other respects. For example, the Madhyamikas hold a view that Mark Siderits describes as a form of global anti-realism.³ On their view, persons do not have real, ultimate existence because nothing has real, ultimate existence. Thus, though this view rejects thinkers, it does not have the kind of asymmetry that I wish to examine: for Madhyamikas, thoughts are no more real than thinkers are. I will therefore be examining the views of Buddhist philosophers who do affirm such an asymmetry. For my purposes, two groups of writers will be particularly important. Buddhists such as Vasubandhu,

who worked in the tradition of the Abhidharma, tried to produce a complete account of reality in terms of just one category of ultimately real entities, the *dharmas*. These *dharmas* are absolutely simple, have no parts, and exist for just one moment of time. Standard lists of *dharmas* include, along with simple physical entities, various types of mental states, all of which thus count as real.⁴ Composite things, such as chairs, rocks, cats, or people, are not *dharmas* and thus have no existence in ultimate truth. However, they are treated as existent from the point of view of conventional truth, which is necessary for ordinary life and practical matters. As the Buddhist tradition developed, members of the Epistemological school, such as Dignaga and Dharmakirti, supplemented the ontology of the Abhidharma with sophisticated theories about knowledge and language.

But what justifies the claim that composite things do not ultimately exist? Though a number of arguments can be given, historically, the most important source of support for this claim is a dilemma.⁵ If a composite entity, a whole, really exists, then it must be either identical to its parts or distinct from them. But the whole and the parts have mutually incompatible properties: for example, the whole is one, but the parts are many. How, then, can they be identical? And if they are distinct, then the whole becomes quite a mysterious entity. Why is it never observed separately from its parts? And it seems that the whole has no causal efficacy over and above that of its parts. Therefore, there is no really existing whole. Clearly, all sorts of replies might be offered to this argument. The main purpose of this paper, though, is not to support the no-self view with positive arguments. My intention, instead, is to defend the view against objections offered by Western philosophers.

The first such objection I will consider is simple enough; Sydney Shoemaker states it in two lines: “Examples given of experiences are typically examples of *experiencings*—and *experiencings* are patently adjectival.”⁶ Now, by “adjectival,” Shoemaker does not mean that experiences are designated by adjectives in our language, since, of course, they mostly are not. Rather, Shoemaker suggests, a defender of the non-self view must resist the idea that mental states are adjectival “in the way *seeings* are adjectival on *seers*, *deeds* are adjectival on *doers*, or (for a non-mental example) *dents* are adjectival on *dentable surfaces*.”⁷ So an entity that is adjectival is ontologically dependent on some more fundamental entity.

Shoemaker doesn’t make it clear why he thinks mental states are adjectival. But his objection obviously has some intuitive force, and not just for people in our culture. Vasubandhu discusses just such an objection arising from grammatical analyses of the Sanskrit language:

Every state of being depends on an agent. As, for instance, when we say that Devadatta walks, in this case the action of walking depends on the walker, Devadatta. In the same way, consciousness is a state of being. Therefore, whoever is conscious must exist.⁸

In his *Treasury of Metaphysics*, a famous exposition of the philosophy of the Abhidharma, Vasubandhu responds by refusing to concede the dependence of “states of being” on “agents,” illustrating his refusal with a reductive account of the expression “Devadatta walks” that does not concede Devadatta’s existence. He compares what we call Devadatta’s walking to a sound propagating through a room or a fire spreading through a forest, phenomena that do not strike us as examples of substances. They are more like processes that can be understood as made up of a number of causally connected events occurring in various different places. These events are not ontologically dependent on the larger process;

the reverse is more likely to be true. According to Vasubandhu, a mind is similar: instead of being a unitary substance, it is a process whose unity is merely conceptually constructed on the basis of momentary mental states or events. For Vasubandhu, these mental *dharmas* are real in a far more robust sense than the person is. By adopting this perspective, a defender of the non-self doctrine against Shoemaker can avoid conceding the real existence of *seers* or *doers* while accepting the existence of *seeings* and *doings*; to such a thinker, Shoemaker’s explanation of “adjectival” will not be acceptable as stated.

The view that thoughts are not adjectival on thinkers can be undermined by analogy, as Shoemaker and the opponents of Vasubandhu tried to do, only if it is an isolated claim that does not accompany a similar view about other allegedly adjectival entities such as the action of walking. It seems, then, that the defender of the no-self view will be in a stronger position if she rejects, absolutely generally, the Aristotelian view that qualities are ontologically dependent on substances. Instead, she should say that particular qualities are themselves ontologically fundamental, and that concrete material objects are, at best, logical constructions out of them and, at worst, merely pretended entities used to systematize and approximate the real world of the qualities. That is, an advocate of the no-self doctrine should be some kind of trope theorist.

