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## COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

### Buddhist Philosophy and the No-Self View



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But if the self were equal to the aggregates  
It must, since there are many, be a multiplicity  
And it would be substantial, visible like every other thing  
And not a simple misconception

Chandrakirti 2004, p. 88

A widespread interpretation of Buddhist thought (especially the Madhyamaka and the Abhidharma<sup>1</sup>) concerning the self makes a prominent place for the claim that there is no self. The idea is that this piece of Buddhist philosophy is best understood as being an eliminativist view about the self, sometimes called the “no-self view” or “non-self view” (see Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011). This claim is motivated, in Buddhist philosophy, by the idea that *if* there were a self, it would have to be a permanent entity that would be a “bearer” of individual psychological states. But since, according to this line of thought, there is no such permanent bearer, then there is no self.

Consider the following statements:

There being nothing more than a succession of these impermanent, impersonal events and states, the question of the ultimate fate of this “*I*,” *the supposed owner of these elements*, simply does not arise. (Siderits 2015, § 2; my italics)

Using this distinction between the two truths, the key insight of the “middle path” may be expressed as follows. The ultimate truth about sentient beings is just that there is a causal series of impermanent, impersonal psychophysical elements. Since these are all impermanent, and lack other properties *that would be required of an essence of the person*, none of them is a self. But given the right arrangement of such entities in a causal series, it is useful to think of them as making up one thing, a person. (Siderits 2015, § 2; my italics)

One abandons the safe ground of substantialism or reification for the abyss of emptiness, something one can do only if one has confidence that there is, in fact, no bottom. (Garfield and Priest 2009, p. 74)

The last quote, taken from Garfield and Priest 2009, expresses nicely a thought I will be interested in: it opposes two possible ways to go—in this view, one can either hold a substantialist view of the self, where the self is a permanent reified bearer of

individual psychological states, or one can become an eliminativist. This short quote does not, of course, do justice to the complexity of the debate, but the main claim I am interested in is there: if one rejects a substantialist conception of the self, one has to hold a kind of an eliminativist “no-self view.” This reflects well how Buddhists typically argue for their view. Expressed in this way, the dialectical situation can be seen as a kind of dilemma. On the one hand, if there were a self it would have to be a heavy piece of metaphysical machinery, namely *one* thing that endures<sup>2</sup>—that is, that persists by being numerically identical at different times—and that is a genuine bearer of psychological states. But there is no such thing, according to this type of Buddhist thought (similarly to Hume as well as others). On the other hand, if there is no such metaphysically heavy self, we have to accept the consequence that there is no self *at all*—that is, that we do not exist. Many Buddhists do embrace this consequence wholeheartedly, and take it to be an idea that actually has positive consequences on our lives: it helps us to alleviate suffering.<sup>3</sup>

There is one component of this dilemma that I will try to question critically, namely the presupposition that if the self existed it would have to be *one* entity. This is a very widespread assumption concerning the self, both in Buddhist thought and in Western philosophy. Siderits, for instance, in the second quote above, says that “given the right arrangement of such entities in a causal series, it is useful to think of them as making up one thing, a person”—he has in mind here the idea that, in Buddhist philosophy, the existence of a person corresponds to a conventional truth. But why does one have to think that the “entities in a causal series” have to “make up *one thing*”? Why does one have to buy the presupposition that the self has to be one entity?

Perhaps this presupposition is rooted in an intuition, which we might call “the endurantist intuition”—the idea that we persist through time by being numerically identical at different times, that is, by being *one* and the same entity existing at different times. I think that it is correct that we indeed do have such an intuition. But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> this intuition merely comes from the contingent way our perceptual system is built (in short, the contingent way in which our brain interprets stimuli in order to produce a conscious experience of the world and of ourselves). As such, this intuition is not, then, a good guide to metaphysical truth.

