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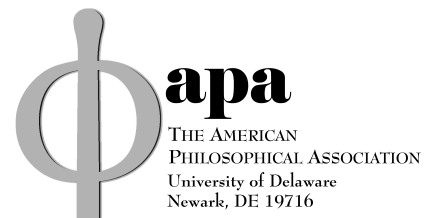
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Reductionism and Fictionalism: Comments on Siderits's Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*

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As a critic, I am in the unenviable position of agreeing with nearly all of what Siderits does in this lucid, erudite, and creative book. My comments will hence not be aimed at showing what he got wrong, as much as an attempt from a Madhyamaka point of view to suggest another way of seeing things. In particular, I will propose another way of seeing how one might think of how Madhyamaka philosophers, such as Nagarjuna and Candrakirti, see conventional truth, our engagement with conventional truth, and the status of persons. I suspect that this alternative is also in the minds of earlier Buddhist philosophers, and that Madhyamaka may be more an explicit working out of ideas implicit in the tradition than a radical break. If this suspicion—for which I will not argue here—is correct, this alternative is also available to those to whom Siderits refers as “reductionists.” I think that this way of seeing things may put certain ideas in Buddhist philosophy into better focus, and may indeed make them more attractive as well.

My view of these matters is guided by three ideas: (1) Truth in fiction is, while fictional, *true*; (2) Madhyamaka Buddhist theory is committed to a doctrine of two *truths*, not to a doctrine of one truth and one falsehood; (3) the last claim notwithstanding, such thinkers as Candrakirti often refer to conventional truth as entirely *false*. I will first explain these three ideas and their importance, then turn to a more explicit account of Madhyamaka fictionalism, and finally indicate where I think Siderits's presentation could be enriched with a dose of fiction.

1. Truth in Fiction

Works of fiction are different from factual reports. The latter aim at getting it right about the actual world, and the former, for the most part, do not (though they nonetheless may rely on and comprise claims that are non-fictional). So, measured against reality, many of the claims in works of fiction are simply false, and nobody frets about that. Were somebody to become angry as a result of her failure to locate Dean Moriarty's birthplace, and to accuse Jack Duluoz of lying about his existence, we would think her terribly confused about the nature of fiction; were she unable to locate Neal Cassady's birthplace and to accuse Jack Kerouac of making him up, we would merely accuse her

of sloppy scholarship, not ontological confusion. Neal was as real as Kerouac, Dean as fictional as Duluoz.

Nonetheless, Dean's fictional status does not preclude drawing the distinction between truth about him and falsity about him, and not merely truth and falsity as measured from outside.¹ There are real distinctions to be drawn between truth and falsity within the fiction, despite the fact that the fiction is a fiction. It is *true* (in the fiction) that Dean drove from Mexico City to San Francisco. It is *false* (in the fiction) that Dean flew from New York to Kathmandu. It is even *true* (in the fiction) that Dean is a real human being, and *false* (in the fiction) that he is a fictional entity, despite the fact that the former claim is false *outside of the fiction*, and that the latter is true *outside of the fiction*.

There is nothing terribly mysterious about this. Nor does this hinge on any particular theory of truth. The story is independent of whether we are correspondence theorists, coherentists, pragmatists, or deflationists and is independent of how many truth values we think there are, etc. The point is simply that fictions can *constitute* worlds against which truth can be assessed, despite the fact that those worlds are themselves fictional. Truth and falsity are determined by these fictional worlds, even though the truth and falsity of many propositions about these worlds are left open. These worlds bear little analysis. It is not just that we don't know Dean's shoe size. There is no fact of the matter about what it is. I don't *know* Neal's shoe size, but I am sure that he had one.

These fictional worlds are neither reducible to nor ontologically supervenient upon the actual world. Dean is not *really* a bunch of inkmarks on paper, nor an idea, however real these are. He is a fictional human being. And it is not true that in any world physically identical to this one there would be a Dean. There would be no Dean in any world like this one. Neither reductionism nor supervenience theory gives us an account of Dean's ontological status. But this does not, I repeat, undermine the fact that there are truths and falsehoods about Dean, and that those are constituted by a wholly natural, real phenomenon, a real fiction.²

Finally, note that fictions *constitute* the truth or falsity of claims about the worlds they describe. It makes no sense to ask whether *On The Road* gets Dean Moriarty right, or whether it makes mistakes about him, while it does make sense to ask whether a historian of the beats gets Neal Cassady right, or makes mistakes about him. Facts about Neal determine the truth or falsity of claims about him independent of our practices; the Kerouac novels *constitute* the truth or falsity of claims about Dean, and nothing in the actual world can verify or undermine them.

2. Two Truths (and a bit of falsehood)

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention,
And an ultimate truth. (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* XXIV: 8)

Nagarjuna argues that there are two *truths*, and Siderits correctly notes that this follows an earlier Buddhist tradition of distinguishing *samvrti-satya* from *paramartha-satya*. Candrakirti is intriguingly ambivalent about the status of *samvrti-satya*, sometimes characterizing it as a kind of *truth*, sometimes as *wholly false*.

Conventional truth is posited due to the force of afflictive ignorance, which constitutes the limbs of cyclic existence. For the *shravakas*, *pratyakhyabuddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, compounded phenomena, which are seen to be like reflections have the nature of being created; but these are not truths for them because they are not fixated on things as true. Fools are deceived, but for those others—just like an illusion—in virtue of being dependently originated, they are merely conventional. [*Madhyanakavatara-bhasya*, *dBu ma 'a 255a*]

His ambivalence, and the complex three-fold gloss he provides for *samvrti*, as well as the complex distribution of *samvrti* and *vyavahara* against *satya* and *sat* (*kun dzob/ tha snyad// bden pa/ yod pa*) generate a fair amount of debate among subsequent commentators in Tibet regarding the ontological status and nature of the truth claims of conventional truth or conventional reality. Some commentators emphasize the *falsity* (*dzun pa*) of conventional truth.³ Others emphasize its conventional *reality* and its status as an object of authoritative cognition, and hence the status of claims regarding it as *true*, even if only conventionally so.⁴ This debate can become both recondite and partisan very quickly.

By adopting a fictionalist reading of Candrakirti on these matters, and by following Tsong khapa in reading this back into Nagarjuna, we arrive at an understanding of the relationship between the two truths slightly different from that suggested by Siderits, and a correspondingly different understanding of Buddhist approaches to personal identity and to morality. The two truths are, as Nagarjuna in *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, and Candrakirti in *Prasannapada*, emphasize, each *truths*. Each one establishes a standard against which claims may be measured as true or false; each determines a *pramana*.⁵ As Tsong khapa puts the point, conventional authoritative cognition is authoritative in distinguishing between conventional truth and falsity. Similarly, transcendental authoritative cognition is authoritative with regard to question about ultimate truth.

Objects of knowledge constitute the basis of division of the two truths. The conventional truth and the ultimate truth are the entities that are the divisions of objects of knowledge. [*Ocean* 481]

This shows that, from among the two natures of the sprout, or the two truths about the sprout, the ultimate nature of the sprout is found by the former cognitive process, and the conventional nature is found by the latter cognitive process. [*Ocean* 483]⁶

It thus says that each phenomenon has two natures; and the ultimate is the one that is found by the cognitive process that apprehends reality; and the conventional is the one that is found by the cognitive process that perceives that which is unreal. [*Ibid.*]

Ordinary beings grasp such things as pots as truly existent, and grasp them as ultimately existent as well. Therefore from the perspective of their minds, such things as pots are ultimately existent, but they are not conventional objects. These things, such as pots, which are ultimately existent from their perspective, are conventional objects as they are seen by the *aryas*, to whom things appear as illusion-like. Since they cannot be posited as truly existent as they are apprehended by an *aryan* consciousness, they are referred to as merely conventional. [*Ocean* 484]⁷

It is important to note that in drawing this epistemological and ontological distinction Tsong khapa, following Candrakirti and Nagarjuna, emphasizes that just as conventional authoritative cognition cannot undermine transcendental authoritative cognition in its domain, *viz.*, the ultimate truth, transcendental authoritative cognition cannot undermine conventional authoritative cognition in *its* domain of authority, *viz.*, conventional truth. It is in this respect that the two truths are *two*, and *truths*.

On the other hand, Candrakirti reminds us in *Madhyamakavatara* that the conventional truth is *entirely false*, and sometimes explains this by saying that it is *deceptive* (*blu ba*). In the *Yuktisastikavrtti* Candrakirti says:

Suppose some one asked, “in that case, why is *nirvana* said to be an ultimate truth?” Because it does not deceive ordinary beings regarding its mode of existence. Only through mundane nominal conventions is it said to exist as ultimate truth. Compound phenomena, which are deceptive, are not ultimate truths. Since these truths are compound phenomena, they appear to have essence, although they do not. Therefore, since they deceive fools, they are regarded as conventional truths. [*dBu ma ya 7b*]

This, of course, follows Nagarjuna's remark that “whatever is deceptive is false.” The deceptiveness of conventional truth is a straightforward matter. Conventional reality has a mode of appearance discordant with its mode of existence. Things that are merely conventionally real appear to ordinary people to be ultimately real.

Taking conventional objects grasped by such unimpaired and impaired cognitive faculties to be real or unreal, respectively, merely conforms to ordinary cognitive practice. This is because they actually exist as they appear or do not, according whether or not they are undermined by ordinary cognition. This distinction between the real and the unreal is not drawn from the perspective of the *aryas*. Just as such things as reflections do not exist as they appear, such things as blue, that appear to exist through their own characteristics to those who are affected by ignorance do not actually exist as they appear. Therefore there is no distinction between those two kinds of cognitive faculties in terms of whether or not they are erroneous. [*Ocean* 485]

This superimposition of inherent existence on that which lacks it is the primal ignorance that leads to suffering. There is no difficulty in reconciling this sense of “falsehood” with the truth of conventional truth. Conventional truth is truly conventional, and deceptively appears to be more than that just as counterfeit dollars are *real* fakes. That's why you can be prosecuted for making them.

But Candrakirti does not *always* gloss falsehood in terms of deceptiveness. Sometimes he says that what is conventionally true does not exist at all.

Through seeing all phenomena both as real and as unreal,
The two natures of the objects that are found are grasped.
The object of the perception of reality is the way things really are.
That which is seen falsely is called the conventional truth.

It is asserted that there are two kinds of perceptions of the false:
That by acute sensory faculties; and that by defective sensory faculties.
The cognitive processes of those who have defective senses
Are fallacious in comparison to those of persons with acute senses.
[*Madhyamakaavatara* VI: 23, 24]

This claim must also be reconciled with the truth of conventional truth. Here is where fictionalism helps. In one important sense Dean Moriarty doesn't exist at all, and anyone who believes that he does exist in that sense is horribly deluded. And it is true, according to Madhyamaka (and according to earlier schools to the extent that their ontology is consistent with its ontology),⁸ in that same sense that whatever is conventionally existent, including persons, does not exist at all. In that sense anyone who believes that mere conventional phenomena, including persons, actually exist is horribly deluded. But *that* sense is perfectly compatible with the *truth constituted* by the Kerouac stories that Dean Moriarty did lots of speed, drove from Mexico City to San Francisco, and worked on the railroad, just as the nonexistence of conventionally real phenomena is consistent with their fictional existence and with lots of important conventional—that is, fictional—truths about them. Those truths are constituted by our conventions, and can neither be verified nor undermined by ultimate reality.⁹ Tsong khapa puts it this way:

The mode of positing through the force of convention—as when it is said, “all conventionally existent phenomena are posited through the force of convention”—is as follows: Consider a conventional assertion, such as, “I accumulated this karma and I am experiencing the effect.” If we search for the way in which the basis of this conventional positing exists, we find that it is neither the eyes, nose, etc., individually; nor is it them taken collectively; nor is this “I” any other thing. This is the sense in which the person does not exist inherently. Nonetheless, if we can't say such things as “I see,” this would be inconsistent with conventional authoritative cognition; so it must be the case that we can. Since objects do not exist through their own nature, they are established as existing through the force of convention.

The “mere” in “it is merely posited through the force of convention” precludes the object existing inherently, but does not preclude its existence being established through authoritative cognition. In the same way, the “mere” in “merely posited through names” precludes neither the existence of things other than names nor their existence being established by authoritative cognition; nor does it indicate that *everything* posited by names exists conventionally. But it *does* preclude anything existing inherently. [*Ocean* 38-39]

3. Madhyamaka Fictionalism

We can now say what it is to be a Madhyamaka fictionalist about conventional reality, about persons and about reality, and in sketching this position its virtues as an account of the doctrine of the two truths that manages to salvage in a natural way many of the *prima facie* inconsistent claims about the two truths in Buddhist literature will be apparent. Once again, let us leave aside for present purposes the status of ultimate truth. There is a lot to say here, but too much for present purposes, and most of it independent of the points that must be made here (and, in all respects, I think I agree with Siderits on that side).

Conventional truth is truth in a fiction, a fiction we collectively constitute. Like a novel, our collective practices, including our language, our perceptual activities, our thoughts and attitudes, constitute a world against and in which truth and falsity can be measured. The standards appropriate to that world are just those that mark off truth and falsity within the fiction. To deny that the persons or enduring physical objects of the conventional world are real, or that they possess the properties that conventional epistemic authority assigns to them on the grounds that they do not withstand ultimate analysis and are found thereby to be empty would be as silly as to deny that Dean Moriarty really drove cross country high on Benzedrine on the grounds that nobody by that name ever had a driver's license, or on the grounds that Neal Cassady did no such thing. On the other hand, arguing that these things truly exist, exist independently of the fiction, on the grounds that there is a difference between being right and wrong about them would be as silly as to argue that because it is *true* that Dean lived in San Francisco and *false* that he lived in Topeka, Dean truly exists.

As a fiction, conventional truth is, in an important sense, wholly false and is seen to be false by anyone who takes a standpoint outside of the fiction. The aryas are such people, of course, for any Buddhist. From that standpoint, every sentence in *On the Road* that mentions Dean is entirely false. And from the standpoint of ultimate truth, any sentence that implicates the existence of persons and enduring objects is wholly false.