I have argued elsewhere that certain Indian Buddhist philosophers, including at least Vasubandhu, held a version of trope theory.⁹ And Jonardon Ganeri has offered evidence that Dignaga, the founder of the Epistemological school, was also a trope theorist.¹⁰ According to these philosophers, the really existing entities include the following: the basic physical tropes that make up the most fundamental layer of reality; higher-level tropes that supervene on the base, such as colors and sounds; and mental states, which they regard as tropes independent of, and not supervenient on, the basic physical tropes. Their ontology has no room for composite, persisting material objects, which exist only within the convenient pretense called “conventional truth.” Like other versions of trope theory, this view has its problems, some of them very difficult. But Shoemaker’s objection about the adjectival character of *experiencings* would apply with equal force to the tropes regarded as fundamental entities by contemporary trope theories such as those of John Bacon and Keith Campbell.¹¹ Not even the opponents of these views would usually say that they are demonstrably impossible.

An advocate of the no-self view has available, then, a consistent way of looking at the world that allows her to resist this first objection. I now turn, therefore, to Shoemaker’s second objection, which relies not on the grammar of natural language but on the philosophy of mind:

If any sort of causal or functional account of the mental is correct, what constitutes a given mental state or event as being of a particular mental kind (e.g., an experience or belief having a certain content) is its being so related to a larger system to which it belongs as to be apt to play a certain ‘causal role’ in the workings of that system—and the existence of that system will be just what Parfit regards as constituting the existence of a person. On any such view there will be a necessary ontological dependence of experiences (etc.) on the existence of persons or other mental subjects.¹²

The objection as stated is directed specifically against Parfit’s Constitutive Reductionist view, which resembles the Buddhist doctrine of no-self in certain respects but differs in others. Like Vasubandhu, Parfit thinks that a complete

description of the universe can be given without referring to persons by including the various physical and mental parts that we regard as making up a person. Parfit also thinks, however, that persons really do exist.¹³ When the right mental and physical entities are arranged in the way required by our use of the word “person,” a person exists.

Now an Indian Buddhist would not say that the existence of the parts constitutes the existence of a person. Buddhists do not believe in persons, except at the level of conventional truth. As I have argued elsewhere, the best way to understand the conventional existence of persons, for a philosopher such as Vasubandhu, is to say that the existence of certain mental states, suitably related, makes it appropriate to pretend that a person exists.¹⁴ On this kind of view, it would be odd to infer the ontological dependence of mental states on something that does not even exist just because, whenever there is a mental state, we find it convenient to pretend that it does! But as this reply to the objection may be rather too quick, let us consider an example.

Many physicists believe that a free quark is a physical impossibility. That is, they hold that no quark ever exists by itself but always as part of a larger physical particle consisting of at least two quarks.¹⁵ The forces that bind groups of quarks together are apparently so powerful that, even if immense energies are applied to separate the quarks, these energies are dissipated in the creation of new material particles before they can pull the quarks apart. Let us suppose, then, that it is a natural law that a quark never exists except in a particle, such as a proton, made of several quarks. Would it make sense to conclude that there is a necessary ontological dependence of quarks on protons? Certainly not! We would still be able to say that protons are nothing over and above the quarks that make them up, whose existence is more fundamental than that of the protons and other particles they compose.

Once we are thinking of mental states as tropes and, therefore, as possible candidates for ontologically fundamental entities, this analogy is bound to seem apt. Unfortunately, it does not wholly dissolve the force of the objection. Mental states appear to depend, not only for their existence but also for their character, on the presence of other mental states with which they can interact in the appropriate way. The question arises whether we can understand mental states as having some intrinsic nature over and above the relational nature given them by their place in a mental system. If their nature is entirely relational, with no trace of intrinsic character, then it will be very problematic to think of them as ontologically fundamental. However, until this thesis about them is demonstrated, the non-self view will not have been shown to be demonstrably impossible. It would be rash to claim that, on *any* causal or functional account of mental states, their character must be entirely relational. And unless such a claim is made, the existence of thoughts without a thinker will remain a live possibility.

Although Shoemaker’s arguments against the no-self view may have some force, they do not demonstrate that the view is impossible. Strawson and Lowe, though, have also offered arguments against the possibility of the no-self doctrine.¹⁶ Since Lowe acknowledges that his presentation is deeply indebted to Strawson’s,¹⁷ I will treat what he offers as a modified version of Strawson’s argument. Both of the authors pose the same challenge to the no-self view: If mental states are not individuated with respect to the subjects that have them, how are they to be individuated?

Strawson imagines a defender of the no-self view arguing as follows. All my mental states are causally dependent on

certain states of my body. This is a property they have contingently, as they could have been dependent on states of some other body. I may imagine, however, that these mental states have a necessary relation to something other than my body: namely, me, my self. Though they could have depended on some other body, I am inclined to think, they could not have been had by any other person or self. But the no-self theorist argues that there is no entity to which these mental states have such a necessary relation. Indeed, “only those things whose ownership is logically transferable can be owned at all.”¹⁸ Hence, Strawson’s no-self theorist claims, the self cannot perform its only possible function, that of owning mental states, and should be eliminated as useless.