I am not going to pursue this line of thought here. What I want to do in this article is to show that there is a very good alternative to the idea that the self is either a metaphysically heavy single entity or that it does not exist. I want to offer a possible way out of the dilemma, which would be compatible with a large part of what is important in Buddhist thought.

Of course, the bundle theory of the self comes immediately to mind. But the bundle theory, while it indeed does avoid the commitment to a substantial bearer/owner of individual psychological states, still identifies the self with *one* thing—one bundle—which is the same throughout the entire existence of the self. There is a possible endurantist version of this view as well as a perdurantist one (see Benovsky 2008 for a discussion of the different variants of these theories). Thus, someone who sympathizes with Buddhist philosophy might find that the bundle is still too sub-

stantial. After all, the friends of the traditional bundle theory, such as, for instance, Donald Williams (1953), say that a bundle of properties is a regular material object—one single entity, suitable to be a table, a tree, or a person.

But then, if one rejects the fully substantialist conception of the self (as one should, I agree), and if one thinks that the bundle theory is still “too substantial,” since it claims that the self is one single—enduring or perduring—entity, is it not the case that the only option we are left with is to become eliminativists about the self? Do we not then find ourselves in an “abyss of emptiness,” as Garfield and Priest put it (2009, p. 74)?

I suggest that a reasonable alternative one can embrace is a conception of the self as being a *plurality*. This suggestion does not amount to Galen Strawson’s “Pearl View,” although it bears some similarities to it. According to Strawson (1997), the self is a short-lived entity that only lasts as long as does an individual uninterrupted period of consciousness:

I will call my view the Pearl view, because it suggests that many mental selves exist, one at a time and one after another, like pearls on a string, in the case of something like a human being. According to the Pearl view, each is a distinct existence, an individual physical thing or object, though they may exist for considerably different lengths of time. . . . The proposal, in any case, is that the mental self—a mental self—exists at any given moment of consciousness or during any uninterrupted or hiatus-free period of consciousness. But it exists only for some short period of time. But it is none the less real. (Strawson 1997, pp. 424–425)

I take it that Strawson’s view is well known and I will not enter into the details of its inner workings. His view is as interesting as it is radical. It is in some sense close to the suggestion I want to make, except that I don’t feel the need for the radical part of the claim, saying that the self is so temporally small. Why is there the need to say that a human self is to be identified with each of the short-lived periods of uninterrupted consciousness? I guess that here again the reason behind this strong claim is the idea—common to substantialists, Buddhists, Hume, and virtually everybody—that the self has to be *one* thing. In Strawson’s view this one thing is then the only thing available, namely one of the (each, actually) short uninterrupted periods of consciousness.

This is what he says:

Many agree that the central component of the idea of the self is the idea of an inner subject of experience, but insist that this inner subject is or can be something that has long-term diachronic continuity. On my view, though, this amounts to claiming that a many-membered set or series of SESMETs<sup>5</sup> in a certain relation can be a *single* subject of experience. (Strawson (1999, p. 132; my italics, my footnote)

Thus, Strawson, as well as the other participants in the debate, wants to secure the claim that the self is a single entity—or at least that *if* there were a self, it would have to be a single entity. This is why, in the end, he identifies the self with single episodes of consciousness.

The suggestion that the self is a plurality, that I want to explore here as being an alternative to the “dilemma” we started with, challenges this widespread assumption.<sup>6</sup> And it explicitly rejects the argument provided by Buddhist philosophy to the effect that *if* there were a self it would have to be a single entity, but it has a lot in common with Buddhist thought, at least in its spirit. Thus, my aim in this article is not to reject Buddhist philosophy, or Hume’s, or Strawson’s—rather, I see my suggestion as being helpful to this type of line of thought by freeing it from an unnecessary burden, namely the assumption of the singularity of the self.