We can make sense not only of Madhyamaka assertions of the complete falsehood of conventional truth but also of the analysis of “false” as meaning *deceptive*. It is certainly possible for one to pick up a novel and to take it to be a chronicle. Some misguided readers might assume, for instance, that a novel is an autobiography and then complain when details of the lives of the fictional protagonist do not match those of the author's life that the novel contained lies. Such readers are *deceived* and, to the extent that the claims in the novel are taken to be false, it is not because they are false by the standards of fiction, nor because the appropriate standards against which to measure their truth and falsity is the extra-fictional world, but instead because the reader was deceived by the fiction into thinking it was more than just a fiction. Just so with conventional truth: primal ignorance just is the mistaking of the fiction of conventional truth for reality. Its falsity can hence be analyzed, as Nagarjuna and Candrakirti urge, neither as falsity by conventional standards, nor in terms of the appropriateness of ultimate standards as the measure of conventional truth, but in terms of ordinary persons taking the conventional truth to be more than just conventional, to deception.¹⁰

Conventional reality, like fiction, cannot withstand analysis. Tsong khapa emphasizes this:

When any substantially existent thing is sought using reasoning, although it *should* be found, since it is *not*, it is refuted. But, when we seek a *merely* existent thing through reasoning, because it should *not* be found, not finding it cannot refute it. Thus, this all depends

on these distinctions: *not* being able to withstand analysis *vs* that which is undermined by reasoning; not being found by an analytical mind *vs.* that which is thereby refuted.

Suppose one thought, “When anything is analyzed, it is impossible to find that it exists. Therefore, if we do not assert that the mundane, conventionally existent object exists in that way, why would this not contradict the fact that under mundane analysis—is it arisen or non arisen; coming or going?—one of the alternatives must be asserted?”

These two methods of analysis are completely dissimilar. This conventional analysis is *not* as follows: Not being satisfied with just the conventional imputation of arising and going, one employs a method of analysis searching for the way in which the object of conventional imputation exists. The previous ultimate analysis *is* like that. And so, we do *not* accept any object to be found to exist through the *previous* mode of analysis. The object of the *latter* analysis is accepted, but since *its inherent existence* is not, how could these be the same? [Ocean 39-40]

Just as fictional worlds are open, leaving many matters undecided, and crumble into indeterminacy or even inconsistency when we ask too many questions, conventional reality leaves a lot open. When we analyze to find the nature of any phenomenon we come up empty. If the conventional world were more than fictional, Tsong khapa reminds us, analysis should terminate. We should be able to find Neal’s shoe size, but not Dean’s.

As we have seen, it is central to Madhyamaka theory (and, as we are properly reminded by Siderits, of earlier Buddhist metaphysics to the extent that Madhyamaka is a continuous outgrowth of that tradition) that the two truths are two *truths*, and not one truth and one falsehood. Madhyamaka fictionalism allows us to understand that claim as well. Fictional truth, as we have emphasized, is not only wholly false, not only deceptive, but also a kind of *truth*. To the extent that our lives are lived largely within the fiction of conventional reality, it is essential that we master conventional authoritative cognition and distinguish truth from falsehood in that domain; this is essential both as an instrument to realize ultimate truth and despite the fact that liberation requires us to see the conventional truth as merely conventional and, hence, as entirely false. The sense in which the two truths are at bottom one—as Siderits has put it famously, that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth—is that the ultimate truth is just that the conventional truth is just conventional. Nothing lies behind or beneath it.

4. Reductionism, Anti-realism, and Irony versus Fictionalism

The foregoing is simply meant to motivate fictionalism as a natural way of understanding much Buddhist metaphysics of the person. I have argued most directly that it is a natural way to understand Madhyamaka, that school that Siderits characterizes as “anti-realist.” I shall have a few things to say below about why I think that fictionalism is a close cousin to, and perhaps a more attractive cousin than, anti-realism. But my real goal is to suggest that fictionalism represents the common thread that links earlier to later Buddhist metaphysics. The continuities between earlier Buddhist schools and Madhyamaka to which Siderits adverts I believe are real, and, in fact, I think that in characterizing the shift from Sautrantika to Madhyamaka schools as a shift from reductionism to anti-realism Siderits overplays the differences in this regard. In fact, I think that he characterizes each school as

more *extreme* than each in fact is and that fictionalism provides the middle path in exegesis.

Siderits provides an excellent characterization of reductionism and argues that the Buddha (as well as most early Buddhists) was clearly a reductionist.

The Reductionist has proposed an account according to which our talk of persons as owners of pain is just a shorthand way of referring to a set of discrete but causally connected psychophysical elements. [40]¹¹

While reductionism, as opposed to eliminativism or straight-out realism about an independent self, is a plausible middle-path reading of an early Buddhist attitude toward persons, once fictionalism is in play, its plausibility fades a bit. For one important thread in Buddhist philosophy from the very beginning is the doctrine of *anatman*, of no-self. Reductionism, as Siderits points out, is not a way of demonstrating that there is *no* self but, rather, that the self *really* is something else—in this case, a continuum of subpersonal psychophysical phenomena. Siderits’s view has much going for it: such a continuum is not what is generally meant by *atman*. And it avoids the extreme of eliminativism. These are, to be sure, important constraints on any interpretation.

On the other hand, Siderits’s view retains the *reality* of the self and, what is more, does not square with the important language found in many Buddhist texts, “basis of imputation” (*btags zhi*) to characterize the relation between the aggregates and the person. The aggregates are repeatedly described in Buddhist texts as on the person, including *both* Sravakayana texts such as the *Questions of King Milinda* and Mahayana texts such as *Madhyamakavatara* *not* as what the self *really* is but, rather, as the basis of its imputation. Reductionism as a reading misses this crucial point; fictionalism captures it. Siderits writes:

Surely the occurrence of such beliefs [as that in the self, etc.] is the result of our having been socialized into a society that found it useful to employ such convenient designators [as “forest,” “chariot,” “army” or “city”]. And since “person” is regularly classified along with “army” and “chariot” as a convenient designator, the same should hold for our belief in the existence of persons.

Candrakirti gives an account of the notion of conventional truth that also supports this interpretation. ...And while Candrakirti is not himself a Reductionist, it is important to his project that his explication of this concept reflect the understanding of the Buddhist Reductionist.

...The ignorance that is to be overcome through enlightenment is thus not our belief in the existence of the person but rather our disposition towards hypostasization with respect to convenient designators. [72 n. g]

All of this strikes me as dead on target. But it is not reductionist. Convenient designators are better in this context thought of as terms occurring in fictions. They are as convenient and as designative as “Dean Moriarty.” Their designata are no more reducible to continua or aggregates or any other ultimate reality than Dean is to either a set of ink marks on paper rolls issuing from Jack’s typewriter or to Neal Cassady.¹²

A bit later Siderits considers Buddhist personalism and argues that this is best thought of as a species of supervenience theory. Again, I think that by seeing it as an alternative expression of fictionalism we better see the continuities among these

schools as well as their subtle differences. Siderits writes:

While there can be little doubt that the Buddha espoused a form of Reductionism, there were some Buddhists who held an anti-Reductionist position. Since the name by which their view came to be known (*pudgalavada*) simply means the doctrine of the person, we shall call them “Personalists.” And while they did not formulate their view in terms of the notion of non-reductive supervenience, there are many suggestive elements in their defense of their view. First, Personalists agreed with the Buddhist Reductionists that there is no separately existing self. They also held that the person is named and conceptualized in dependence on the psychophysical elements, and that it can be said to be neither identical to nor distinct from its elements. Unlike the psychophysical elements, it is not ultimately real, but neither is it a mere conceptual fiction. Instead it must be accorded a distinctive sort of reality, since it has properties that none of the psychophysical elements has, such as being the bearer of moral desert... [89]

Supervenience, of course, is a contested relation. But let us grant Siderits’s account of the relation as one of non-reductive ontological determination. I think that that is roughly right. The relation between supervenience base and supervening entities should be such that any two worlds identical with respect to the base entities will be identical with respect to the supervening entities.¹³ Once one fixes the base phenomena, it should hence not matter what conventions are present in order to determine the supervening phenomena. That is the point of *determination*. Moreover, supervenience should not be thought of as eliminating but, rather, as *vindicating* the reality of the supervening phenomena. As Siderits notes, supervenience theory requires that the properties ascribed at the supervening level have “autonomous explanatory powers” (90), just as the properties of the person, on the personalist theory attributed to pudgalavadins such as the Sammitiya, are supposed to be distinct from those of the aggregates.

But here the analogy ends. For the supervenience theorist, the base properties nonetheless *determine* the supervening properties; for the fictionalist they do not. The autonomy of explanation in supervenience theory is merely the absence of *reduction*. But, as Tsong khapa puts it, the pudgalavadins are committed to the claim that “the self—whether it is identical to or different from the aggregates—is inexpressible” (*Ocean* 334). According to this position, just as according to the position articulated in *The Questions of King Milinda*, whether Milinda the infant is identical with Milinda the King, like whether Milinda arrived in a chariot or not, is not *determined* by base phenomena but by our conventions. The reason that there is no determinate answer to the questions that King Milinda asks is that they are not *determined by*, and hence do not *supervene on*, the relevant base. Instead, it is because such questions make no sense of fictional entities.

Pudgalavada differs from earlier schools just in its emphasis on the importance of the fictional entity as the entity of rebirth, as the bearer of moral properties, etc., and, hence, for its fictionalization of these phenomena as well as its emphasis on the serious metaphysical work the person does. The Pudgalavada innovation, at least as we read it from the standpoint of their critics, is to assert that the relation between the self and the aggregates, or the nature of the self, is inexpressible. This is the position that Candrakirti and Tsong khapa single out for criticism when they discuss this position. This development, however, is simply a further development of fictionalism en route to the full-blown Madhyamaka position:

the nature of the self, and the precise relation it bears to the aggregates, has no *ontic* character—cannot be *expressed* in terms of any *real* (that is causally efficacious) relation because of its unreality. Nonetheless, the self plays an important role in our collective fiction, as the subject of rebirth, the bearer of moral properties, etc.

Let us now turn to Madhyamaka and see why fictionalism offers us a better understanding of Buddhist metaphysics in this school than does a straightforward anti-realism. Here things are a bit closer—anti-realism and fictionalism may not be all that different in this context. Siderits writes:

[After arguing that there cannot be anything with intrinsic nature {*svabhava*}] the Buddhist anti-realist would put this as the claim that all things are *empty*... Now a Buddhist Reductionist would agree that such things as chariots, forests and persons are empty in this sense. For it is a hallmark of conceptual fictions that they borrow their natures from the parts of which they are composed. ...What might [this] claim mean? There appear to be just two possibilities, metaphysical nihilism and global anti-realism. ...According to global anti-realism...the very notion of an ultimate truth, of there being an ultimate nature of reality, is incoherent. [132]

I agree completely that, for Madhyamaka, the very notion of there being an ultimate nature of reality is incoherent. That is precisely what Nagarjuna means when he identifies the two truths, and what Candrakirti means when he describes emptiness as an external negation and as the absence of any intrinsic nature. And if this is what “global anti-realism” means, then, sure, to be a madhyamika is to be a global anti-realist. But this label is misleading for at least two reasons. First, it strikes one as hyperbolic regarding the ontological commitments of Madhyamaka; second, it overstates the discontinuities between Madhyamaka and earlier Buddhist metaphysics and occludes the precise innovation that Nagarjuna introduces into Buddhist metaphysics.

The label “anti-realist” strikes me as hyperbolic because while it correctly emphasizes the *emptiness* of all phenomena and the absence of any ultimately existent substratum for anything—any ultimate against which the conventional contrasts—it obscures the fact that for Madhyamaka the two truths really are two *truths*, and that emptiness amounts to conventional *reality*, which is the only kind of reality anything can have. Siderits, to be sure, understands this. But to call a position according to which the reality of everything that, say, an idealist or, for that matter, a materialist, denies is real, is real, “anti-realist” seems to be at best misleading. Tsong khapa, commenting on a verse in *Ratnavali*, says:

Apart from that which is conventionally designated,
What world could there be ultimately, [32]
Either existent or non-existent? [II: 14bcd]

So, without being posited through the force of convention, existence is not possible. However, not *everything* posited through the force of convention exists. There is no difference between the failure to find even the slightest basis for the designations in “*Lhejin* saw form” and “*substantially existent Lhejin* saw form.” [*Ocean* 39]

The question about the continuity and discontinuity between Madhyamaka and earlier schools is perhaps more important. Here is where seeing the landscape as one of varieties of fictionalism brings things into better focus. On Siderits’s view, Madhyamaka is radically discontinuous with

earlier Buddhist schools in that while the early schools are reductionist, Madhyamaka is anti-realist. Sautrantika and Pudgalavadin schools, I have argued, were fictionalists about persons and other conventional phenomena, albeit in subtly different ways. But, as Siderits and I would agree, they believed that there is a level of analysis at which fictionalism is false. Fundamental dharmas are not, on their view, fictional entities. But madhyamikas as well appeal to fundamental dharmas, despite the fact that, as Siderits notes, their attitude toward them is radically different. For madhyamikas hold all phenomena to be empty and, hence, in this sense, to be fictional. Madhyamaka is fictionalism all the way down. In this sense it is very radical. But in another, it is quite continuous with earlier Buddhist analysis. It simply takes that analysis all the way. The difference between Siderits's and my way of seeing this theoretical landscape is slight. I do not so much as quarrel with his but offer a different metaphor.

Speaking of metaphors, among the best paragraphs in *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* is this:

Coming to grips with Buddhist anti-realism can be usefully compared to what happens when a currency is taken off the gold standard. A paper currency that is readily convertible into gold may come to be seen as having value quite independently of its relation to something antecedently thought of as intrinsically valuable. To withdraw the backing of gold is to disrupt any attachment we may feel toward the currency by showing it to be without intrinsic value. This may in turn give rise to the fear that our currency will become just so much worthless paper. Such fears are shown to be misplaced when it turns out that the currency retains its former value after going off the gold standard. For we then learn that what gives a currency value is its role as a medium of exchange within that set of human institutions and practices known as an economy. Indeed we then come to see that gold is equally without intrinsic value, that its value has always rested on contingent facts about human interests and practices. But the insight that nothing has intrinsic value does not trigger the despair of economic nihilism. Instead we simply acquiesce in the practice of accepting the currency (and gold too, for that matter) as having economic value. [202]

I could not agree more. I only think that when seen as an articulation of Madhyamaka fictionalism, this insight is easier to harmonize with the sequence of Buddhist positions that preceded it. Mark Siderits is to be commended for producing a fine book, among the best contributions to the enterprise he has so aptly dubbed “fusion philosophy” of which I am aware.

Endnotes

* Thanks to Constance Kassor and to Lindsay Crawford for lots of hard thinking and good conversations about fictionalism, personal identity, and the two truths. Their theses and our supervision meetings provide much of the raw material for these thoughts. I am indebted to Abraham Veléz for numerous conversations and for his recent essays that convinced me of the importance of taking more seriously the continuities between earlier Buddhist philosophy and Madhyamaka. Thanks to Nalini Bhushan, Constance Kassor, and John Taber for useful comments on an earlier draft. These comments do not reflect Mark Siderits's replies or indicate how I would respond to them.

