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Mark Siderits

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



Mark Siderits

Department of Philosophy, Seoul National University
msideri@ilstu.edu

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

the view that these Buddhists hold. Their position can be described as claiming that (1) the self is simply unreal, and that (2) the person is merely conventionally but not ultimately real. Here the terms “self” and “person” are clearly being used to mean different things. By “self” they mean a soul-pellet or Cartesian ego, the one entity among the many psychophysical elements that is one’s essence. By “person,” on the other hand, is meant the mereological sum of some or all of the many causally connected psychophysical elements. An element and a mereological sum of elements are clearly different things. But instead of talking about “self” or “person,” I propose to couch the discussion in terms of the meaning of the first-person pronoun “I.” This is where Buddhist nonself theorists start: with the claim that the sense of an “I” is illusory and the source of existential suffering. Those who espouse Buddhist Reductionism do so as part of a strategy to extirpate the “I”-sense. Framing the discussion in terms of the first-person “I” may help us see why the pluralist-self view will not work.

According to that view, “I” could be replaced by “we.” Since “I” and “myself” are interchangeable, and the view has it that my self is a plurality, the first-person pronoun would always be a plural. Now there are cases where “we” is allowed in place of “I.” But the parental “we” (every child quickly learns) is really just a way for the parent to refer to themselves, and so is a disguised singular. The royal “we” is another matter. There the idea is that since the monarch supposedly represents the nation in its entirety, what we take to be the pronouncement of a single entity actually speaks for a many. There is a difficulty, though: for these pronouncements to do their job, they seem to need the assistance of the idea of the state as a single transcendent entity to the interests of which the monarch is answerable. This is, in any event, how the monarch’s subjects typically see things when the monarchy runs smoothly. It is not clear how the affairs of state would go if “the state” were understood to be just an enumerative term (like “gross” or “multitude”), a way of denoting some unspecified number of people occupying a certain territory and standing in certain complex spatio-temporal relations. How does one fire up the troops to make war against Prussia if one cannot invoke past wrongs to an entity with which the subjects identify? Motivating emotions such as loyalty or resentment at injustice seem to need a single object.

The Buddha’s account of the origin of suffering has something called “appropriation” (*upādāna*) as a crucial causal link. To appropriate is to take some event or state as “me” or “mine.” Consider human socialization as a process of instilling a certain way of organizing the system that is a human organism. Gaining the ability to appropriate—to identify—represents a key stage in the progression from a desire-satisfaction model of system organization to the very different model of a system organized around principles of delayed gratification, responsibility-taking, and happiness-seeking. As we would now put it, appropriation is a key step in a child’s transition to full-fledged personhood. It is, for instance, only by virtue of its ability to think of certain causally connected past events as having been authored by the same entity that now reflects on what to do that a child can begin to take responsibility for its own actions—can begin to see itself as justifiably subject to praise and blame,

reward and punishment for earlier actions. Likewise for the ability to engage in prudential reasoning—to forego small present pleasure in exchange for getting greater future pleasure or avoiding greater future pain. And, most crucially, it is only by virtue of its coming to think of all the elements in the causal series as states of a single thing, the “I,” that a child can begin the transition from a pleasure-seeking system to a happiness-seeking system. As Aristotle saw, the pursuit of individual happiness involves the quest for what can be thought to confer meaning on the events in one’s life. We derive happiness from events that we can see as contributing to the narrative arc of our lives. This sense of a life as a kind of self-authored narrative plays a crucial role in facilitating development of such traits as prudence and a sense of justice.

Most will agree that life goes better—there is less overall pain and suffering, more overall pleasure and happiness—when humans are induced to employ prudential rationality, seek to conform their behavior to social norms by taking responsibility for their actions, and strive for fulfillment by developing their peculiar capacities. But we should also agree that it would be difficult to achieve these goods in the absence of the sense of an “I” that is a single persisting entity, something for which the events in a life can have significance. Just as the royal “we” seems silly in the absence of a sense of the state as an organic whole, so an “I” understood as a mere enumerative term, one that conveyed no more than that there is a multiplicity of past, present, and future psychophysical elements with all manner of causal connections, seems unlikely to inspire the sort of behavior we agree would make things go well. The human organism typically comes equipped with the precursors of such reactive emotions as anger and fellow feeling, and socialization into personhood makes ample use of them. It is hard to see how we could get the desirable results if we were unable to appeal to the sense of an “I” as a single persisting thing.

At this point metaphysicians may enter the discussion. They can agree on the many salutary effects of a conceptual scheme that uses the notion of an “I” as a single persisting subject of experience and agent of actions. But they would also say that this is separate from the question whether there is such an “I.” Our metaphysicians will say that the practical consequences of belief in the “I” as a persisting entity cannot straightforwardly count as evidence for or against its existence. They disagree among themselves, however, about what evidence is relevant for the ontological question, and what such evidence shows. One important source of support for the self theorist is the fact that belief in the “I” is virtually universal. This places the burden of proof on the nonself theorist, who, like all revisionary metaphysicians, must explain away the intuitions fueling the conceptual scheme they challenge. For their part, nonself theorists deploy a variety of arguments meant to show that a self is a superfluous posit that leads to many conceptual difficulties. And they deploy arguments in support of mereological nihilism. But neither side questions the assumption that if “I” denotes, what it denotes is a single entity. Benovsky thinks this is a mistake.