Strawson regards this position as an impossible one because of the problem of the individuation of mental states. Which experiences, Strawson asks, are those that are contingently related to this body? The no-self theorist cannot “answer ‘my experiences,’ because” that way of picking them out not only assumes the existence of a self but seems also to make the experiences metaphysically dependent on that self. And there is no viable alternative way of individuating them: “such particulars cannot be thus identifyingly referred to except as the states or experiences of some identified person. States, or experiences, one might say, owe their identity as particulars to the identity of the person whose states or experiences they are.”¹⁹ If Strawson is right, then a defender of the no-self doctrine is not even able to offer an example of the application of his view without contradicting himself.

We can begin to see that Strawson overstates his case here by noting that referring to something by means of an identifying description can be quite different from individuating it using the principle of individuation that applies to entities of its type. If I say, “The woman you are looking for is the one in the red hat,” I do not thereby commit myself to the view that wearing a red hat is part of her essence. All parties can agree that someone can correctly identify the woman in question as the one wearing the red hat without knowing what the principle of individuation for people is. And similarly with mental states: to answer Strawson’s challenge, one need not offer a description of the mental states that refers directly to those factors that feature in the principle of individuation for those states, whatever that might be. All that the no-self theorist needs to do is to offer some description or other that picks out the correct mental states and does not refer to any person.

It is interesting to note that Humean and Buddhist no-self theorists would do so in essentially the same way: by referring to a group of mental states unified by causal connections. The Humean would call this group a bundle, and the Buddhist would call it a series (*santati*). In either case, however, what makes the group a natural one, and not a collection assembled at random, is the causal connections among its members. Now it is true that mental states outside the series can stand in causal relations to its members. But many more of the past mental states in the series will participate in the causal history of a series member than of any other mental state, and a series member will help to cause many more future mental states in the series than any external mental state will. Of course, there may be some cases, involving fission and fusion, for example, where the simple linear geometry of the series will break down. But a no-self theorist will regard such examples as showing that the concept of a series does not describe any ultimately existing entity. It is merely a convenient and useful approximation that will, under normal circumstances, summarize the reality of the mental states in a concise and reasonably accurate way. It will certainly allow the no-self theorist to identify the mental states that she says are not

owned by any self, at least so long as fission, fusion, and similar strange events do not occur in the example she is discussing.

This answer does reduce the force of Strawson's version of the argument, but it is not a satisfactory answer to the argument in general, as we can see from Lowe's presentation of it.²⁰ The argument does not have to rely on problems about identifying which mental states are being referred to in a particular case. So long as the principle of individuation for mental states depends on the subjects that experience them, it will not finally make sense to regard the mental states as existing without subjects. Now, some no-self theorists might try to respond by asserting that mental states are to be individuated with reference to their causes and effects, as in Davidson's conception of events. Lowe considers this possible reply, which he attributes to Christopher Peacocke, and offers an objection against it, which reduces the appeal of the reply. As he points out, the proposed principle of individuation is in danger of circularity:

Briefly, the trouble with Davidson's criterion is that if (as Davidson himself proposes) the causes and effects of events are themselves events, then the question of whether events e_1 and e_2 have the same causes and effects (and hence turn out to be the same event according to the criterion) is itself a question concerning the identity of events, so that in the absence of an independent criterion of event identity Davidson's criterion leaves every question of event identity unsettled: hence it is either superfluous or ineffectual. Moreover, Peacocke's special application of Davidson's criterion to mental events inherits this difficulty.²¹

If, then, mental states should not be individuated by their causes and effects, how is the no-self theorist to avoid having to individuate them with respect to the subjects who have them?

An interesting answer to this question can be found in the works of Dharmakirti, the foremost member of the Epistemological school of Buddhist philosophers. For complex religious and dialectical reasons, Dharmakirti presents several different philosophical views in his writings, which form an ascending scale leading from ordinary awareness to what he regards as the highest truth. For our present purposes, the most important such view is Dharmakirti's version of the Sautrantika perspective. Here Dharmakirti offers us a theory that is a relative of the views of Vasubandhu but that is combined with sophisticated positions in epistemology, a topic about which Vasubandhu and his contemporaries have much less to say. According to Dreyfus's presentation of this Sautrantika view, real entities, including mental states, have three identity conditions: spatial, temporal, and a condition called "determinate with respect to their entity," which, Dreyfus says, "is determined in causal terms."²² Thus, in constructing this theory, Dharmakirti includes a condition that is quite similar to Davidson's account, though he seems to place greater stress on the causes of a mental state than on its effects. But he then builds in spatial and temporal conditions as well.

Dharmakirti introduces his proposed identity conditions largely in order to undermine the realism about universals defended by the Logician-Distinguisher school of Hindu philosophers. He wishes to draw an invidious distinction between particulars, which exist in space and time and have causal efficacy, and universals, which do not. Since Dharmakirti is a conceptualist, he does not regard universals as utterly nonexistent; instead, he sees them as less than fully real, as conceptual constructions superimposed by the mind on a more fundamental reality of particulars.