1. By truth and falsity as measured from outside, I mean the truth of claims like, “Dean is a character in *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*,” and the falsity of claims like “Kerouac modeled Dean on Woodrow Wilson.” These are sentences

the truth-values of which are determined by facts about the real world.

2. This does indicate an interesting formal problem regarding the way that supervenience is often formulated. For any world physically identical to this one will *induce* a fictional world in which Dean is as he is in the fiction as it is constituted here. This indicates that supervenience, as an ontological thesis, has to be formulated in the material mode, not in terms of descriptions.
3. See especially Go ram pa in *Ngas don rab gsal*.
4. See especially Tsong khapa in *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal* and *rTsa she tik chen*.
5. I set aside for present purposes a hard problem, but one truly orthogonal to this discussion, *viz.*, the nature of ultimate reality, and its relation to statements purporting to express ultimate truth. This issue quickly involves complex questions in Madhyamaka ontology, philosophy of language, and logic. But all of these questions are independent of views about the status of conventional truth, and even about its relation to ultimate truth, which are the questions at stake here.
6. All references to Tsong khapa's *Ocean of Reasoning* (*rTsa she tik chen rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*) are to *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, trans. by Samten and Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
7. Tsong khapa continues:

However, since their nature is said to be ultimate truth, it should be asserted, with this distinction in mind, that such things as pots are conventional. But their nature, as the aryas grasp it, is ultimate; but one should *not* assert that such things as pots are ultimates for the aryas, because the aryas' rational minds, which see reality, do not find things such as pots; and because it is said that the distinctive characteristic of the ultimate truth is that it is found by [408] the rational mind that sees reality. ...

There are two kinds of cognitive processes that perceive unreal deceptive objects: the cognitive process associated with an acute sensory faculty, which is not impaired by any extraneous causes of misperception such as cataracts; and the cognitive process associated with a defective sensory faculty impaired by extraneous causes of misperception. In comparison to the ones discussed earlier, these two are fallacious cognitive processes...

Just as there are two kinds of faculty—non-erroneous and erroneous—their objects are said to be of two corresponding kinds—unreal and real: the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are unimpaired by extraneous causes of misperception; and the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are impaired by extraneous causes of misperception, respectively. Here *Madhyamakavatara* says:

That which is perceived by ordinary people

By being grasped through unimpaired sense faculties

Is regarded by ordinary people as real.

All the rest is said to be unreal. [VI: 25]

The internal impairments of the sense faculties are such things as cataracts, jaundice and such things as hallucinogenic drugs. The external impairments of the sense faculties are such things as mirrors; the echoing of sound in a cave; and the rays of the autumn sun falling on such things as white sand. Even without the internal impairments, these can become the causes of grasping such things as mirages, reflections, and echoes as water, etc. [409] Magicians' mantras and potions should be understood similarly.

The impairments of the mental faculty are such things as erroneous philosophical views, fallacious arguments, dreams and sleep. Thus, the impairments such as ignorance with regard to the two kinds of self-grasping that develop from beginningless time are not treated as impairments in this

context. Rather, as we previously explained, the extraneous causes of misperception in the faculties are treated as impairments in this context. [Ocean 484-85]

8. This is another vexed issue in Buddhist doxography about which Siderits has much to say that is of interest, and about which there is much more to say. I will say nothing more about it here.
9. This point is important. On this account an apprehension of ultimate reality is not an apprehension of the nonexistence of conventional reality but of its lack of inherent existence. Conventional reality is not dissolved by apprehension of the ultimate—it is only seen for what it is, merely conventional. Knowing Kerouac's biography does not prevent one from appreciating *On the Road*.
10. One might object at this point that the analogy between conventional truth and fictional truth crumbles in that fictions are deliberately constructed against a background of reality and can be deliberately entered and exited, whereas the conventional truth seems to be global, pervasive, and a mandatory feature of our cognitive lives. The very point of the Buddhist analysis, though, is that while we are conditioned to accept the conventional truth as more than simply conventional (primal ignorance due to our karma), this predicament is escapable with practice. Moreover, we are certainly familiar with fictions that have been so pervasive in our cultural past that we accepted them as true and could not imagine their fictional status. Think about Ptolemaic astronomy, intelligent design theory, or the flat earth hypothesis. Or in the social realm, think about the fictions regarding the nature and capability of women explored with such care by de Beauvoir. In each case, everything spoke for the truth and nothing for the falsity of these fictions. But with effort, we have come to see them as fictional. I thank Nalini Bhushan for convincing me of the importance of this point.
11. References to Siderits are to *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (London: Ashgate, 2003).
12. At this point a reminder is necessary. Mark has a reasonable reading of early Buddhist positions, and not one I take myself to be demonstrating to be *incorrect*. I am offering an alternative reading, one I take to be equally defensible with regard to these texts themselves, one that solves some problems that Mark's retains (in particular I save the doctrine of *anatman* more straightforwardly than does he, and explain the "neither the same nor different" passages better), but one that may raise its own textual difficulties. The most striking difficulty for my own reading is this: Texts such as the *Questions of King Milinda* do say such things as that terms such as "chariot" and "person" are convenient designators for collections of chariot parts or sequences of collections of skandhas, respectively. And they suggest that these collections are what is *really there*. These latter remarks do suggest reductionism. On the other hand, the case is not unambiguous. For one thing, given that these theorists are not self-consciously distinguishing positions like fictionalism and reductionism from one another, at least not to the degree that Madhyamaka theorists would a bit later, we can expect some imprecision in formulation. But, second, if the position was unambiguously reductionist, it would be hard to see why Nagasena would insist that the adult, e.g., is *neither* the same nor different from the child. If the adult *is* the sequence of adult skandhas, and the child *is* the sequence of childhood skandhas, they are different. Instead of reading the "convenient designator" language as implicating reductive identity, I would read it as suggesting that the self is a convenient term for a fictional entity imputed on the basis of the (real) aggregates, etc. But I confess that there may be no clear hermeneutical judgment here. Mark's reading of this as reflecting a choice to speak on the ultimate level (p 97, n. c) strikes me as a forced reply to this problem, but it may be correct. On the other hand, when seen as a moment in a series of Buddhist articulations, I would argue that the fictionalist reading captures the continuities and development nicely.

13. Here I leave aside all questions about whether the relation is best conceived as obtaining between entities, properties, descriptions, or worlds; whether the relation is local or global; and whether or not supervenience is equivalent to some form of reduction. All of these questions are fascinating, and they have inspired a large literature. But they need not detain us here.

On Borrowing from the Indian Philosopher's Toolbox: Comments on Mark Siderits, Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy

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In my discussion of Mark Siderits's book, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), I shall focus exclusively on the first part, in which he carefully crafts and vigorously defends a reductionist theory of personal identity. Although Siderits in effect withdraws this proposal in the second half of the book (beginning with chapter six) on the grounds that it presupposes realism, which he believes is false, he nevertheless recommends that one should accept the reductionist view of personal identity that he works out in the first part of the book if one can't follow him down the path—some might say, over the cliff—toward anti-realism. If one is going to be a realist, in other words, then one should be a reductionist in regard to what it is to be a person. Most of us are realists most of the time; therefore, it is on Siderits's reductionist theory of personal identity that I shall concentrate.

I have much admiration for the first part of Mark's book. It is a philosophical tour de force inspired in part by Buddhist ideas that nevertheless stands on its own as a contribution to the literature on personal identity. At the same time, it is one of the most convincing demonstrations to date of the relevance of Indian philosophy to contemporary philosophy, the fulfillment of the promise of the pioneers of the study of Indian philosophy from the analytic point of view—B. K. Matilal, Karl Potter, A. K. Warder, and others. Until now, we've been offered mostly hints and suggestions that this or that Indian theory might be helpful in solving a contemporary philosophical problem. Most writers in this tradition have stopped short, however, of actually working out detailed solutions and introducing them in the arena of contemporary philosophical debate—by publishing their work, for example, in analytic philosophy journals. The view Siderits develops in his book, on the other hand, which derives in part from discussions of the person in Indian Buddhist texts, is put forward as a serious proposal in contemporary metaphysics. Siderits doesn't hedge by asking us to forgive shortcomings of the theory he is interested in by regarding its historical context or religious presuppositions. Rather, for the most part he completely detaches it from its historical and religious moorings and presents it completely refurbished and updated, free, he believes, of any weaknesses or shortcomings, as a viable contender among contemporary theories of personal identity.

Siderits refers to his method as "fusion philosophy," by which he means the combining of resources from different philosophical traditions to solve philosophical problems. While the second half of the book represents what might indeed be called a fusion of Indian and Western philosophy, insofar as it attempts to demonstrate and defend a distinctly Buddhist metaphysical idea (essentially, the Madhyamaka notion of the emptiness of all entities) in rigorously analytical fashion, making use of current theories in analytic metaphysics and epistemology, in the first part "fusion" looks more

like “extraction.” Selected concepts and arguments are “borrowed”—one might well say “stripped”—from Buddhist philosophy and applied to the problem of personal identity as it is known in Western philosophy, while most of the rest of Buddhist philosophy is discarded. Ideas generally considered essential to the Buddhist worldview—karma, rebirth, *nirvana*, the momentariness of entities, mind-body dualism, and the dependence of insight into reality on meditative practice, to mention only a few—are set to one side. It is only the idea of a person as a series of causally related psycho-physical factors and the distinction between conventional and ultimate truths that Siderits makes extensive use of. Since the former had already been explored and developed by Derek Parfit, it is really only the latter that could provide any basis for saying that the theory he is defending is a Buddhist one. In fact, this is not a claim that Siderits seems particularly concerned to defend. “What I present here as elements of Buddhist philosophy,” he writes, “may not be immediately recognizable as such to those who are accustomed to reading the tradition in other ways and for other purposes” (p. xiii); “All I am claiming is that this is a reasonable extrapolation from what [Buddhist philosophers] did say, that this is what someone who held their view and was also a party to present philosophical discussions ought to say” (p. xiv).

Is it legitimate to extract ideas integral to a complex thought-system in this way and introduce them into a discourse completely different from that in which they evolved and for which they were intended? Of course it is! We do this all the time in regard to our own tradition. Insights from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* are applied in contemporary moral psychology, arguments from Descartes are resurrected in the contemporary mind-body debate, and so on. Siderits argues that removing concepts and theories from one tradition to solve philosophical problems in another is no less legitimate than borrowing tools from the house next door. If they work to fix the things we need to fix, it doesn’t matter what they were used for next door, and we certainly don’t need to know about everything that is going on next door!

Siderits’s approach to Indian philosophy is legitimate and reasonable. As I’ve indicated, it is an approach that a certain school of scholars of Indian philosophy have been keen on for some time, and I believe Mark has executed it more successfully than anyone so far. Yet it is one approach among others and, like the others, has its limitations.

Its main limitation, I believe, is that it causes us to miss valuable aspects of the systems we are borrowing from besides those that are immediately relevant to problems already familiar to us from our own tradition. The kind of enterprise Siderits is engaged in is focused on getting our own house in order. Certainly, one’s house should be in order! And one must live in one house or another; one can’t very well live in two. By borrowing ideas from another philosophical tradition to solve problems in one’s own, one is contributing to one’s own tradition—repairing and remodeling one’s own house—and that is good. Yet one is also not really seeing what he is doing in the other tradition, what that other tradition, which is providing so many useful tools, is about. In particular, one is unable to understand how that tradition came up with the tools we find so useful, i.e., how the problems we find interesting arose in that tradition and what angle of approach it took to them that made the solutions we find so helpful apparent. If one keeps going next door to borrow tools because next door has all kinds of handy tools we’ve never invented or thought of, then one might begin to suspect that they have a whole way of doing things next door that it would benefit us to learn about. One ought to want to find out a lot more about what’s going on next door!

Thus, the endeavor to understand Indian philosophical theories in their historical and cultural context is not mere antiquarianism, nor is it tantamount to treating Buddhism as a “museum diorama.” Rather, it is a reflection of a concern to understand the ideas and theories of Indian philosophy in greater depth, thereby introducing the possibility of a more profound alteration in one’s thinking than can be achieved by selecting this or that isolated bit of Indian philosophy for immediate application to a contemporary problem. (Keep in mind that I am talking here about the first part of Mark’s book. The second part, where he embraces a uniquely Buddhist teaching and tries to defend it in a rigorously analytical fashion, is another matter entirely.)

Therefore, in my comments today I would like to supplement somewhat what Mark has done by going a little further into the debate about the self in classical Indian philosophy. Mark has given us snippets of the controversy in his historical endnotes, but I’m sure he is aware that a great deal remains to be brought out. The debate, after all, lasted for over a millennium. For one thing, we really don’t understand from his book why the doctrine of No-Self, as it is often called, was so questionable among non-Buddhist philosophers, especially the Brahmins. If the ancient arguments for the Buddhist teaching of No-Self can find application in philosophy today, then so can the ancient objections to them. I, too, shall try to formulate these objections as rigorously as I can. In the end, however, I believe that they are not very effective—or not as effective as the Brahmins believed—isolated from the context for which they were intended, as I shall also try to explain.

One of the most alarming consequences of the No-Self theory for Brahmanical philosophers of the classical period as I read the texts—my knowledge, of course, is limited; I have principally in mind the Naiyayikas and Mimamsakas, and in particular the Mimamsa philosopher Kumarila Bhatta¹—is that, in their view, it undermines the law of karma. The first objection Kumarila raises against the Buddhist position in his chapter on the self in his *Slokavarttika* is that it entails *krtanasa* and *akrtagama*, the loss of one’s own deeds and the taking on of another’s (SV, *Atmavada* 23 ff.). If there is not one continuously existing self who both commits a certain action and experiences its retribution, then one person will commit the action and another will experience its retribution—assuming, of course, that there are persons at both ends of the continuum at all. (If there aren’t, the Brahmins believe, then one is in even deeper trouble; there is no agent or experiencer at all.) The person or person-stage who commits the action will avoid the enjoyment of its effect, while the other person will enjoy the effect of an action she didn’t commit. This problem cannot be dealt with in the same way as memory, by the introduction of mental impressions, *vasanas*, which are deposited by past experiences and which have the power later to awaken memories of those experiences as if “from the inside” (i.e., quasi-memories), regardless of whether the rememberer of the memory and experiencer of the original experience are identical. For if the continuity of responsibility is not to be broken—if, that is, only the person who commits the deed is to enjoy its consequences and not some other person—then the agent of karma and the experiencer of its fruit must be the same. If they are the same only in a relative or conventional sense insofar as both belong to the same series of causally related psycho-physical factors, then the law of karma would hold only in a relative or conventional sense; the result of an action would not in reality fall upon the *person* who did it but on something else that is not a real thing at all, for the Buddhists deny that aggregates of any kind are real. Given the stress that the Buddha put on the law of karma in the face of all attempts to deny or qualify it, however—given his insistence that there is a real difference between good and

bad actions and that we will inevitably reap the rewards of those actions (cf. the *Samannaphala Sutta*)—it seems that he held the law of karma to be literally, not just conventionally, true, as Siderits himself notes.²

The Brahmanical philosophers went even further, however, and argued that action itself, which is the literal meaning of the word karma, is not even possible on the orthodox Buddhist theory of the person, which conceives of persons as series of *momentarily* existing, causally-related psycho-physical factors, i.e., *skandhas*. Actions are not instantaneous; they take place over time. For anyone to perform an action that same person must carry out all of its stages. Otherwise we have, strictly speaking—and especially, as Kumarila points out, in the case of complicated actions such as sacrifices—not really an action but a collective enterprise, no different from the building of a cathedral by many artisans and laborers over centuries.³ On the Buddhist theory, the Brahmin wants to say, the earlier “person-stage” doesn’t even commit the deed the consequence of which a later stage in that same series suffers or enjoys.⁴ And the Buddhists themselves agree! Dharmakirti, for instance, openly admits that action, *kriya*, from the standpoint of ultimate truth, never really occurs.⁵ Dharmakirti has no problem with this because he, like Siderits, ultimately believes that the world of common experience is a kind of illusion. For a realist, however, and especially one who believes in the reality of moral desert, this is a serious problem.