Ordinary language seems to indicate that the self is a single entity, since we use the expression “the self,” but there is no requirement to follow ordinary language here. Language is a contingent piece of human creation and it can be as misleading as some of our so-called intuitions can be (see what I said above about such intuitions). Besides, ordinary English does have resources to refer to pluralities, and we can very well appeal to these to talk about the self, if we feel the need for it. One can distinguish here between (a) a *reference to a plurality*, where an expression refers to a single entity that is a plurality (this would, perhaps, be the case for the bundle theory, since the bundle is one), or (b) a genuinely *plural reference*, where an expression refers to a plurality *as a multitude* and not as a single collective entity. It is of course the latter that I have in mind here, and I suggest that the expression “the self” can be understood in this way. After all, how we use our language is entirely in our power.<sup>7</sup>

The core idea, then, is that the self is a plurality, and that it *is* the psychological states that it has. There are the impermanent successive psychological states—the same ones that Buddhists, Hume, Strawson, and everybody else talk about—and these *are me*. Not a collection of them (as the bundle theorist would say), not a single one of them (as Strawson would say), but all of them, as a plurality, are me.

I say that the self is the psychological states that it has. It may sound odd that something *is* something that it *has*. But it only *sounds* odd. The problem here is familiar from the literature concerning the bundle theory (of ordinary material objects as well as of the self), where the bundle theory is accused of a similar crime, since it claims that a bundle—say, a table—*has* the properties that are members/constituents/parts of the bundle that it *is* (in what follows, for the sake of brevity, I’ll simply say “members,” but I wish to remain neutral about whether one should say “members,” “constituents,” “parts,” or something else). The “having” of properties is analyzed in terms of “being a member of” the bundle. The objector, from the standpoint of a substance/substratum theory, then raises the worry that if the object is a bundle, it cannot *have* the properties that constitute it. But this is only because she thinks of the relation of having as of a relation that obtains between an object conceived of as an owner/bearer and a property. But this is a notion that has been invented (yes, invented) for the purposes, and in the framework of, a substance/substratum theory. It makes perfect sense in this framework.<sup>8</sup> But it is simply entirely unsuitable to express what one wants to say in the alternative framework of the bundle theory such as it is traditionally understood.<sup>9</sup> In the latter framework, “having” is to be understood in terms of “containing as a member.” That’s what the bundle

theory amounts to, and denying this would simply be begging the question in favor of the substance/substratum theory.

The pluralist view I am exploring can rely on a similar understanding of “having.” In this view, the self is a plurality (again, *not* a collection, unlike under the bundle theory), and a plurality also has members. In this way, I can say that I *have* the property of being sad at a time  $t_n$  and that I have the property of being joyful at a time  $t_m$  *iff* there is a plurality of experiences that is suitably intra-connected (see below) and that contains as members psychological states that involve sadness and joyfulness at these times. The *having* of such and such a psychological state is thus understood simply and solely in terms of the *existence* of the psychological state. (That the psychological state exists is something that everybody accepts, including Buddhists, Strawson, bundle theorists, and substance/substratum theorists alike—that is, nobody denies that there are individual psychological states.)

Nobody denies that there are individual psychological states, but some deny that they can exist without “being had” by something. Again, a similar objection has been raised against the bundle theory of ordinary material objects, where it has been argued that properties of an object have to be had by something and that they cannot “float free.” The idea is that properties are not capable of independent existence (see, *inter alia*, Armstrong 1997, p. 99) and that they require some kind of a bearer. Jonathan Lowe (1996, p. 25), as well as others, raises this point when he says that “individual mental states are necessarily states of persons: they are necessarily ‘owned’—necessarily have a subject.” These worries apply perhaps even more strongly in the case of the pluralist view than in the case of the bundle theory, since in the latter case there is something—namely the bundling relation—that is supposed to have the effect of generating an object by bundling together properties. In the case of the pluralist view (of the self), there is no such unifying device that would have the function of taking individual psychological states as inputs and generating a unique object-like self as an output; instead, the plurality remains a plurality, a multitude. Thus, individual psychological states appear to be “floating free” indeed.