Like Vasubandhu and Dignaga, Dharmakirti as Sautrantika is best understood as a trope theorist. If I am right about this, then Dharmakirti anticipated the view, recently defended by Jonathan Schaffer,²³ that tropes should be individuated spatiotemporally. The spatiotemporal criterion for trope individuation is as follows: if A and B are tropes, and A is exactly similar to B , and A and B are in the same place at the same time, then $A = B$. This criterion is compatible with tropes being extended, both in space and in time, but it requires that they be in space and time somewhere. Schaffer's view appeals to similarity, but this does not create important differences between his account and Dharmakirti's. When discussing the problem of universals, Dharmakirti makes heavy use of the concept of resemblance, and he explains resemblance in terms of "having 'a [common] effect.'"²⁴ Thus Dharmakirti connects resemblance to causal efficacy in a way that makes his account a close relative of Schaffer's.

The answer we are considering works only if mental states really are in space and time. I trust there will be no objection to mental states' being in time, but claiming that they are located in space might be more problematic. I would hold, however, that when we say that information can flow from one part of the brain to another, or that a particular part of the brain stores memories, or even that the concept of the categorical imperative first occurred to Kant in the city of Königsberg, the truth of what we say requires, at least *prima facie*, that mental states have a location. This location need not be a geometrical point, though it would be very convenient if it were. Perhaps mental states are located only within a certain region of space, though we must then say that, although a certain mental state occupies an extended region, it has no spatial parts that occupy parts of that region. This conclusion is counterintuitive but no more counterintuitive than certain analogous claims that might be made about quantum mechanical particles.

Here is the application of these considerations to the argument we have been considering, whether in Strawson's version or in Lowe's. Both argue that there is no coherent way to individuate mental states that does not refer to the subjects that have them. But if we can individuate them spatiotemporally, then their identity can be explained in a way that does not involve any reference to persons. And this is just how Dharmakirti proposed to explain their identity. Unless this approach can be conclusively refuted, Strawson's critique, even as refined by Lowe, will fail to demonstrate the impossibility of the no-self view.

I have offered a way of defending the view that there are thoughts, but no thinkers, against the criticisms of several analytic philosophers. To make this defense work, one has to accept quite a few views that might, at first, seem unrelated to the main issue: trope theory, mental states as tropes, mental states as located, spatiotemporal trope individuation, and mental states as not having an entirely relational nature. But those who hold these views can draw on them to construct satisfactory replies to Shoemaker, Lowe, and Strawson.

I would like to conclude by pointing out an ironic aspect of this dialectical situation. The Sautrantika philosophical perspective I have attributed to Dharmakirti, in which spatiotemporal trope individuation plays such a central role, is indeed found in his writings but does not represent his final view. Dharmakirti is an idealist; he holds that, in the highest and most profound view of reality, no physical entities of any kind exist, and space is an illusion. For Dharmakirti, the Sautrantika ontology of tropes located in space, while not ultimately correct, is superior to common sense and represents a kind of intermediate way-station along the path to the most defensible perspective. He tries to lead his readers gradually

towards the truth by first convincing them of the Sautrantika theory, thereby eliminating various confusions that are found in the perspective of most ordinary people but do not infect that theory. Then, by indicating the limitations of the Sautrantika perspective, he can ultimately help readers to find the highest understanding.²⁵

The irony thus lies in the fact that, by rejecting the concept of space, Dharmakirti loses his ability to use the reply to Strawson's objection that was available from within the Sautrantika perspective. Since that reply does exist, Strawson can be answered. Thoughts without a thinker have not yet been shown to be metaphysically impossible. But once Dharmakirti has adopted his final, idealist view, it is far from clear that he still has the resources to answer Strawson. Thus, for all I have argued, Strawson may have refuted Dharmakirti—but without thereby refuting all versions of the no-self view that he wished to criticize.²⁶

Endnotes

1. Trenton Merricks. *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 121-22.
2. Sidney Shoemaker. "Parfit on Identity." In *Reading Parfit*, edited by Jonathan Dancy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 139.
3. Mark Siderits. *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), ch. 6.
4. My use of the English expression "mental states" to explain a view originally expressed by using such Sanskrit words as *citta* and *caitta* should not be taken as accepting the idea that these are states, or properties, of a substance called the mind.
5. For a careful and philosophically rich presentation of this argument, see Siderits 2003, pp. 76-77. Many Buddhist texts discuss this argument; an especially sophisticated version, due to Candrakirti, can be found in Huntington, C. W., Jr., trans. *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 172-75.
6. Shoemaker 1997, p. 139.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
8. Translation by the author. Corresponds to vol. V, p. 279, in de la Vallee Poussin's standard French translation: Louis de la Vallee Poussin. *L'Abhidharmakosa de Vasubandhu*. Melanges Chinois et Bouddhiques, vol. XVI (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1971).
9. In my "The *Treasury of Metaphysics* and the Physical World," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 54:216 (July 2004) pp. 389-401.
10. Jonardon Ganeri. *Philosophy in Classical India* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 98-103.
11. John Bacon. *The Alphabet of Being: Universals and Property Instances* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1995); Keith Campbell. *Abstract Particulars* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).
12. Shoemaker, 1997, p. 139.
13. Derek Parfit. *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 223.
14. In my "Vaibhasika Metaphoricalism," forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West*.
15. "A central but unproven hypothesis of this theory, Quantum Chromodynamics, is that quarks cannot be

observed as free particles but are confined to mesons and baryons. Experiments show that it is at best difficult to 'unglue' quarks. Accelerator searches at increasing energies have produced no evidence for free quarks, while only a few cosmic-ray and matter searches have produced uncorroborated events." S. Eidelman, et al. (Particle Data Group.) "Free Quark Searches." *Phys. B. Lett* 592, 1 (2004). URL: <http://pdg.lbl.gov>.