This line of criticism can be seen as related to some of the objections Siderits considers against Parfit’s view of personal identity in his brilliant third chapter, “Getting Impersonal.” The Extreme Claim is the charge that if Reductionism in regard to the self were true, then four central features of personhood—interest in one’s own survival, egoistic concern for one’s future states, holding persons responsible for past deeds, and compensation for one’s past burdens—would lack rational justification.⁶ Siderits is quite successful, I think, in showing how at least “mitigated forms” of the first two features, interest in one’s own survival and egoistic concern for one’s future states, can be accounted for within Buddhist Reductionism. Yet he seems to concede that an account of even mitigated forms of the latter cannot be given (p. 52). “[Moral] desert must disappear when we seek to describe the world in terms of the wholly impersonal truth” (p. 37). “While we may often want to punish our cars and computers, in our calmer moments we recognize these to be irrational impulses” (loc. cit.). We can only say that desert is “conventionally real”; it is just a notion we find useful in evaluating and controlling our own and others’ behavior. This concession, however, would amount to a *nigrahasthana*, an admission of defeat, in the classical Indian setting. In the contemporary context, it poses an obstacle to the acceptance of Siderits’s theory not just for those inclined to believe in the reality of moral responsibility but, insofar as moral responsibility and libertarianism can be seen to mutually imply each other, for anyone favorably inclined toward libertarianism.⁷

Perhaps one will say, “So much the worse for freedom of will and moral desert.” But Siderits, at least, cannot say that, or only that; for he seems to hold that Buddhist Reductionism provides not just a possible alternative explanation of the evidence that allegedly supports moral responsibility and other beliefs associated with the idea of a transcendent self, but a better one, in the sense of “lighter,” i.e., more parsimonious. The Buddhist Reductionist account, in other words, explains these phenomena while making fewer metaphysical posits, and that is what chiefly recommends it over the sort of account based on a transcendent self.

One philosopher’s parsimony, however, is another’s extravagance—I shall come to this point in a minute. First,

however, we should note that the Buddhists did not typically—or ever, as far as I can tell—appeal to the rule of parsimony in establishing the No-Self position, even though this rule is often used in classical Indian debate. (It was the Mimamsakas who were notorious for employing it, though the Sautrantikas also made frequent use of it—chiefly against other Buddhist philosophers.) In the earlier texts (e.g., *Samyutta Nikaya* III.66, *Milindapañha*) the strategy is to suggest that if you take an inventory of all the factors that constitute a person, none of them qualifies as a self (because, e.g., it is impermanent and therefore beset with suffering, or because it is not within one’s control), nor does the person seem to be anything apart from all those factors. In later texts (e.g., the *Tattvasaṅgraha*) the strategy is primarily to try to show that the evidence the Brahmanical philosophers cite for believing in a self is insufficient: perception does not establish it, and the reasons (*hetu*) given for inferring it are inconclusive (*anaikantika*, *vyabhicarin*; see TS 220, 283-4). Although this requires showing that there are other explanations of the facts the Brahmins give as inferential reasons—e.g., the notion “I” needn’t refer to a real entity but could be the product of beginningless ignorance (TS 275 ff.); memory does not require a continuously existing self as the substratum of mental impressions but could be borne by a chain of *vasanas*—the claim is never made, to my knowledge, that the Buddhist explanations are simpler, specifically, that they are simpler because they involve fewer posits.

What strikes one about Siderits’s alternative explanations of the aspects of our experience that modern philosophers cite in support of the existence of a transcendent self or transcendental subject—the experience of ourselves as being other than what we are experiencing (Martin), as capable of standing above our desires and choosing which ones to act on (Korsgaard), as occupying an “invisible horizon” or window that looks out onto the world (Blackburn), and so forth—is in fact that, while they may dispense with an additional metaphysical entity, they are hardly more straightforward. It is hardly “simpler,” in the epistemic sense at least, to say that there is an executive function of the psycho-physical complex, consisting in the abilities of self-scrutiny, self-assessment, and self-regulation, which contributes to its long-term survival, and that, though it is really distributed over different elements of the psycho-physical complex at different times, it tends to be “hypostatized” as a single, constant entity because it can always be activated in one way or another. The more straightforward account of these transcendental aspects of our experience cited by modern authors, of the “fact of universal potential objectification” (p. 26), is just that there is a single substance, distinct from the shifting psychological and physical factors that constitute one’s life and existing continuously through time that surveys all that one experiences. The virtue of the self theory is precisely its seductive simplicity. It is actually the commonsense position. The Buddhist’s strategy in her effort to discredit the idea of a self is to tell us, in effect, that common sense leads us astray about the person. There is no rational basis for our belief in a self; the reasons we think we have are ultimately inconclusive. And that is all, essentially, the Buddhist says; perhaps it is all Siderits really intends to say. I would maintain, in any case, that it is all he *needs* to say. The Buddhist doesn’t claim that her explanation of human experience is simpler because it’s not, not even in the sense that it involves fewer metaphysical posits. If any system is encumbered with metaphysical posits it is that of the *Abhidharmakosa*! (I mean the Vaibhasika views contained in the *karikas*, of course; the Sautrantikas, who have their say in the *bhasya*, typically want to throw out superfluous Vaibhasika posits.) What really recommends the kind of Reductionist view of the self that Siderits develops as a superior account of human experience over that which posits a transcendent

self is not its lightness or simplicity, I would maintain, but its potential compatibility with scientific naturalism. That is to say, that is what recommends it to us. It is not what would particularly recommend it to a Buddhist—who is decidedly a metaphysical dualist!

What ammunition does the Brahmanical philosopher have, then, against the Buddhist position? What conclusive reason does he think there is for inferring the existence of a self distinct from the series of causally related psycho-physical elements? There are two arguments I've always found interesting, one from Kumarila and another from Sankara. Neither argument by itself may suffice to prove the existence of a self; taken together, they might. Yet, in the end, it does not seem that either philosopher really thought the existence of a self could be, or needs to be, established by philosophical argumentation.

The argument of Kumarila's that I have in mind is built on what can be characterized as a philosophical reassertion of common sense. The main principle of Bhatta epistemology, the so-called doctrine of intrinsic validity, is that we should take our representations (or cognitions, *jñāna*, *buddhi*) at face value. A cognition is normally true for us, i.e., presents itself as true, unless and until it is overturned by some other cognition. (When I see a cup on the table I normally don't have to reach over and touch it to be assured that there really is a cup there. My first, visual cognition of the cup convinces me that there is.) Otherwise, if we could not trust our representations as they occur, we could never be confident we are in possession of the truth, since there is no special class of infallible or indubitable cognitions that could serve as a criterion. The Buddhist, in her questioning of the obvious—the existence of external objects, for instance—and insisting on some kind of conclusive, irrefutable evidence for common beliefs, deprives herself ultimately of any basis for believing anything.

The *prima facie* evidence for the existence of an enduring self distinct from the psycho-physical complex that the Mimamsaka cites is the recognition, implicit in an act of memory, of oneself as having experienced something in the past. The salient feature about memory in this case is not that one is able to remember a past experience "from the inside," as it were, which other Brahmanical philosophers, like modern European philosophers, believed requires that the one who had the experience be the one who is remembering it; for the Mimamsakas understood how the Buddhist theory of *vasanas* could easily account for these sorts of facts without a single conscious subject uniting past and present mental states. Rather, they believed the crucial feature of memory that constitutes evidence for an enduring self is the judgment, implicit in the statement, "I remember experiencing X in the past," that I, who am remembering now, am the same subject who previously underwent the experience that is being remembered. A memory experience, in other words, presents me, the rememberer, as having existed in the past; that is part of the content of a memory experience. This assertion of identity is definite in character and, like any other unambiguous judgment I make, e.g., that there is a room full of people in front of me right now, should be taken at face value—unless and until it is overturned by other evidence.

The argument is a subtle one and has gone unnoticed by most scholars who have written on the controversy about the self in Indian philosophy. Perhaps it can be clarified by means of a contrast to an episode in the Western discussion of the self. Kant famously denied that the representation "I think" that is able to, or "must" be able to, accompany any experience provides a basis for knowing that there is a self such as Descartes conceived of it—a single, enduring substance simple in nature, i.e., immaterial or spiritual, and distinct from the body. For the

representation "I think" expresses merely a formal condition of thinking; it "serves merely to introduce all our thought as belonging to consciousness." Otherwise, it is "the poorest of all representations," it lacks empirical content. That is to say, it is not accompanied by an intuition. We cannot say that the word "I" in "I think" refers to anything. Even if it does, we have no way of knowing that it refers to the same thing every time it occurs. The (Bhatta) Mimamsaka could go along with Kant as far as the representation "I think" accompanying any individual act of consciousness is concerned. The representation that appears to refer to the self that accompanies memory, however, is different. It is of the form, "I (who exist in the present) remember myself experiencing X in the past," which implies that I have both existed in the past and exist in the present, which in turn implies that I have existed continuously over time. It is a more complex, contentful judgment than "I think," which merely expresses the transcendental unity of apperception. It has the nature of a definite assertion, indeed, an identity statement: $A = B$. Although it is uncertain whether this is an *empirical* judgment, i.e., whether it is accompanied by any intuition of the self, it nevertheless tells us definitely that matters are a certain way and as such conveys a sense of its own truth. (In general, for Kumarila, it is not a criterion of the validity of a judgment that it be grounded on immediate experience. This feature of his epistemology is of particular importance when it comes to judgments arising from testimony or scripture.) This judgment should continue to convey a sense of its own truth unless and until it is overturned by some more authoritative judgment.

The Buddhist could persist in denying, in a Kantian vein, that there is any substance or validity to this judgment. She may argue, for example, that since the self, always the subject, never presents itself as an object, it is not the sort of thing about which one could even make an identity statement. This, in essence, would be to fall back on the view that this is a judgment without empirical content (and so, by Kantian principles, involves an illegitimate use of the categories). Yet the self is not in every sense a non-object (cf. Sankara on this point). The Mimamsaka could hold with certain contemporary philosophers that it is what we are conscious of as the "invisible horizon," or the point of observation from which objects and mental states are viewed. It may be that this is just a "function" that shifts from one set of elements of the psycho-physical complex to another and gets hypostatized as a single entity, but that is not what our experience suggests to us. Rather, it suggests that it is the same thing every time it intrudes upon our awareness. There is, in any case, no particular reason to believe that it is different every time. Classically, the Buddhists held that this notion of self-recognition, like all other cases of so-called recognition, is based on a mistake: in memory one apprehends a previously existing psycho-physical complex that is only similar, not identical, to the one existing in the present. But, once again, the Mimamsaka tells us, we can only say something is a mistake if it is firmly overturned by another judgment, as when we realize that what we thought was a diamond is really just a piece of glass. We shouldn't abandon our beliefs just because it is possible they could turn out to be false. The Buddhist rejection of the self is ultimately rooted in her inability to take things at face value. If one is always demanding evidence for one's evidence, one will never believe anything—or, at most, one will believe that everything is just an illusion.

Perhaps, however, the enduring entity to which "I" in the judgment of memory refers is the body, which has been more or less the same from the time of the original experience until now? The Mimamsaka turns this suggestion aside by simply saying that matter cannot be conscious; a body can no more be conscious than a pot made out of clay. Although a Buddhist, also a dualist, would have to agree with this, we would not feel

so compelled. At this point, then, Kumarila's argument needs help. This is where I think Sankara's argument can be brought in to support it.

At *Brahmasutrabhasya* 2.2.18-32 Sankara criticizes a range of Buddhist views, both Abhidharma and Yogacara. At 2.2.18 he takes on the Abhidharma idea of the world as consisting of aggregates composed of ultimately real, impersonal constituents, arguing that while the Buddhist may be able to give an account of how individual psychological and physical factors come into existence—this is what the doctrine of dependent origination allegedly does (though he later denies this, on the grounds that momentary entities cannot be causally effective)—the Buddhist cannot explain aggregates. On Sankara's own view, any organized arrangement of matter, or, indeed, any structured arrangement consisting of both material and psychological factors, requires an intelligent organizing principle. Matter and other impersonal elements cannot take on order spontaneously. (In Sankara's system it is, of course, Brahman, which consists of intelligence itself, that is the cause of the universe.) He adds—and this is the point I find to be of particular interest—that the formation of aggregates, especially bodies suited to the experiencing of pleasure and pain, does not make sense in the absence of beings for the sake of whom such pleasure and pain will occur.