But why would this be a problem? Lowe says that individual mental states require a subject of some sort, understood as an owner or bearer of them. But why could individual psychological states not exist on their own? Apart from the fact that this is always insisted upon by substance/substratum theorists, is there something that forces us to see things that way? Individual psychological states are, in one way or another, based in brain activity, so their existence is not a mysterious one where they would pop in and out of existence for no reason at all. They’re there, and there is no reason to think of them as incapable of existence independent of an alleged “owner.” Thus, individual psychological states can very well serve as basic constituents when it comes to trying to understand the nature of the self. Such individual states exist, and the pluralist view simply identifies the self with a plurality of them.

This plurality is sometimes discontinuous in the sense that the individual psychological states involved in a plurality are not always temporally adjacent. This is the case when we have intervals of time during which we are not conscious and we don’t have any experiences. During such intervals, the friends of the substance/

substratum view have the burden to explain what is happening to the self, as a kind of non-manifest, dormant, entity—a bearer that does not bear anything. The friends of pluralism (and I hope there will be some!) do not have this problem since, according to this view, there is nothing to explain: when there are no individual psychological states, there is nothing—at these times, the self just does not exist. Thus, if a self is understood as a plurality, it is—usually, when it comes to humans—a “gappy self.” But it is not gappy in any objectionable way, since it is only temporally gappy: the temporally discontinuous individual psychological states that are members of the plurality are connected and continuous from the phenomenological point of view. And that’s what counts. The individual psychological states are causally and qualitatively continuous—which is also something that virtually everybody, including Buddhists, agrees on—and that’s what makes them members of the same plurality.

Extreme cases come to mind. If there is a drastic change in the psychological and phenomenal continuity of someone, then, under the pluralist view, it will be easily seen as being a different self. But perhaps, if the change is really abrupt and sufficiently radical, then this is indeed what we *should* say. To have another exotic case in mind, let’s think of what happens in case of time travel, where a huge temporal gap can arise between two phenomenally continuous psychological states. But time travel, as far as it is ordinarily understood, is not death, but a way of traveling. Thus, we see that temporal continuity is irrelevant—only phenomenal psychological continuity is—and this sort of continuity is perfectly accounted for in the pluralist view of the self. Again, the individual psychological states do not mysteriously pop in and out of existence; rather they are based in brain activity and—most importantly—they are causally, phenomenally, and psychologically connected and continuous.

Thus, as it has often been said in the philosophical literature (both Western and Buddhist) about personal identity,<sup>10</sup> it is not a temporal (metaphysical) continuity, but rather a psychological continuity, that counts. And this kind of continuity and unity is easily understood in the pluralist view, despite the fact that there is no metaphysical glue (unlike under the bundle theory or the substance/substratum theories) that glues together the various different psychological states. It’s like in the cinema: static images are shown in rapid succession, usually twenty-four or twenty-five images per second, which creates an illusion of continuity where there only is a succession of individual static frames. Continuity—or at least the appearance of continuity—can arise from a series of metaphysically discontinuous elements. Such illusions of continuity are common (not only is this how movies are made, but it’s also how television screens or computer monitors are built, for instance). The appearance of continuity comes here not from the way the reality is (since there is no movement, only a succession of static frames or successively activated pixels), but from the way our perceptual system interprets the stimuli it gets. This is the phenomenon known as “apparent motion.”

In short, a succession of static stimuli following each other at an appropriate speed is interpreted by our perceptual system as a continuous movement in a pre-conscious way—the perceptual system takes the static stimuli as inputs and generates an experience as of a continuous movement as an output, where this interpretative