16. The works by Lowe are E. J. Lowe. *Subjects of Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and E. J. Lowe. *Kinds of Being* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
17. Lowe, 1996, p. 25 n. 19.
18. P. F. Strawson. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), 96.
19. *Ibid.*, 96.
20. Lowe, 1996, pp. 22-32.
21. *Ibid.*, 27-28.
22. Georges Dreyfus. *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti's Philosophy and its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 70.
23. Jonathan Schaffer. "The Individuation of Tropes," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (March 2001): 247-57.
24. Dreyfus, 1997, p. 148.
25. *Ibid.*, 103-5.
26. I am grateful to Dan Arnold, Christopher Knapp, Jessica Wilson, Steven Scalet, Lisa Tessman, Eric Dietrich, and Melissa Zinkin for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Luis Gomez and Madhav Deshpande, with whom I studied Vasubandhu.

Impersonal Badness and Subjectless Conceptual Schemes

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In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Parfit claimed that it is true both that we are persons, and that it is possible to give a completely impersonal description of reality that leaves out no facts (hereafter, "the ID thesis"). In my most recent book, I sought to show how these two seemingly conflicting claims might be reconciled by drawing on resources from the Buddhist philosophical tradition. One key tool is the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. According to Buddhist Reductionists, it is conventionally but not ultimately true that we are persons. It is conventionally true because it is more useful when the members of a causal series of psychophysical elements think of themselves as persons (i.e., identify with past and future states of that series). It is not ultimately true because "person" is an aggregative concept, and aggregation is the mark of the mental. (This is the source of Buddhist mereological reductionism.) The Buddhist Reductionist's ultimate truth will be completely impersonal in the sense that it will contain no statements that assert or presuppose the existence of persons. But knowledge of those impersonal facts that make up the ultimate nature of reality enables us to see why it should prove useful for a causal series of psychophysical elements to think of itself as a person. Thus the ID thesis may be upheld without denying the obvious truth that we are persons.

More recently, Parfit has sought to distance himself from both Buddhist Reductionism and from the ID thesis. While he has always maintained the truth (in some sense) of the claim that we are persons, he now takes the Buddhist to hold that this is false (1999: 260). And he is also now convinced that the ID thesis itself is false (1999: 218). Concerning the first point, I believe Parfit is simply misinformed. But I shall pass over that here. What I wish to discuss is his strategy for defending Reductionism in the wake of his abandonment of the ID thesis. That strategy begins by conceding that, according to our conceptual scheme, we are persons. He holds, however, that there could be a conceptual scheme lacking our scheme's demand that experiences have persons as subject but that was otherwise like ours. And he claims that the beings who employed such a scheme would be better off in certain important ways. I shall argue that this last claim is false. While the alternative conceptual scheme Parfit envisions might lack the concept of a person, it will have some other concept playing the role that is played in ours by that of person as subject of experience. This need not spell the defeat of Reductionism, however. I shall claim that reflection on the views of certain Buddhist Reductionists shows how it might still be the case that persons are only conventionally, and not ultimately, real.

An important objection to Reductionism's ID thesis is that there cannot be experiences unless there are also experiencing subjects. The Buddhist's opponents raised such objections, as do Parfit's many critics today. Among the psychophysical elements that Reductionists typically acknowledge in their ultimate ontology are such events as perceivings, desires, and occurrences of pain. At issue is whether it is comprehensible to say that such things exist when there are no subjects whose experiences they are. Note that the objection is not that experiences would then somehow "float around in the air," or that a particular experience might be the only thing that existed in the universe. The Reductionist will claim that such states occur in causal dependence on other states, including bodily states. To say that pains exist but not the person who has them is not to deny that pains occur in bodies. The objection is, rather, that experiences require a subject whose experiences they are. Just as dents require a surface, so experiences require an experiencer to whom they occur.

When the objection is put in this way, it is relatively easy for the Reductionist to answer it. They can simply say that the demand for an experiencer is purely grammatical, as with the "it" in "It is raining." Shoemaker has suggested a more interesting formulation of the objection. He claims that "mental state" is a functional concept: for something to be a mental state, it must play a certain role in a larger system, one that consists in other mental states in dependence on a persisting body. Since such systems are persons, it follows that there cannot be experiences without persons. In that case, beings that had experiences and thought of them as such (using our concept of an experience) but did not think of themselves as persons would be missing an important fact about the world. They would not just be failing to apply a concept that is somehow optional, like the concept of a week for beings that already had the concepts of month and date. So, when these beings speak of the occurrence of an experience, it is not, after all, our concept, but some other, that of an *experience**, that they employ.