...That for the purpose of whose enjoyment the aggregate is formed is, according to your [the Buddhist's] doctrine, not a permanent enjoying soul, so that enjoyment subserves itself merely and cannot be desired by anything else; hence final release also must, according to you, be considered as subserving itself only, and no being desirous of release can be assumed.⁸

This is the idea I would like to pursue. Pleasure and pain seem to presuppose some being who enjoys or suffers them. This is an ancient belief that comes up in Buddhist texts as well, if only to be dismissed; it underlies one of the five proofs of the existence of the *purusa* given at *Samkhyakarika* 17. Why can't this "enjoyer" just be the psycho-physical complex? Because, Sankara would answer, the psycho-physical complex is just an aggregate of impersonal, if not solely material, factors, and it is difficult to see how pleasure and pain could be for the sake of a bunch of impersonal entities, no matter how well organized. To be sure, we call the psycho-physical complex a "person," but that is just a convenient expression. But, again, why can't "enjoyment" just consist in the registering of the stimulus of pleasure or pain by the psycho-physical complex, together with its response thereto? Because there is more to pleasure and pain than the functional roles they play in the psycho-physical complex. Pleasure and pain both involve a distinctive kind of immediate presentation as well. When Siderits and the Buddhists say that pain, for example, is bad and therefore should be alleviated no matter where it occurs, whether in this psycho-physical complex that I refer to as myself or another, I suspect that they are referring to the way pain immediately presents itself, not the functional role of pain, i.e., the fact that it is a warning of potential damage to the system. Here, the salient point is not that the immediate presentation of pain has a certain quality that distinguishes it as such from other immediate presentations. The salient point, rather, is that as an immediate presentation pain must have someone or some thing to whom it is presented. As the German idealist philosophers would say, it is *for another*.

But why, again, can't the other *for whom* pleasure or pain occurs be the psycho-physical complex, or if not the psycho-physical complex as a whole, then certain other elements of it? Or, indeed, as Sankara suggests, why can't it just be for itself? That

is to say, why couldn't a pleasure or a pain somehow perceive itself? The immediacy of pleasure or pain, in that case, would have to do with some inner dynamism of those states. This is something Sankara considers in connection with his refutation of another Buddhist position, the Yogacara denial of external objects. (I am aware that many scholars reject the interpretation of Yogacara as a form of idealism, but I am following Sankara's understanding of it here.) Vasubandhu, for instance, held that "all this," the phenomenal world, is "merely consciousness." Nothing exists outside of consciousness; consciousness, by means of its own internal mechanisms, assumes innumerable forms which it itself apprehends as if they were objects existing outside. As Vasubandhu's successors, Dinnaga and Dharmakirti, made clear, this implies that our experience consists essentially of consciousness—in the form of a succession of individual, momentary cognitions perceiving themselves. Consciousness splits into two portions, as it were, with the "object portion" taking on the form of a particular sensible quality, a color, say, and the "subject portion" apprehending that quality. No other perceiver, no self, is required.

Realist (and certain Buddhist) philosophers typically attacked this view on the grounds that it violates the general principle that the same thing cannot be both agent (*kartr*) and object (*karman*) in the same act. The sword does not cut itself; the finger does not touch itself; fire does not burn itself. Sankara mentions this objection in his discussion but does not rely on it, for he is aware of the Buddhist counter: we are not talking about physical transformation here but presentation or illumination. Fire may not be able to burn itself, but it *illuminates* itself; so does a lamp. So, it seems, a cognition ought to be able to reveal itself just as it can reveal some other thing, and this would account for the immediacy of presentation that we consider so distinctive of cognitions without bringing in another entity (a self) *to whom* they must be present.

Here is Sankara's response to this line of objection:

...If you maintain that that the cognition, like a lamp, manifests itself without standing in need of a further principle to illuminate it, you maintain thereby that cognitions exist which are not apprehended by any means of knowledge, and which are without a knowing being; which is no better than to assert that a thousand lamps burning inside some impenetrable mass of rocks manifest themselves.⁹

Illumination by itself does not suffice for something to be seen. A lamp or a fire may illumine itself, but there is no awareness of the lamp or fire if there is no subject of consciousness to perceive them. Similarly, while a cognition, or another mental state like a pleasure or pain, could conceivably illumine itself, or a psycho-physical complex "scrutinize" an aspect of itself, that by itself would not entail that anything is immediately presented in experience. And since, on the Buddhist account, these things are "impersonal," hence, one gathers, not essentially different in nature from a lamp or a fire, one may well conclude that it would be unlikely that experience would occur. Something else is required for experience, an irreducible principle of subjectivity, the self.

To put Sankara's point in a slightly different way, it may indeed be the case that a cognition functions to "reveal" (*prakasayati*) an object, but so does a lamp. Revealing or illumining is not sufficient for experience. In addition, there has to be something that sees the object so revealed—and that is the function that we associate with a self. Now, the Buddhist may think that she can assign this function to a cognition; it is the cognition that sees the object it has illumined, or perhaps it is another cognition that sees it illumining that object. But

then, the Brahmanical philosopher will say, you have effectively introduced a personal element into the cognition; you've made it into a self. Indeed, in conceiving of a person as a series of cognitions the Yogacara has not replaced the self with a collection of impersonal entities. She has, rather, replaced it with a multitude of momentarily-existing selves.

I think that this same critique can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to Siderits's account of subjectivity in terms of functions of self-scrutiny, etc., that shift among different portions of the psychophysical complex, so long as one takes the immediate presence of mental states, aka qualia, seriously.

Putting Kumarila's and Sankara's arguments together, it is doubtful that the experiencer at any given moment is the body or even the impersonal psycho-physical complex. If, then, we are to take the judgment of memory at face value that I who am remembering now existed in the past as the experiencer of the experience I am remembering, then there must be a transcendent self that has existed continuously from the past to the present.

It is doubtful, however, that Sankara and Kumarila intended their arguments as proving the existence of a self. Sankara, at least, is quite clear that only scripture can establish the true nature of reality; reasoning should serve only to support scripture. He certainly does not attempt to establish the existence of a self by inference at the beginning of his system, as its principal topic. That Brahman, identical to the self, is the cause of the origin, continuation, and destruction of the universe—that is something we can know only from the Veda, he believes (BSBh 1.1.2). To be sure, arguments for the self may be extracted from his discussions of Buddhist views, but they are only intended to show that the Buddhist positions are flawed in part by their refusal to acknowledge a self. We are not to arrive at the truth by philosophical argumentation, but only defend it, as it is revealed to us by scripture, showing it to be consistent with our experience while refuting other erroneous views. While these arguments, then, may be taken to show that belief in a self is rationally justifiable, by themselves they may not suffice to engender such a belief; that, in any case, is probably not how they were intended. And so, I believe, are the Buddhist arguments against the existence of a self, to the extent that such arguments are found in Buddhist texts, to be viewed—not primarily as refuting the existence of a self by independent reasoning, but as confirming the Buddha's insight that "everything is without self," and bringing the intellect in line with the practices conducive to the realization of that insight. How Sankara and Kumarila thought that the deliverances of scriptures can have the same kind of apodictic character that we associate with Reason in the West, while viewing the findings of Reason with suspicion, is one of the fascinating stories of Indian philosophy that remains to be fully told.

The riches of Indian philosophy are very great and lie very deep. If we are just mining Indian philosophy for theories suitable for immediate application in solving contemporary problems, we tend to stay close to the surface; we can easily miss the richest veins. But if we plunge deeper, exploring for the sake of exploring, we invariably come upon the unexpected: ideas for which there are few or no precedents in our own tradition, and which open our thinking to extraordinary new vistas. That is less likely if we think we already know what we are looking for.

Endnotes

1. Four texts form the primary basis of my discussion here: the *Atmavada* of Kumarila's *Slokavarttika*, the Mimamsa *purvapaksa* in the *Atmapariksa* chapter of Santaraksita's *Tattvasangraha*, which is drawn from Kumarila's *Bhattika*, Uddyotakara's commentary on NBh 1.1.12, and Sankara's refutation of Buddhism at BSBh 2.2.18 ff.

2. "Buddhist Reductionists do not claim that diminished degrees of connectedness entail diminished degrees of responsibility, compensation, or justifiable egoistic concern. This, I would suggest, stems from their acceptance of the karma-rebirth ideology," p. 73, n. 1.
3. *Slokavarttika*, *Atmavada*, 36-38.
4. Cf. Sankara's abbreviated statement of the argument, BSBh 2.2.18, *Brahma Sutra Sankara Bhashya, with the Commentaries Bhamati, Kalpataru and Parimala*, edited by Pandita Anantakrishna Sastri and Vasudev Laxman Shastri Pansikar (Varanasi: Krishnadas Academy, 1982), 525, 3-4: *ksanikatvabhhyupagamac ca nirvyaparavatvat pravrttyanupapattih*.
5. *Pramanavarttika* 3.3-4, 319 (Bauddha Bharati edn.).
6. It can also be seen at the basis of the objections Strawson and Korsgaard raise from the standpoint of practical reason considered later in the third chapter. We think of our lives, argues Korsgaard, as things we do, not things we suffer. We stand above our lives; they do not just happen to us as a succession of experiences. This involves, in part, seeing ourselves as free moral agents, "truly self-determining planner[s] and performer[s] of our actions" (Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986], p. 119). This requires, in turn, thinking of ourselves as enduring subjects of mental states over time. Siderits turns this kind of attack aside by arguing that it hypostatizes the shifting "executive" function of the constantly changing psycho-physical complex. It is never the same part of the complex that carries out this function. Siderits does not, in this context, address the issue of freedom of will and moral responsibility.
7. Libertarianism involves the notion of an agent standing above the causally determined complex of mental and physical states causing actions for which he/she alone is solely and completely responsible.
8. *The Vedanta Sstras of Badarayana with the Commentary by Sankara*, vol. 1, trans. George Thibaut (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 406 f.
9. *Ibid.*, 424.

On How It Can Be Ultimately True That There Is No Ultimate Truth: Thoughts on Mark Siderits's Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy

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I have followed the work of Mark Siderits for quite some time and have long found it fruitful to think about Madhyamaka in conversation with his sophisticated reconstructions of that trajectory of thought. I have, in this regard, been especially interested in his characterization of Madhyamaka as "anti-realist"—a characterization that I have sometimes resisted by framing my own interpretation of Madhyamaka as distinct from Siderits's.

When I first read Siderits's *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, though, my initial reactions included a feeling of relief that I had already sent off the final manuscript of my own book; for I found myself persuaded, to an extent that I had not previously experienced, by large parts of this presentation of his position. Although still uneasy with the understanding of Madhyamaka as "anti-realist," I also recognized that taking account of Siderits's interpretation, as I now understood it, might have to mean a lot more work on my part. If, then, my recent work¹ contains engagements with an inadequately elaborated

version of Siderits's position, I am nevertheless grateful to have had a brief reprieve.

I am also happy, though, for this opportunity now to reflect on how I might have proceeded. And having given some thought to Siderits's book, I am less sure of the extent to which it calls into question my own interpretation; indeed, it seems to me that much of what Siderits says may finally be compatible with a view (such as my own) of Madhyamaka as making transcendental arguments in defense of properly metaphysical claims.² Of course, that claim could reasonably be thought to counter the characterization of Madhyamaka as constitutively "anti-realist"—which would be, it seems, to call into question the very heart of Siderits's interpretation. I think, however, that his own reconstruction may turn out to recommend a rather different sort of characterization.

I want to suggest, then, that the many points where Siderits's reading of Madhyamaka is very much to be commended can be understood in terms of something other than an opposition between "realism" and "anti-realism." Indeed, it's as we should expect a proponent of Madhyamaka to say that to frame the matter in terms of such an opposition is to miss one of the most important senses in which Madhyamaka represents a "middle way" between extremes.

Let me begin by sketching what I take to be the basic impulse of Madhyamaka³—my understanding of which (like that of Siderits) requires reference to the broadly Abhidharmika trajectory as its constitutive "other." To emphasize the arguably radical difference between them is not, however, to deny that both of these trajectories of thought represent logical developments of basically Buddhist commitments—and in particular, of the idea of *selflessness*, which is the commitment whose elaboration and defense is what all Buddhist philosophy finally concerns. The flipside of the idea of selflessness is the Buddhist doctrine of "dependent origination" (*pratityasamutpada*); that is, the *reason* we do not have enduring and unitary selves just is that any moment of experience can be explained as having originated as dependent upon innumerable causes and conditions (none of which can be specified as what we "really" are).

The tradition of Abhidharmika thought represents one way of developing this point: *viz.*, that of systematically re-describing our naive intuitions.⁴ That effort is thought to be called for insofar as we systematically mistake the basic data of our experience, erroneously projecting upon those data the sense that they are the properties or states of an enduring subject. That our naive intuitions are effectively to be *replaced* by the Abhidharmika redescription is clear from the characteristically Abhidharmika endorsement of this as a privileged level of description—i.e., as picking out what is *paramartha-sat* ("ultimately existent"), which is defined in contrast to the "conventionally existent" (*samvrtisat*) phenomena of our naive intuitions.

Here, it is worth noting that some of the difficulties in distinguishing *truth* on the accounts in question may turn out to look rather different if we thus take our bearings from the fact that the "conventional" and "ultimate *truth*" (*satya*) are notions derived from the categories of *samvrti*- and *paramartha-sat* (conventionally and ultimately *existent*).⁵ This is to emphasize that what is at stake here is whether or not there are two different *kinds of existents*. What is in play here, then, is the question whether the "two truths" can be said finally to consist in two sets of enumerable *existents*; for one can take the Abhidharmika view to be that the *samvrtisat* ("conventionally existent") is the set of all things that are reducible, by way of critical analysis, to what is ultimately real, while the *paramartha-sat* ("ultimately existent") is the set of irreducible ontological primitives.

Proponents of Madhyamaka can accordingly be understood as thinking that the ontologizing impulse of Abhidharma compromises the most important insight of the Buddhist tradition—which is, according to Madhyamaka, that all existents are dependently originated. More particularly, proponents of Madhyamaka can be said to have recognized that the ontological primitives ("*dharmas*") posited by Abhidharma could have explanatory purchase only if they are posited as an *exception* to the rule that everything is dependently originated; that is, dependently originated existents would only really be *explained* by something that did not itself require the same kind of explanation. But it is precisely the point of Madhyamaka to emphasize that there *is* no exception to this rule; things are dependently originated all the way down, and it is therefore impossible to specify precisely *what* it is upon which anything finally depends. Hence, there can be no set of "ultimately existent" things.⁶

This way of representing the basic Madhyamaka impulse is, I think, recommended by the standard doxographical ("*siddhanta*") schemas that are well-known to figure prominently in Tibetan monastic curricula. Thus, the hierarchical ascent through a series of "schools" taken to exhaust the major philosophical developments of Indian Buddhist thought (*viz.*, Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Yogacara, and Madhyamaka) is most basically characterized by the progressive elimination of ontological commitments—the progressive paring down, that is, of the contents of the set "ultimately existent." On this way of representing things, the most salient point about Madhyamaka is that at this point in the hierarchy, the "ultimately existent" becomes an *empty set*.