process is not consciously accessible to us (for more on this, see, for instance, Scholl 2007; Paul 2010; and Benovsky 2015, § 5). I suggest that one can think similarly of the way we experience ourselves. A “metaphysically gappy self” only consisting in there being successive individual psychological states is sufficient to account for our phenomenal experiences of continuity and unity, as we have just seen, and also, as I would like to suggest, for our experiences of a unity and continuity of ourselves, in a similar way. Granted, such experiences are largely illusory, and it is true that all there really is are the individual psychological states—no continuous self, and nothing that is genuinely numerically identical through time. Not only is this an economical view, but it also perfectly fits with what one can find in many places in Buddhist thought. But then, as I have been trying to argue, if one finds this kind of thought appealing, one does not have to endorse a “no-self view.” One can, I submit, salvage everything that is important for this type of Buddhist view, without denying the existence of the self, by endorsing the view that the self is not *one*, but a plurality.<sup>11</sup> The presupposition that if the self existed it would have to be *one* entity, such as an owner, a continuous bearer, or similar, is to be abandoned. Once we free ourselves from this presupposition, there is no reason—or at least no obligation—to deny the existence of the self, even if one shares a Buddhist worldview.

#### Notes

I would like to thank Thomas Jacobi, Jean-Roch Lauper, Baptiste Le Bihan, and Adrien Zanarelli for discussions that helped me in writing this article.

- 1 – See, *inter alia*, Siderits 2003 and 2007 for an excellent discussion. As an interpretative background, I will mostly have in mind his understanding of the Madhyamaka and the Abhidharma.
- 2 – “When we think of ourselves and others as persons, we are thinking of a person as something that *endures* at least a whole lifetime” (Siderits 2007, p. 61).
- 3 – For a critical discussion of this very last claim, see Benovsky n.d.
- 4 – Benovsky 2015.
- 5 – **S**ubjects of **E**xperience that are **S**ingle **M**ental **T**hings.
- 6 – I first put forward this view in Benovsky 2014, where I labeled it, somewhat clumsily, a “pluralistic” view. I now say more simply “pluralist” rather than “pluralistic.” I owe my thanks to Baptiste Le Bihan for this terminological suggestion.
- 7 – An anonymous referee of this journal interestingly pointed out to me that instead of saying “all of them, as a plurality, are me,” I could have said “all of them, as a plurality, are us.” This is, indeed, in line with the overall thought of this article. My general stance is that the contingent way in which language functions should not be our guide to metaphysical truth. Thus, the fact that “I” and “self” are singular terms should not be taken to indicate that the self is a

singular/single entity. It sounds odd to say “we” instead of “I,” but in principle it would be possible to adopt such use of language, except that it could perhaps make what I want to convey here too odd to be clear.

- 8 – Severe objections have been raised in the literature concerning the nature and the functional role of this relation—think, for instance, of the Bradley Regress objection.
- 9 – In Benovsky 2008 I argue for the claim that the bundle theory and the substratum theory are in fact not as different as is traditionally thought (I defend a claim of metaphysical equivalence). In this article, I stick to the traditional characterizations and understandings of these views.
- 10 – One of the most prominent places is Parfit 1984.
- 11 – One may ask here how big the difference is between my non-eliminativist reductionist pluralist view and an eliminativist view of a similar kind. There is an interesting general question about what the difference is between a view that reduces an entity E1 to another entity (or entities) E2, and a view that eliminates E1 by virtue of the existence of E2. Probably the only—but important—difference that really counts here is the simple fact that while the eliminativist is only committed to the existence of the fundamental entities, the reductionist is committed to the existence of these *and* also of the entity that is being reduced. Otherwise, the two types of views can work in the same way and can be extremely similar.

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## The Importance of "My" Being Single: A Response to Jiri Benovsky



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Given how much the issue of the self and diachronic personal identity has been discussed in recent decades, one might wonder why something like Benovsky's pluralist-self view has not already been proposed and critically examined. It does, after all, look promising as a way to negotiate a settlement between the partisans of self and of nonself. For it gives the first party what it says it wants—ontological commitment to selves—while also granting the nonself theorists their core claim that there is no single entity that is the referent of "I." But I doubt that any such settlement can last.

Benovsky claims to have some sympathy for the view that I call Buddhist Reductionism, and his pluralist-self view does at first glance look like a near neighbor of