Parfit replies that their conceptual scheme may nonetheless be metaphysically just as good as ours. If we lacked the concept of a river as a persisting entity, we might nonetheless possess the concept of a process consisting of a continuous flowing of water along a relatively fixed path. This concept would then apply to the same stretches of reality as does the concept of a river. And it would be, in some respects,

a better way of conceptualizing these portions of the world, since it would be less likely to give rise to puzzle cases concerning diachronic identity. The concept of a river is the concept of some one thing that endures by being wholly present in a series of distinct times. The concept of a process is the concept of a whole made up of distinct, temporally contiguous events. To ask whether this is the same river as some earlier one is to ask whether it is some one thing that is present on both occasions. To ask whether this is the same process of continuous water flow is to ask whether some present event is best seen as a part of an earlier sequence of events. We can more readily see the latter question as involving a demand to make more precise the concept of a continuous process of flowing water. Thus it is easier to see that such puzzle cases involve no more than competing descriptions of the same facts.

Thus, consider the case of My Division, in which each of two bodies receives a fully functioning hemisphere of my brain. Given the usual understanding of our conceptual scheme, this case is deeply troubling. For we can accept that, if one hemisphere had not been successfully transplanted, then the person resulting from the transplant of the other hemisphere would be me. Yet when both operations succeed, none of the possible answers to the question of what happened to me seem satisfactory. But, Parfit claims, if we employed a conceptual scheme that lacked the concept of a person but was otherwise like ours, the case would not seem so puzzling. For, then, instead of asking what will happen to (the person) me, we could only ask whether, after the surgery, the causal series of psychophysical elements will be continued in the elements associated with one, both, or neither of the two bodies. And this question, he contends, is more transparently one concerning how best to extend our concepts to apply to novel circumstances; it is not a question the answer to which hinges on some further fact beyond the known details of the case.

A Buddhist Reductionist might welcome this reply to Shoemaker. For the most part, Buddhist Reductionists have been committed to the possibility of a conceptual scheme that is completely impersonal but contains (supposing Shoemaker to be right) the concept of an experience*. This is just what they take the ultimate truth to consist in. Granted, their conceptual scheme will be considerably more impoverished than the conceptual scheme Parfit has in mind, which is to be, apart from its lacking the concept of a person, just like ours. Because of the thoroughgoing mereological reductionism of the Buddhist Reductionist, the scheme informing his ultimate truth lacks the concept of a middle-sized enduring thing. But let us suppose that this poses no insuperable difficulties to the viability of such a scheme. Is the concept of an experience* a functional concept? Does an experience* necessarily play a certain role in a larger system consisting of other experiences* in dependence on a body (or a series of bodies)? If so, then the suggestion will be that the concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements will take on key features of our concept of a person. In particular, beings who employed that conceptual scheme would be inclined to think there is some further fact that makes one answer the right answer in My Division.

Before spelling out why this might be so, we need to ask what reason there could be to think that "experience*" is a functional concept. It does, after all, seem plausible that such things as pains and perceptions might have identity conditions that were intrinsic to the states themselves and were independent of any relations they might bear to other states and a larger system. In this case, while it might be true that pains regularly caused avoidance behavior on the part of the

system in which they occurred, still something's being a pain was quite independent of this and similar facts about it. Why should this turn out not to be possible? The difficulty is that, in that case, the concept will not be one that can be acquired through learning, and, consequently, there could never be any confidence that we share the same concept. When mental states are construed as entities whose natures are independent of any public manifestation, it becomes problematic to ascribe them to others and thus to self-ascribe as well. This is the principal argument in favor of experience's being a functional concept. And if experience* is to differ from experience just in not being necessarily the state of a subject, then it would seem that the same should hold for the concept of experience* as well. Parfit's thoroughly impersonal conceptual scheme would otherwise turn out to be unusable.

If this is correct, then it will be difficult to resist the conclusion that the concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements plays a role in the impersonal conceptual scheme analogous to that of a person in ours. For to say that experience* is a functional concept is to say that an experience* has its nature by virtue of its role in some system. And, given the nature of the mental states to be included under the rubric of experience*, this system must extend over some temporal duration. *Pain**, for instance, serves to predict future damage to the system, while *memory** retrieves past experience* in the system, thereby enabling it to take advantage of opportunities afforded by recurrent patterns in its environment. If the system in question is not to be identified as a person, then something like the concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements seems the most plausible candidate here. But to the extent that this is seen as that for which particular experiences* have meaning (e.g., by fostering reliable predictions), this is likely to take on some of the other properties of our concept of a person: properties such as being an agent, bearing responsibility, and having an interest in its future welfare. The concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements will, in short, become that of a *person**. And it will come to seem extremely puzzling to the beings employing this impersonal conceptual scheme that, in My Division, there is no uniquely best answer to the question how the causal series continues.