This represents, I think, a useful way to give content to one of Siderits's most characteristic expressions, which is that "the ultimate truth[, for Madhyamaka,] is that there is no ultimate truth" (133, *et passim*). That is, the air of paradox here is perhaps mitigated if Siderits's expression is taken to involve an equivocation on "ultimate truth," exploiting the different senses of *satya* and *sat*. The point then becomes that "the ultimate truth [in the sense of *what is truly, indeed metaphysically, the case*] is that there is no ultimate truth [in the sense that *there are no irreducible existents*]." This is not to say that the paradoxical character of Madhyamaka (and the question, in particular, of the status of Madhyamaka's "claim") is easily dismissed—only to suggest that the issues here can look a little different depending upon how we understand *paramartha-sat*. It can be noted that the kind of equivocation I am here suggesting we might exploit is, in fact, arguably comparable to one that proponents of Madhyamaka themselves exploit with respect to the term *svabhava*; here, I have in mind the point that makes it possible for Candrakirti to say (as he does at several points throughout the corpus of his works) that "essencelessness" (*naihsvabhavyam*, etc.) is itself the "essence" (*svabhava*) of things.⁷

Be that as it may, this presentation can help us appreciate both the extent to which Madhyamaka represents the logical culmination of a characteristically Buddhist trajectory of thought, *and* a moment that is in some ways radically discontinuous with that; for it is eminently in keeping with the impulse of this basic doxographical scheme that the progressive elimination of ontological commitments should issue in some sort of *complete* emptiness thereof—and, yet, the most significant philosophical work that is to be done at this point can usefully be understood as that of explaining the arguably radical difference it makes (explaining *what the world looks like*) once the only "set" with any enumerable contents is the set of "conventionally existent" things. Madhyamaka's logical culmination of the doxographical hierarchy, then, at the same time represents a complete break from the preceding moments therein.

Among the things to be said about what it looks like thus to be thrown back into the conventionally described world is that there are (as Siderits very sensitively shows) profound ethical implications. Appreciating this point represents, I think, the best way to understand the characteristically Madhyamaka response to the charge (leveled as often by other Buddhist philosophers as by Brahmanical thinkers) of nihilism (*ucchedavada*). Thus, the characteristically Madhyamaka conviction is that it is in fact the Abhidharmika iteration of the Buddhist project (and not Madhyamaka claims regarding emptiness) that is “nihilist.” This is because on the characteristically Abhidharmika understanding of the “two truths,” the world as “conventionally” described—as consisting, for example, in suffering persons whose plight should elicit compassionate dedication to the Buddhist path—is finally altogether superseded by the privileged level of description constitutively developed in the Abhidharma literature.

That is, the characteristically Abhidharmika enumeration of the “*dharmas*” that putatively constitute the set of “ultimately existent” things amounts to the specification of what “really” exists *instead of* the self. If, in contrast, it is recognized that no such privileged level of description can coherently be elaborated—that, in other words, there is no set of ontological primitives in terms of which the only real explanatory work can be done, and that in that sense there is nothing “more real” than the world as conventionally described—then the world is finally to be accepted as *irreducibly conventional*, and the persons therein can hence be regarded as ethical agents who are not finally eliminable in terms of the analytic categories of Abhidharma.

Now, I have found it useful to think of the characteristically Madhyamaka arguments advancing these claims as transcendental arguments, by which I mean: arguments in defense of a constitutively metaphysical claim, the proper metaphysical status of which is revealed by the fact that any denial of the claim involves self-contradiction.⁸ That is, the truth of the claim that all existents are “empty” is itself a condition of the possibility even of that claim’s denial. This characterization nicely captures, I think, the basic logic of one of the most recurrent Madhyamaka argument strategies: that of arguing that some state of affairs is not only not precluded by the emptiness of all existents, but is, in fact, possible only because of this.

Such is the argument strategy on display, for example, in chapter 24 of (what is the foundational text of the tradition) Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. This chapter begins with the challenge of an imagined interlocutor, who exhibits the same misunderstanding of Madhyamaka claims that underlies nearly all of the objections anticipated by proponents of Madhyamaka: that of taking “emptiness” to mean *non-existence*. Thus, this chapter’s interlocutor objects: “If all this is empty, then there’s neither production nor destruction; it follows, for you, that the Four Noble Truths don’t exist.”⁹ Nagarjuna’s rhetorically compelling rejoinder: it is only *because* everything is empty that the Four Noble Truths obtain.¹⁰

Thus to understand emptiness as a condition of the possibility of the Four Noble Truths (and of everything else) is to see a finally logical point: “emptiness,” if it means simply the *possibility and necessity of relations*, can be understood as a logical category as basic as the principle of non-contradiction, in the sense that any attempt even to imagine alternatives to it inevitably *presupposes* it. Insofar as the Madhyamaka claim is finally and most basically only a claim to the effect that *things only exist in relationship*—that, as the commentators Buddhapalita and Candrakirti characteristically put it, everything is *upadaya prajñapti*—any *analysis* of existents (even one such

as would deny this claim) necessarily exemplifies the truth of the claim; for “knowing” consists, in the first instance, in a *relation* to what is known.

This understanding of Madhyamaka’s as transcendental arguments also works well, I think, in understanding the logic of Madhyamaka responses to the charge of nihilism. Here, it is useful to say a bit about one of the most prominently recurrent lines of argument in the first part of Siderits’s book, where Siderits has sympathetically elaborated the broadly Abhidharmika version of reductionism. Now, standard objections to such reductionist accounts chiefly involve what Siderits characterizes as “circularity” objections—or, as I would say, transcendental arguments to the effect that anyone offering an exhaustively “impersonal,” non-intentional description of (what we think of as) persons can be shown necessarily to presuppose precisely the personal, intentional level of description that is purportedly explained.¹¹

Siderits appreciates the force of such arguments, which, to his credit, he canvasses thoroughly. Against them, he develops a line of argument involving a basically pragmatist criterion (one elaborated, however, in the entirely impersonal terms of evolution): “Becoming a Reductionist means coming to see [a] strictly Consequentialist justification of egoistic concern. Overall utility is best served by *the practice of each causal series coming to adopt an attitude of identification with and appropriation of the states in that series*” (59; my emphasis). These represent the terms, then, in which Siderits echoes the Buddhist Santideva: “Because pain is bad, we all have a reason to try to prevent its occurrence. ... [And] my concern over my own future well-being no longer seems different in kind from my concern over the well-being of others...”¹²

Despite his care in thus addressing this line of objection, though, it remains questionable whether this entirely impersonal description of pain (and, perhaps even more, of *committing to its amelioration*) can finally be made intelligible. The very idea of “maximization of utility” (and of knowing what will bring that about) arguably presupposes an *intentional* level of description—as does the activity, on the part of putatively impersonal causal series, of “coming to adopt an attitude of identification.” That is, the very idea of *adopting an attitude* represents an instance of precisely the sort of intentional activity that the reductionist purports to explain.

I suggest that some characteristically Madhyamaka responses to the oft-leveled charge of nihilism work in a similar way. Transposing the basic Abhidharmika line of thought into contemporary idiom, then, it could be said that the Abhidharmika idea is that there is, “conventionally,” an *intentional* level of description—one comprising what Siderits calls “person-regarding practices” (37), and variously characterized by contemporary thinkers as the “common-sense” view, “folk psychology,” etc.; and, “ultimately,” something like a scientific level of description, comprising the ontological primitives that alone are said “really” to exist, and exhaustively to explain the former level.

Against such a view, we have noted the problem with thinking that an impersonally described causal series might “come to adopt an attitude of identification” with itself; similarly, the upshot of the Madhyamaka argument that the world is “irreducibly conventional” is that the level of description at which “persons” are in play cannot coherently be thought to be eliminable. Many of the commentator Candrakirti’s arguments can be said, without too great a stretch, to make something like this point: Candrakirti recurrently argues that any purported attempt to explain the conventional world (in terms that, if the proposed account is to have any explanatory purchase, must not themselves be conventional) inevitably founders on

the unavoidability of presupposing the conventional senses of words. And what our conventional discursive practices exemplify, above all else, is the fact of relationship.

The foregoing represents a brief sketch of the way I have found it useful to think about Madhyamaka. Now, to characterize Madhyamaka as thus advancing a constitutively metaphysical claim would seem to require (what I have tried in the past to defend) something like a realist conception of truth; and, indeed, I have said that it is Siderits's characterization of Madhyamaka as "anti-realist" that I am most uneasy with. I wonder, though, whether Siderits's own reconstruction of Madhyamaka finally recommends that characterization.

It seems to me that one grants too much to the foundationalist-reductionist in allowing that "realism" could be understood to consist only in the idea that there is a domain of enumerable existents such that the truth of any claim consists in its reference to (or *causal relations with*)¹³ that domain of objects. Insofar as proponents of Madhyamaka claim to take their bearings from what is conventionally true, why not work with the kind of "realist conception of truth" that arguably informs our everyday practices? This is the view (arguably elaborated in Mimamsaka epistemology) according to which John Taber can rightly note (as he has in his remarks) that "[m]ost of us are realists most of the time." What I now want to argue, then, is that this is, in fact, basically what Siderits ends up with—and that his interpretation may to that extent not be incompatible with (and, given the specific content of Madhyamaka claims, may even require) the idea of Madhyamaka as making transcendental arguments.

Siderits's reconstruction of the implications of Madhyamaka with respect to our understanding of truth seems to me to represent one of the most valuable contributions of this book. Siderits says, in this regard, that "Buddhist anti-realism" (which is what he calls Madhyamaka) "constitutes a kind of middle path between the extremes of deflationism about truth and epistemologized truth" (157). The point of a deflationary account of truth is that there cannot be (as Siderits puts it) "any such thing as a substantive theory of truth. Truth, according to the deflationist, is not a property at all, but rather just a disquotational device: saying of a statement that it is true is just another way of accomplishing what would ordinarily be done by asserting it" (162-63). That is, when I call someone else's belief "true," that is tantamount simply to my asserting their belief as my own, as well. All we can ever be is *justified* in holding a belief (where "justified" means "entitled to think the belief really true")—but there is nothing (of an explanatory sort) that it could *mean* to think one could know of one's *justified* belief that it is also *true*. "Truth," on such an account, simply represents something like a regulative ideal—and Siderits has said this represents one of the extremes to be eschewed by the "middle path" of "Buddhist anti-realism."

But in what is, to my mind, one of the most telling passages in his book, Siderits at once almost takes back the characterization of Madhyamaka as "anti-realist," and opts for (what he had represented as one of the extremes to be eschewed) a deflationary account. Thus, Siderits says that on the Madhyamaka view, as he has understood it,

it seems we should take truth to be the perfectly transparent property that everyone else takes it for: a statement is true when things are as it says they are. *This, of course, is the common-sense realism toward truth* that is captured in the T-sentences, and *that deflationists take themselves as championing*. To say of a statement that it is true is just to pay it the compliment of concurring in its assertion. This

stance may be summed up in the slogan, "No Truth, but truths." In the Buddhist context this might best be called semantic non-dualism: no ultimate truth, no conventional truth, just truths, that is, statements that tell it like it is. *Perhaps it is semantic non-dualism and not anti-realism that is the proper conclusion to draw from the doctrine of emptiness.* (184-85; all emphasis mine)

It is hard for me to see how (or even whether) the "semantic non-dualism" that Siderits thus takes to represent the definitive Madhyamaka contribution differs from a deflationary account of truth, as Siderits himself has characterized that. More to the point, even if Siderits can give an account of the sense in which deflationists fail to capture the view offered here (the very one, he allows, that deflationists "take themselves as championing"), it is hard to see how this counts as "anti-realism"—a fact that Siderits himself seems to acknowledge when he concludes by offering semantic non-dualism as an *alternative* to anti-realism ("...it is semantic non-dualism and not anti-realism..."). With this concluding passage, Siderits, as I understand him, effectively makes an apt point that Jay Garfield has made in his remarks: "...to call a position according to which the reality of everything that, say, an idealist, or for that matter a materialist, denies is real, is real, 'anti-realist' seems to be at best misleading."

Whatever we call the position, Siderits eloquently expresses the ethical and soteriological upshot of it: "...[i]f there is just truth, then it seems we might say that persons do after all exist. ... That rivers and mountains are empty becomes the simple fact that there are rivers and mountains. That persons are empty becomes the simple fact that we are persons" (192-93, 202). Note that this makes, in a poetic vein, almost precisely the point that, I suggested, proponents of Madhyamaka like Candrakirti can be understood to have made against standard Abhidharmika charges of Madhyamaka nihilism: the Abhidharmika's privileged level of description cannot coherently be thought to supersede the conventional level of description, insofar as the explanatory categories of Abhidharma (the "*dharmas*") turn out, on analysis, to exemplify precisely the same metaphysical conditions they purport to explain. That is, the terms in which the Abhidharmika purports to explain dependent origination turn out themselves to be *dependently originated*—which is (as Nagarjuna repeatedly tells us) all that it means for a proponent of Madhyamaka to say that "all *dharmas* are empty."

And, further, this can be understood as a variation on the line of argument that, I suggested, may represent the most compelling rejoinder to the reductionist program. Here, that is, we have the argument that the world is finally to be accepted as *irreducibly conventional*, and that the persons therein can hence be regarded as ethical agents who are not finally eliminable in terms of the analytic categories of Abhidharma. To the extent that (tellingly) an "intentional" level of description is often characterized by contemporary philosophers as the "common-sense view" of the mental, Madhyamaka's retrieval of the "common-sense view" (*samvrtisatya*) can be understood as making the point that the Abhidharmika's exhaustively "impersonal," non-intentional description of (what we think of as) persons can be shown to presuppose precisely the personal, intentional level of description that is purportedly explained.

But, of course, we can only understand the Madhyamaka argument this way if we take it as nonetheless meant to elaborate the cardinal Buddhist idea of *selflessness*; the "common-sense realism" of Madhyamaka must not be simply that of the ordinary person. Thus, while proponents of Madhyamaka themselves do not typically argue as though the broadly Abhidharmika program is necessarily propaedeutic to Madhyamaka, the proponent

of the reconstruction of Madhyamaka here recommended has to recognize that the “irreducibly conventional” truth of Madhyamaka differs from the view of the unenlightened (as Siderits nicely puts it) “by virtue of its being adopted in full cognizance of the progression through the intervening stages... each of which is recognized as superior to its predecessor in the sequence” (185).

But that is a much longer story. For now, suffice it to say that despite the fact that Siderits only ever calls Madhyamaka “anti-realism,” this may not turn out to be a characterization that his reconstruction requires. Perhaps, then, this is why I finally found myself more persuaded by Siderits’s reconstruction of Madhyamaka than I had previously been: on his fullest-yet elaboration of the reconstruction of Madhyamaka as constitutively “anti-realist,” Siderits effectively argues that Madhyamaka is, well, not *really* “anti-realist.” That this is how his interpretation develops is, I take it, a useful indication of the acuity with which Siderits has characterized the logic of Madhyamaka; for what proponent of Madhyamaka, when faced with the dichotomous pair “realism” and “anti-realism,” would want to endorse either one of these extremes?