To say this is not to say that Parfit is utterly wrong to suppose there could be an advantage to their conceptual scheme. Buddhist Reductionists also claim we would each do better to think of ourselves not as a person, a substance, but as a process, a causal series of impersonal psychophysical elements. This is because, as Parfit points out, the concept of a series is transparently an aggregative concept. So we are less prone to reify it and thus fall into the trap of existential suffering. But the transparency of the concept might be a function not of its nature as a concept but of its relative unfamiliarity in this context. As I suggested above, we can imagine that those who employed the impersonal conceptual scheme might come to reify the concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements. For them, it might prove liberating to realize that a *person** can also be conceptualized as a person, that the same stretch of reality might be thought of not as a continuous process but under the concept of an enduring substance instead. For, given their conceptual economy, it might seem clear to them that to ask what becomes of the person in My Division is to ask no more than how best to extend a concept in novel circumstances.

What this would mean, though, is that there could be no usable conceptual scheme that lacked the concept of a subject of experience. Parfit's strategy for answering Shoemaker's formulation of the objection would then fail. Likewise, those Buddhist Reductionists who claim we can grasp a completely

impersonal ultimate truth would turn out to be wrong. Would this spell the defeat of Reductionism? Not necessarily. There were, after all, those Buddhist Reductionists who held that the ultimate truth is necessarily inexpressible. This was not because they held that the concept of an experience is functional in nature. It was rather because they held that no usable language can avoid aggregative concepts of some sort or other, and the use of such concepts will inevitably become the basis for a sense of an "I" and all that this entails. (They would say this, for instance, about the concept of a causal series of psychophysical elements.) Still, these Buddhists also held that our ultimate ontology contains neither self nor person, and that the conventionally real person is reducible to entities that are ultimately real. The objection we have been considering would have it that Reductionism is incoherent, since some of the entities in the reduction base, namely experiences, cannot be said to exist apart from the very thing allegedly being reduced, the experiencing subject. Those Buddhist Reductionists who hold the ultimate truth to be inexpressible would reply that experiences themselves cannot be said to belong to the reduction base.

But now a new worry will emerge: Why might it be that every usable conceptual scheme should contain something like the concept of a subject of experience? Might that not be taken as evidence that there really is such a thing? Of course, doubts might be raised about the intelligibility of the question whether there is or is not a subject of experience in our ultimate ontology, if the ultimate nature of reality is said to be inexpressible. Reductionists might try to put such doubts aside by claiming that the manner in which their reduction proceeds indicates—in a purely negative way, of course—something about the nature of our ultimate ontology. One way this might be done would be to claim that just as doubt is cast on the ultimate reality of the subject by showing it to supervene on experiences, so the ultimate reality of experiences may subsequently be put in question through showing them to supervene on physical states. Since we are now assuming that no usable conceptual scheme can lack the concepts of experience and of experiencing subject, these demonstrations could not be said to show that a strictly impersonal physicalist conceptual scheme represents the ultimate nature of reality. But the demonstrations, and the order in which they occur, might be said to show that our belief in the existence of the subject is more reflective of facts about us than of what is in our ultimate ontology.

Let us suppose that something like this strategy might work. Our question was whether the presence of a concept of the subject in every usable conceptual scheme could be taken as evidence for the ultimate reality of something like a subject of experience. Here it is important to bear in mind that this is a debate among realists. For realists, there are ultimate facts to which a conceptual scheme must answer. It is the anti-realist, not the realist, who must hold that if all usable conceptual schemes require the concept of a subject of experience then the subject of experience must be said to exist. For the anti-realist, it is just the commitments of our going theories that determine our ontology. The realist has the option of interpreting this requirement on conceptual schemes as merely reflecting facts about the users of conceptual schemes. For the realist, such facts must be derivable from ultimate facts, but they need not themselves be construed as ultimate. We must also bear in mind that there are already considerations creating difficulties for the hypothesis of a real subject. Given the mereological problems that arise when trying to square the ultimate existence of persons with the facts as we know them, it seems hasty to take the alleged impossibility of an impersonal conceptual scheme by itself to

vindicate belief in the reality of persons. What is the argument that is meant to take us from the alleged universality of subject-involving schemes to the real existence of the subject? Why can it not be that this is all just a matter of pragmatics, of what turns out to be useful?

This question might be put in the following way. In addition to the Non-Reductionist and Reductionist views of persons and personal identity, there is the Eliminativist position. The Eliminativist disagrees with the Reductionist precisely over the question whether the admittedly fictitious concept of a person is useful. Eliminativists are so called because they hold that our belief in persons is generated by a folk theory that stands in need of replacement. Now, while the Eliminativist need not propose any alternative concept, there will be those who do. In addition to the form of Eliminativism that maintains we should just learn to live with the ultimate truth (though this might prove inexpressible), there will be various forms of what might be called Punctualism and Weltgeistism. Punctualism holds that psychophysical elements should learn to identify with relatively short stretches of the causal series of psychophysical elements. The Punctualist claims that our concept of the subject of experience should be that of an entity that is relatively short-lived—perhaps as short as just the duration of the present moment. The Weltgeist theory maintains that identification should be not with the elements in a single causal series but with those in a multiplicity of such series. Punctualists advocate that we think of ourselves in the grasshopper's way. Weltgeistists hold that we should think more along the lines of ants and other social insects, which presumably identify with the colony as a whole. Now the Reductionist will claim that neither of these rival concepts of the subject of experience will promote overall welfare as well as our concept of the person. But the present point does not concern which theory is correct. The question is whether there is anything about this debate that shows it to be incompatible with there being nothing in our ultimate ontology corresponding to the concept of a subject of experience. This is, after all, a debate concerning which of a number of competing subject-involving conceptual schemes should be used. Yet no party to this debate believes the subject to be ultimately real. Are they deeply confused?

All the parties hold that there is no such thing as a transcendent subject for whom things would go better if it were to adopt one or another of these schemes. They all deny that there is an antecedently existing subject that could be thought of as choosing among competing schemes. For them, a subject is constituted only through the employment of one or another scheme. So it is only through inhabiting one or another scheme that one might attempt to judge which is best. Still, the debate seems to make sense. For it makes sense to compare the overall welfare achieved through adopting each. In seeing their debate this way, are they making some fundamental mistake? Perhaps the objection is that such comparison is incoherent. If there is no common subject for which things might be said to go better under one scheme than under another, then it makes no sense to say that one scheme is better. Judgments of better and worse require a subject. But this objection is mistaken. Suppose it is true that judgments of better and worse cannot be impersonal: to say that one state of affairs is better than another is really shorthand for saying that the one is better than the other *for some subject*. So, in saying that there is less overall suffering under the personhood scheme, the Reductionist is really saying that subjects are better off under that scheme than they would be under the alternative schemes. But this does not undermine the thesis that ultimately there is no subject of experience. For we are now assuming that the ultimate truth is not

expressible in any usable language. Only the conventional truth is expressible. And it is also being assumed that any formulation of conventional truth requires the concept of a subject. So the parties to this debate are not claiming that things would be impersonally better or worse under some one scheme. They are saying that the subjects that they take themselves to be would be better or worse off.

Suppose we were debating the question. Since we take ourselves to be persons, we would be considering whether persons might be better off thinking of themselves as grasshoppers or as ants. Under the terms of this debate, if we thought of ourselves as grasshoppers, we would be grasshoppers. Likewise, if we thought of ourselves as ants, we would be ants. Still, the question appears to make sense. We must take special care in answering it. There are things that matter to persons that would not matter to grasshoppers or ants. Still, we can take care to take this into account and so arrive at a view of the overall welfare that would be achieved under each scheme. And then we can judge that one scheme is better at maximizing overall welfare than the others. This may be difficult, but it is not impossible. If it were, then it would be unjustifiable to ask young people to make reasoned choices concerning their life paths. Different choices, for instance in career, may result in different sets of preferences. So what count as satisfactions for one future version of me may not count for another version. Still, it seems possible to judge that there would be greater overall satisfaction on one path than on another. This ability does not depend on there being, impossibly, some subject who shares the two different sets of preferences or who has none whatever. Likewise, the intelligibility of our debate does not depend on there being a subject who is simultaneously a person, a grasshopper, and an ant, or who is none of these.

Parfit holds that there is such a thing as being *bad, period* (1999: 258). On such a conception, it is possible for there to be states of affairs that would be worse, even though there was no one who was worse off. (This would be so if, for instance, we were comparing two worlds with disjoint populations, and there were more people who suffered in the one than in the other.) This is one sense in which things might be said to be impersonally bad. But there might seem to be another, deeper sense as well. The Buddha claimed that while ultimately there is suffering, there is ultimately none who suffers. And those Buddhist Reductionists who hold that there can be a completely impersonal description of reality are committed to the view that such suffering is ultimately bad. Many claim to find these Buddhist theses incomprehensible. Suffering and badness, they believe, cannot be impersonal in this deeper sense. Suffering requires a subject. And since badness confers a reason to act, badness likewise requires a subject, one for whom something could count as a reason. What is shown by our imagined debate over life lived as a person, a grasshopper, or an ant, is that there is a way in which this second, controversial sense of impersonal badness might be reduced to the less controversial first sense. To say that suffering is ultimately bad might just be a dramatic way of saying that alternative conceptual schemes are to be judged in terms of the degree to which they minimize overall suffering. It might not involve commitment to the implausible claim that badness is an ultimately real property, something without any conceptual dependence on subjects. To say that suffering is ultimately bad would just be to say that, of the alternative schemes that are candidates for the status of conventional truth, that scheme is conventionally true the adoption of which would result in the least amount of suffering overall.

* I follow Parfit in using starred terms to indicate concepts that are like their unstarred equivalents in all respects save their figuring in a completely impersonal conceptual scheme.

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