Endnotes

1. Dan Arnold. *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion* (Columbia University Press, 2005).
2. This view is advanced in Part 3 of the previously cited work. See also my article on “Madhyamaka” in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/b-madhyam.htm>) for a presentation of the various interpretive options, as I understand them.
3. By “Madhyamaka,” I am generally inclined to mean “the thought of Nagarjuna as rightly understood by Candrakirti”—which is to say, I take my own reconstruction of Madhyamaka to be informed chiefly by a sympathetic reading of Candrakirti, and my use of the term “Madhyamaka” should be understood accordingly.
4. For a splendid introduction to the philosophical issues in understanding Abhidharma, see Alexis Sanderson, “The Sarvastivada and its Critics: Anatmavada and the Theory of Karma,” in *Buddhism into the Year 2000: International Conference Proceedings* (Bangkok: Dharmakaya Foundation, 1994), 33-48.
5. For illuminating thoughts in a related vein, see Matthew Kapstein, “The Trouble with Truth: Heidegger on *Alétheia*, Buddhist Thinkers on *Satya*,” in his *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Wisdom Publications, 2001), 205-29.
6. Madhyamaka arguments to this effect typically work by showing that all explanatory categories turn out to be constitutively dependent upon the phenomena they purportedly explain—as, for example, notions such as “fire” and “fuel,” “action” and “agent,” or “cause” and “effect” are intelligible only relative to one another. To show the constitutively relative (i.e., dependent) character of all such explanatory categories and phenomena is effectively to make the one point that proponents of Madhyamaka are most concerned to make: that insofar as there is nothing that is not dependently originated, there is therefore nothing that is not “empty” (*sunya*). (This paraphrases Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarika* [MMK] 24.19, which says: “Since there is no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, therefore there is no dharma whatsoever that is not empty.”)
7. On this point, see, inter alia, William Ames, “The Notion of *Svabhava* in the Thought of Candrakirti,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 10 (1982): 161-77; my *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 183-92; and Jay Garfield and Graham Priest, “Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought,” *Philosophy East & West*, 53 (2003): 1-21 (especially

for the discussion of what they call “Nagarjuna’s Paradox”). I thus have in mind a different kind of equivocation than the one that Richard Hayes has been concerned to identify (which involves the senses of *svabhava* as “identity” and “causal independence”); see Richard Hayes, “Nagarjuna’s Appeal,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22 (1994): 299-378.

8. It might usefully be said that my use of the word “metaphysical” here reflects what Strawson calls “descriptive” (as opposed to “revisionary”) metaphysics; see P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1959).
9. MMK 24.1. For an accessible (and philosophically informed) translation of Nagarjuna’s text, see Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995).
10. MMK 24.20: “If all this is *not* empty, then there’s neither production nor destruction; it follows, for you, that the Four Noble Truths don’t exist.” This is because the fact that existents only come into being in mutual dependence upon one another (and are therefore “empty” of an essence) is all that makes it possible for suffering to *arise*—and, thus having *arisen* as a contingent and dependent phenomenon, to be caused to *cease*. If, in contrast, suffering were the “natural” or “essential” (*svabhavika*) state of affairs, this would (as Nagarjuna sees it) mean that it could not be interrupted, and the cultivation of the entire Buddhist path would be pointless.
11. This is a broadly Kantian line of argument, stemming in particular from the *Second Critique*; this is the basic line of argument deployed in part II of Lynne Rudder Baker’s *Saving Belief: A Critique of Physicalism* (Princeton, 1987), as also in Jay Garfield’s *Belief in Psychology: A Study in the Ontology of Mind* (MIT, 1988). See chapter 6 of the latter.
12. Siderits, p. 60; cf., as well, pp. 102-3, where Siderits quotes and discusses Santideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara*, which is well known to students of Buddhism as eloquently advancing a similar idea. A reliable translation of Santideva’s text is Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans., *The Bodhicaryavatara* (Oxford, 1996).
13. Siderits has said in conversation (27 April 2006) that any realist conception of truth must finally involve a *causal* explication of the truth-making relation; among my points in holding out against the “anti-realist” reading of Madhyamaka (and in characterizing Madhyamaka arguments as properly *metaphysical*) is to urge that this claim need not be accepted.

Replies to Garfield, Taber, and Arnold

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I want to thank Jay Garfield, John Taber, and Dan Arnold for their helpful remarks. I truly appreciate the effort I know they put into their reading of my book. My teacher Rulon Wells once told me it might be a good idea if I were to think of writing as a form of communication. I have been trying ever since to break myself of the habit of using writing as a way to figure out what I think. But I’m all too aware of how far I have yet to go in learning how to make myself clear to others.

I.

Garfield proposes “fictionalism” as a way to understand the stance toward conventional truth taken by both Abhidharma and Madhyamaka. I say instead that Abhidharma takes a Reductionist stance while Madhyamaka takes an anti-realist stance. But it’s not entirely clear to me how much distance there is between his account and mine. To determine this I would need to know more about what Garfield means by a fiction. I

can see one way of understanding this notion on which it would pretty clearly not offer an adequate way of reconstructing the Abhidharma teachings on the person. To explain why, I should start by saying something about the genesis of the book.

I was spurred to write it by the controversy over Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. It struck me that the Buddhist tradition had developed conceptual resources that could be used to answer many of the objections of Parfit's critics. Chief among these resources was the taxonomy of views that was used to frame the discussion. Where Parfit's taxonomy had just two main rivals, Reductionism and Non-Reductionism, the Buddhist spoke of three: Non-Reductionism, Reductionism, and Eliminativism. This trichotomy is generated by recognizing two dimensions to the dispute, ontological and semantic. But, first, I need to make a terminological stipulation. The Buddhist project involves looking for the referent of "I." Buddhists recognize two possibilities here: that "I" denotes the self, some one part of the psychophysical complex that is its essence; and that "I" denotes the person, the psychophysical complex as a whole. I think it would be useful to follow the Buddhist practice of distinguishing between "self" and "person." The Non-Reductionist can then be represented as holding that the self exists, and that we are selves. Both Reductionists and Eliminativists deny that the self exists. But given this denial, they must explain the sense each of us has that we endure. They say this comes from our acceptance of the theory that we are persons. Their disagreement concerns the status of that theory. The Eliminativist claims that it is simply false and should be replaced. The Reductionist holds instead that while it is not strictly speaking true, it is nonetheless useful given what the facts actually are. A helpful analogy here might be the art of celestial navigation, which is based on the Ptolemaic or geocentric model of astronomy. The astronomical facts are really Copernican but, given those facts, the employment of the far simpler Ptolemaic model turns out to be good enough for purposes of getting a boat across the ocean. The Reductionist holds that the sense of an enduring "I" stems from our acceptance of the useful fiction that we are persons. Buddhist Reductionists put this as the claim that the person is conventionally but not ultimately real.

I also think that this Abhidharma distinction between the conventionally real and the ultimately real allows for a far more satisfactory way of formulating reductionisms. Reductionism about *Xs* is often characterized as the view that *Xs* just consist in *Ys*, or that the *Xs* are really just *Ys*. The difficulty with this way of putting it is that it is not at all clear what the force of this "just" is. Abhidharma's two-tier ontology gives us a way of saying. The *Ys* are in our top-tier ontology, while the *Xs* are ontological back-benchers, things that don't belong in our final ontology but to which we are committed by a useful way of talking; and this way of talking is useful because of the facts about those things that are in our final ontology.

Now, given that understanding of Reductionism, I don't think Garfield is right to characterize my view as one of "reductive identity," or one that holds that "the [person] *really* is something else." The advantage I see in the Abhidharma formulation of Reductionism is precisely that it does not identify things that are merely conventionally real with anything that is ultimately real. It represents a way of expressing that troublesome "just is" without introducing identity. The Abhidharmika says that only impartite things are ultimately real, so a whole like a chariot, a tree, or a person could not be identical with anything ultimately real. The chariot, the tree, and the person are posits of a theory that is not ultimately true.

Does this make chariot, tree, and person fictional entities? Is reductionism really fictionalism? One might put it that way. But if so then it is important to add that talk of these fictional

entities may prove useful. *Milindapañha* calls "chariot" and "I" convenient designators (*paññatti vohara*). Now, in contrasting my view with his own, Garfield says that convenient designators "are better thought of as terms occurring in fictions." This would make the theory that there are chariots, and that we are persons, a fiction. I call it a theory that is to be reduced. Could I call it a fiction? That depends on where Garfield thinks fictions come from. He seems to say that they are generated by conventions, but the literary analogy suggests that these are in an important sense arbitrary. If they are arbitrary in the way in which novels are, though, then how are we to account for their usefulness? *Paññatti vohara* suggests concepts employed in commerce, such as the concept of the average Volvo owner. The average Volvo owner is a fictional entity. We can see this from the fact that among its properties is that of living in a household with 2.47 inhabitants. This is a property possessed by no human being (though some mornings I do feel that way). Yet the concept is useful for Volvo dealers. This is because the concept represents a way for finite intellects to utilize a large set of facts in a cognitively economical way. What holds concerning this fictional entity is generated in a fully determinate way by the facts. That is what explains its usefulness. And for this reason its generation cannot be arbitrary in the sense in which that of Dean Moriarty is. The statistician can get things wrong about the average Volvo owner; Jack Kerouac can't get things wrong about Dean Moriarty.

One consideration Garfield cites in support of his fictionalist account is that literary fiction generates instances of bivalence failure. It is neither true nor false that Dean Moriarty wears size ten shoes. This would explain why in *Milindapanha* Nagasena says the adult Milinda is neither the same person as infant Milinda nor a distinct person. I explain this differently. I say that on the Abhidharma theory of the two truths, mere convenient designators cannot be meaningfully employed in statements made at the ultimate level of truth. The reason for this prohibition is that such usage would lead to bivalence failure. And bivalence failure cannot be allowed given the classical nature of the ultimate truth-predicate: every well-formed sentence about ultimately real things must be either true or false. Suppose "heap" is a convenient designator, and "stone" designates ultimately real entities. Violation of the prohibition would allow us to ask whether the heap is identical with or distinct from the stones. And for reasons that were well known to all Abhidharmikas, neither answer will work. It would also allow us to ask whether the same heap remains after its constituent stones are successively removed and replaced with new stones. We know that there will be cases where there is no clear answer to this question. But the relation between the stones and the heap is not like that between real human beings and fictional characters such as Dean Moriarty. It is the relation between the reduction base and the reducible. A heap just consists in a bunch of stones.

The "neither identical nor distinct" formula is *prima facie* puzzling. But I think it is used to indicate the sort of reference failure that occurs when one tries to use convenient designators at the ultimate level. The model for this is the Buddha's treatment of the *catuskoti* in responding to the so-called indeterminate questions. The Buddha explains his denial of each of the four logically possible alternatives with the example of the fire that has gone out: one would not say that the fire has gone to the west, to the east, to the north, or to the south. All the alternatives may be rejected because all involve a sort of reference failure. This is what Nagasena seems to have in mind; likewise Buddhaghosa when he says that it is neither the same person nor someone else who is reborn.¹

Does Pudgalavada represent a kind of half-way house between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka? I'm not sure that would be quite accurate. The Pudgalavadin tries to stay within the confines of Buddhist orthodoxy by denying that there is a self, while also holding that the person, as the bearer of moral properties, is ultimately real. It is this that sets Pudgalavada apart from other Abhidharma schools, and not the assertion that the person is neither identical with nor distinct from the psychophysical elements. The latter is also accepted by all the Abhidharma schools.² But when Abhidharmikas assert it, they intend thereby to indicate that persons are only conventionally real. They take it as obvious that if both the person and the psychophysical elements were ultimately real, then the former would be either identical with or else distinct from the latter. And they know of arguments to show that it could be neither. The Pudgalavadins were likewise familiar with those arguments. But they also held that persons must be more than mere conceptual fictions. Thus, when they say that the person is neither identical with nor distinct from the psychophysical elements, their assertion concerns two sorts of things that are held to exist in just the same way. This is what makes their view so extraordinary. This is not the sort of bivalence failure that results from asking real-world questions about literary characters. Abidharmikas and Madhyamikas can agree that the Pudgalavada view is incoherent. For this reason it seems an implausible candidate for the role of mediating link between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka on the person.

I wrote that Pudgalavada might be thought of as holding that the relation between persons and psychophysical elements is one of non-reductive supervenience. I think Garfield may have misunderstood my view. First, I think that other Abhidharma schools can be thought of as claiming that personhood properties supervene on the properties of the ultimately real psychophysical elements. I do not think of supervenience as non-reductive ontological dependence. Quite the opposite: like Kim, I think supervening properties are likely to be reducible to their base properties.³ What I sought to show in chapter four is that Pudgalavada cannot prove the requisite explanatory autonomy of the person, given the realist constraint that explanations be causal, plus the fact that the base psychophysical elements seem to do all the causal work.

Second, I don't think that for Abhidharma the conventions that determine what counts as conventionally true float free of the base phenomena. So I would reject G's dichotomy, "determined either by the base phenomena or by our conventions." For Abhidharma our conventions are expressed in individual dispositions inherited from past lives. These are, for them, among the ultimately real psychophysical elements. They must be ultimately real if the usefulness of our conventions is to be comprehensible. Of course, this requires not only that there be rebirth but also that the series of lives be beginningless. Since many find this last assumption incoherent, I tried to develop a naturalistic alternative, in the form of cultural evolutionary processes that select for cultural transmission of the requisite dispositions. If such an account succeeds, then the facts about persons can be shown to be determined by strictly impersonal facts.

II.

Neither Garfield nor Arnold particularly liked my decision to explicate Madhyamaka as a kind of anti-realism. Garfield says that it obscures important continuities between Madhyamaka and Abhidharma. But, in fact, I arrived at this interpretive strategy through thinking about how Madhyamaka might be seen as extending the Abhidharma Reductionist project. It's important to point out that I use "anti-realism" in Dummett's sense, as the name of a view about meaning and truth, and not

as the name of a metaphysical view. For Dummett an anti-realist is one who denies that there are verification-transcendent truth-conditions for statements in a given class. Now, as Dummett points out, a reductionist is a kind of local anti-realist, but this is typically against the background of global realism. Abhidharma seems to fit this pattern. The conventional truth-predicate reflects human interests and cognitive limitations, while the ultimate truth-predicate is meant to be thoroughly impersonal and objective. Now Madhyamaka represents itself as merely completing the Abhidharma project by embracing a more thorough-going anti-essentialism: accepting the Abhidharma claim that persons are without essence or self—accepting *pudgalanairatmya*—but adding that the psychophysical elements are likewise devoid of essence—*dharmanairatmya*—and, hence, that these are also not ultimately real. So it seemed plausible that Madhyamaka might be usefully considered a kind of global anti-realism; as denying, that is, that any statements have verification-transcendent truth-conditions. This makes sense of the Madhyamaka strategy of attempting to reduce to absurdity all statements that the opponent takes to be ultimately true. And it coheres quite nicely with the Madhyamaka claim that emptiness is itself empty.

The biggest drawback I see to the anti-realist label is that it has come to be associated with semantic internalism. This is largely because Dummett and Putnam use verificationist premises in its defense. At one time I fell into the trap of attributing to Nagarjuna just such a verificationist assumption.⁴ I now think that was a mistake. I am fairly sure that no Indian philosopher held any form of internalism, semantic or epistemological. Yet I still see strong affinities between the Madhyamaka rejection of ultimate truth and Putnam's arguments against the view of truth he calls metaphysical realism. The difficulty is to say what anti-realism might look like without the internalist commitments of Putnam or Dummett. The best I have been able to come up with is what might be called a memorius minimalism: like minimalism in adopting a kind of naive-realist stance toward truth, but unlike minimalism in not being forgetful of the anti-realist path traveled. This path is anti-realist precisely because to reject ultimate truth is just to deny that there could be such a relation as correspondence to a reality whose nature is independent of the concepts we happen to use.

I don't think, though, that calling Madhyamaka anti-realist obscures its difference from Yogacara idealism or, for that matter, materialism. It might seem so only if we take "anti-realism" to name a metaphysical position, and not the semantic position that I have in mind. Idealism and materialism can both be viewed as kinds of ontological reductionism: each maintains that one sort of entity is reducible without remainder to another sort of entity, thus demonstrating that only the second sort of entity is ultimately real.⁵ Madhyamaka criticizes Yogacara idealism not for its claim that physical objects are *not* ultimately real, but for the claim that consciousness *is* ultimately real. Of course, Madhyamaka holds that both physical objects and consciousness are conventionally real. But then at one level so does Yogacara. (This is why Dharmakirti can adopt a Sautrantika stance for ease of explication without jeopardizing his idealist commitments.) The difference lies in what Madhyamaka does not say—that there is an ultimate ontology. Yogacara holds that conventional truth requires grounding in ultimately real entities; Madhyamaka denies this.

Still, I think Garfield and I are not far apart in how we view the Madhyamaka stance toward conventional truth. What I should like to hear more about is how his fictionalist approach would handle the thorny problem of explaining why, for Madhyamaka, our conventions lead to successful practice.

III.

If I have spent much of my allotted time replying to Garfield's comments, this is not because I found them more important than those of Taber and Arnold. I hope I have now made my own position on some key issues sufficiently clear that I can reply to these other comments more straightforwardly. I greatly enjoyed Taber's remarks. I've already said something in response to the concern he raised that my "Buddhist Reductionism" isn't really all that Buddhist. To this I will just add that I think Abhidharma's mereological reductionism—its view that all partite things are conceptual constructions—is an important contribution to contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics. But I agree that a traditionally trained analytic philosopher who read my book would not walk away with any real understanding of "Indian philosophical theories in their historical and cultural context." That wasn't my aim. That's not because I think such understanding is unimportant. Quite the opposite. If no one had such understanding, then fusion philosophy would be impossible. But I had a different agenda. I believe that the study of Indian and Buddhist philosophy should be a regular part of the undergraduate philosophy curriculum—that Indian philosophy should be studied alongside the Western tradition. One aim I had was to convince the powers-that-be in academic philosophy that the study of this tradition might contribute to something they already care about, solving problems of current research interest. Another aim was to show those who study the tradition in its cultural and historical context that they might achieve new insights into that tradition by considering what it might have to say to analytic philosophers. For I suspect that only by first convincing the residents in each house of the value to them of what is being done in the other house will there be the sort of real dialogue between the two traditions that I think both Taber and I wish to see.

Now on to some specific points Taber raises. I think the Buddhist Reductionist can defend a mitigated form of responsibility and the sense of agent causation that accompanies it in common-sense thinking about desert. When I said that desert disappears at the ultimate (impersonal) level, this was not meant to suggest that persons lack moral responsibility and freedom. Since persons are only conventionally real, it could not be ultimately true that persons lack freedom and responsibility. Nothing could be ultimately true of persons. But neither is it conventionally true. Persons are conceptually constructed in such a way as to be bearers of moral responsibility. And to the extent that this requires freedom, persons are free.⁵ Indeed, if Taber truly thinks that moral responsibility requires that an incompatibilist libertarianism be true, then perhaps he should find the Buddhist Reductionist position more acceptable than the realism about the self espoused by Nyaya and Mimamsa. For these latter hold that the self is in thoroughgoing causal interaction with the psychophysical elements, and so precisely not "standing above the causally determined complex of mental and physical states."

I agree that the Abhidharma explanations of personal phenomena are seldom as simple as the explanations proffered by those who believe in a simple self that serves as subject of cognitions and agent of actions. I also agree that Abhidharmikas do not explicitly appeal to the principle of lightness in support of their explanations over those of their rivals. But I think they are implicitly appealing to this principle. This is because the principle of lightness is not concerned with simplicity per se. It concerns the positing of unobservable entities. Abhidharmikas claim that everything mentioned in their explanations is observable. (Meditation is supposed to confirm this claim.) Not so the self of their opponents. As the subject of cognition, it is in principle unobservable. Hume and the Buddha were

right about that. What's more, the Abhidharmika purports to explain—through the notion of a useful fiction—the intuition that we have such selves. So the Buddhist Reductionist account wins by explaining the relevant phenomena while positing fewer unobservable entities.⁷ Of course, things would be far simpler if we just accepted our pre-theoretic intuitions at face value. But the same could be said for allowing the circle of fire into our ontology in the case of the whirling firebrand. It is not our intuitions but careful empirical investigation that reveals that there are just the many flames.

I very much liked Taber's invocation of Mimamsa's principle of intrinsic validity (credulism). Buddhist epistemologists do not accept this principle, though they agree that some cognitions are to be deemed *prima facie* trustworthy. I think Taber mischaracterizes their view when he says they insist on a special class of indubitable cognitions, but let's put that to one side. Suppose Kumarila is right and cognitions are to be accepted as valid unless and until there is subsequent falsifying evidence. As adults we normally take ourselves to be enduring subjects and agents. As Taber points out, occurrences of experience-memory present themselves in such a way as to make this view seem particularly compelling. Is there any subsequent falsifying evidence? The Buddhist Reductionist claims there is—in the form of the suffering we experience when we act on the basis of the belief that there is an enduring person. The test of veridicality is successful practice—achieving our goals. Our judgment that it is a diamond we hold is overturned by our inability to get cash from the diamond merchant. And practice based on belief in an "I" results in failure to achieve our goal of happiness. This is why ignorance about non-self was at the heart of the Buddha's diagnosis of the origins of suffering.

As for the argument that Taber assembles out of materials from Shankara, I'm not sure I have anything particularly interesting to say. Of course, the badness of pain looks like a functional property, something it could have only as part of a larger system. But this is not yet proof that the system must include a single subject for which pain plays this functional role. So I take it the argument now shifts to the point that pain must be a mental state to play this role; the claim is that in the absence of a self that is the subject of cognition, something could be a mental state only by being self-cognizing. Now, the school of Dignaga did hold that cognition of the object is just illumination of the form of the object, and that this form is intrinsic to the cognition itself, so that cognition of the object is actually cognition of the cognition itself. But this was not meant to explain apperception, which they held to always involve a subsequent cognition. In fact, their claim that cognitions are reflexive in nature was meant to explain the possibility of apperception, given that apperception functions like memory, and memory requires prior cognition.⁸ And if the argument is that a mental state can play its functional role only by presenting its content to something distinct, the Buddhist could respond that this is just what happens in apperception. Indeed, we may have in the doctrine of self-cognition the beginnings of a solution to the problem of qualia.

Finally, I think the attitude of Shankara and Kumarila toward reason is not shared by Buddhists—or by Naiyayikas for that matter. It is instructive that they belong to the two schools (Vedanta and Mimamsa) that hold release is possible only through knowledge imparted by the sacred texts. The Buddha explicitly warns against taking his word as authoritative. One is to test his claims by subjecting them to rational and empirical investigation—through philosophy and meditation, respectively. This is because faith commitments may conceal subtle manifestations of self-assertion and so frustrate the quest for cessation of suffering. Other schools in the Indian

tradition shared this conviction that release from suffering can be achieved through the exercise of philosophical rationality. And this is another lesson I think we can learn from the Indian tradition. Our own culture teaches that spiritual matters are not amenable to reasoned inquiry; in this respect Shankara and Kumarila sound distinctly Western. If we look at the Indian tradition through these cultural lenses, we may fail to see the extent to which Indian philosophers are genuinely doing philosophy, or else fail to see that they are embarked on a genuinely soteriological project. We may think one must do either the one or the other. I'm sure Taber would agree that either failure would be a disservice to the tradition.

IV.

While Garfield's views concerning Madhyamaka and my own may be close, I think Arnold and I have some substantive disagreements. For instance, I would not agree that Madhyamaka takes Abhidharma Reductionism to have eliminated the ethical agent. There are three reasons. First, I think that this confuses Reductionism with Eliminativism. Abhidharma agrees that it is useful that a causal series of psychophysical elements have the disposition to regard itself as a moral agent. They simply deny that this disposition requires any greater ontological grounding than is provided by the psychophysical elements. Second, Candrakirti actually endorses the Abhidharma reduction. Madhyamikas do not reject Abhidharma arguments for the essencelessness of persons. They simply wish to go further. Third, Shantideva's famous argument for compassion contains no premises that would be unacceptable to an Abhidharmika. So a Madhyamikas apparently thinks Abhidharma Reductionism is compatible with what is often taken as a distinctively Mahayana ethical obligation. I agree that the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness looks like the rejection of the entire Abhidharma project. But the actual practice of Madhyamikas suggests that the relation between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka is more nuanced.

I would also be reluctant to endorse Arnold's claim that Madhyamaka holds that everything exists only in relationship. This looks alarmingly like a metaphysical theory, something Madhyamikas claim to eschew—and with good reason. For this could not be ultimately true, given that anything ultimately real must have its nature intrinsically and so not through its relations to other things. And it seems not to be conventionally true. For ordinary people seem to have little difficulty imagining that something might exist in splendid isolation, cut off from all relation to other things. And any attempt to show that ordinary people are deluded about this is likely to look like an attempt to establish the ultimate truth about the matter.

I'm not entirely sure what Arnold means by a transcendental argument, and so I don't know if this part of his characterization of Madhyamaka is something I could agree with. But it was always my understanding that transcendental arguments require internalist assumptions (such as verificationism), and so the name makes me uneasy for reasons I've already indicated. Another source of unease here is that it sounds like Arnold thinks Madhyamikas can have a kind of master argument for emptiness, something that establishes definitively and against all possible opponents that all things must be devoid of intrinsic nature. Of course, it would be nice if they did, but I think the existence of such an argument is incompatible with emptiness. Anti-essentialists can't pick and choose; they must accept the consequences of anti-essentialism for the tools they use to try to establish it. And a master argument would seem to require that there be some procedure that is essentially a means of knowledge.

Does the Reductionist program inevitably founder on the ineliminability of the intentional, or of conventional discourse? For my own part, I fail to see why, for instance, the claim that

a causal series of psychophysical elements might "adopt an attitude of identification with past and future stretches of the series" should indicate a problem for the Reductionist program. The state in question is obviously described in an intentional idiom. But the Abhidharma ontology includes both dispositions and mental states with representational capacity ("perceptions"). It is not clear why talk of such "adopting" cannot be analyzed into talk of selective reinforcement for a disposition to represent past and future stages of the causal series in such a way as to influence the arising of desires. As for the claim that Madhyamikas rely on the inescapability of linguistic convention in arguing for the irreducibility of the conventional, such a strategy is effective only against Yogacara-Sautrantika, which alone among schools involved in the Abhidharma project holds that the ultimately real is inexpressible.

I am not sure that Madhyamaka can be recruited for the sort of anti-naturalist position Arnold seems to favor. The Buddha's Middle Path involved dissolving existential suffering through systematic dehomuncularization: replacing our ingrained preference for agency-based explanations with strictly causal explanations. Abhidharma sought to give this project ontological grounding. Madhyamaka rejects that move. But rejecting the metaphysics is not the same thing as rejecting the project. It may well be that strictly naturalistic explanations can be given for all the phenomena in which we take an interest. The Madhyamika cannot rule this out in advance. Nor should they want to—at least not if they wish to continue to call themselves Buddhists.

Arnold is right to think that when I characterize Madhyamaka as holding "The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth," I mean the apparent paradox to be resolvable through disambiguation. But it is "ultimate truth" that I take to be ambiguous here: it might mean "that truth knowledge of which is required for final liberation," or it might mean "a representation of reality as it is independently of the concepts we happen to employ." Since I don't think coherent sense can be made of ultimate truth in the second sense unless there are ultimate reals, I don't think Arnold's suggested disambiguation will work.

Arnold says he breathed a sigh of relief when he perceived that our views were not that far apart. I think there are still some substantive differences. But maybe that should be a relief to him. Georges Dreyfus and I recently discovered that we apparently agree on most substantive points of interpretation of Indian Buddhist philosophy—much to our mutual chagrin. Life can be boring when everyone agrees. And besides, what would we then have to write about?

Endnotes

1. *Visuddhi-Magga* (XVII.162-72).
2. See Joseph Walser, *Nagarjuna in Context* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 250.
3. See Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
4. In "Nagarjuna as Anti-Realist," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 16 (1988): 311-25.
5. Of course, physicalists have recently tried to make out some way of understanding the mental that is not straightforwardly reductionistic. But like Kim and many others, I think those efforts have generally failed.
6. I defended this view in "Beyond Compatibilism: A Buddhist Approach to Freedom and Determinism," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 24 (1987): 149-59. For a dissenting view, see Charles Goodman, "Resentment and Reality," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39 (2002): 359-72.

7. See Vasubandhu's commentary on v.7 of *Vimsatika* for a good example of this sort of appeal.
8. Mimamsakas who upheld the irreflexivity of cognition explained apperception as an inference from the cognizedness of the object. This inference is problematic for those (such as Buddhists and Naiyayikas) who uphold the primacy of perception as a means of knowledge: cognition being imperceptible, it is unclear how the pervasion between cognizedness and cognition can be ascertained.