Here is one metaphysical difficulty that arises if we reject the singleness assumption. When we engage in practical deliberation, we consider what would happen if one did A, and what would happen if one did B. Suppose my life so far consists of events p_1 – p_n , and that if I choose to do A this will bring about that my life also

contains events p_{n+1} , p_{n+2} , and p_{n+3} , while if I choose to do B it will contain not these events but events p_{n+4} , p_{n+5} , and p_{n+6} instead. Now the series consisting of events p_1 – p_n , p_{n+1} , p_{n+2} , and p_{n+3} is different from the series consisting of p_1 – p_n , p_{n+4} , p_{n+5} , and p_{n+6} . But if “I” is merely an enumerative term for the many events making up a life, then the “I” that chose to do A is distinct from an “I” that chose to do B. If it was A that I chose, while B turns out to have been the right thing to do, I cannot be criticized for failing to do the right thing. The “I” that chose A is not something that might have chosen to do B, for it is metaphysically impossible for the one series to be the other.¹ This should tell us something about why it is universally assumed that “I” denotes a single persisting entity, and why the desirable outcomes of our personhood practices would not be on offer if we did not make such an assumption.

And there may be further difficulties for the pluralist-self view. Absent a coherent notion of a deliberative agent, it is not clear that there can be such things as reasons. To deliberate, an agent must be able to consider how it would view various different outcomes were they to be realized. Reasons stem from ways in which an outcome would affect the interests of the deliberator. But if each different outcome pertains to a distinct series of psychophysical elements, and there is nothing more to the “I” than this series, the reasons attaching to different outcomes become incommensurable. And reasons must be commensurable or else deliberation becomes impossible. Note that this result holds as much for reasons for believing as it does for reasons for acting: believing is itself an action. The upshot is that if the pluralist-self view were true, there could be no reasons to believe it.²

One way of attempting to resolve the dispute between partisans of self and of nonself is to try somehow to have it both ways. Buddhist Reductionists do this through their two-scheme approach: claim that “I” denotes nothing ultimately (the term lacks meaning in the ultimate discourse), but retain the term and its ordinary uses at the conventional level. With the “I” safely domesticated at the level of conventional truth, its use generates no serious ontological commitments. The pluralist-self strategy for having it both ways, on the other hand, does not have the reductionist’s two-tier ontology. So its recommendation that we retain the “I” generates an ontological commitment. The pluralist tries to make this palatable to the nonself theorist by insisting that this commitment is to something the existence of which they already acknowledge: the plurality of causally connected psychophysical elements. But for reasons I have rehearsed, this will satisfy neither side. The self theorist will say that there is no room for agency, deliberation, and reasons in the pluralist scheme. The nonself theorist will agree, and add that retaining the term “I” can only foster confusion. Given its role in ordinary life, they will claim that dissemination of the pluralist-self view will leave intact the problem of existential suffering.

Suppose that thanks to a massive media campaign, most people came to believe that “I” denotes a plurality of causally connected psychophysical elements. There are cases where a given term is retained through significant changes in our beliefs about its referent. The word “planet” continues to be used despite the mismatch between its etymological meaning of “wanderer” and the heliocentric theory of the solar system. (That Mars appears to wander among the “fixed” stars turns out to be an artifact of the motion of the planet from which we observe it; our observations can be accounted

for without supposing that Mars' motion involves epicycles.) Likewise "atom" retains the reference it was assigned by eighteenth-century physicists despite the fact that "splitting the atom" is no longer thought to be oxymoronic. Suppose something similar happened with "I." Then, given the importance of its present use to denote a deliberative agent, people might simply fail to note that the now-official pluralist view is contradicted by the singleness presupposition behind most ordinary usage. Or else they might come to distinguish between two senses of "I," those of the singular and of the pluralist uses. In either event, they would retain the set of attitudes and beliefs that Buddhists hold are responsible for existential suffering. They would continue to believe in an entity that is crucial to the happiness-seeking project. And given our mortality, Buddhists claim, that project turns out to be a hedonic Ponzi scheme.

A final word is in order concerning Buddhist Reductionism. I have claimed that the assumption that "I" has singular reference plays a crucial role in our practice of deliberative rationality, which is in turn important to the effort to achieve overall maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain. Buddhists say that the singleness assumption results from "beginningless ignorance," and that overcoming this ignorance ushers in the ideal state for sentient beings, *nirvāna*.³ Since they also hold that one can live in this state, it seems they must think that the benefits of our personhood practices can be had without the existential suffering that these practices supposedly induce and without the singleness assumption on which I say they depend. (The enlightened person presumably sees through the singleness assumption, seeing it as no more than a useful shortcut, a concession to human interests and cognitive limitations.) Why is this result not also open to the pluralist-self view? To see why not, consider the Buddhist argument for universal beneficence from the ownerlessness of suffering.⁴ The argument seeks to show why one is obligated to try to prevent all suffering regardless of when and where it occurs: now or in the future, in this causal series (i.e., "me") or in some other. Because there is no self and there are no mereological sums, the "I" fails to denote anything ultimately real. Thus, there is nothing that might ultimately justify a bias in favor of present hedonic states over future ones, or a bias in favor of this series' states over those in other series. Indeed, if any such bias needed ownership to be justified, it would be irrational for the hand to remove a splinter from the simultaneously existing foot to which it is connected. The upshot is that we must either agree that all suffering is to be prevented or else hold that none is. Presumably one will choose the first option over the second.

Note that this argument parlays an already existing concern to prevent what is taken to be one's own present pain into an obligation to prevent all suffering. It is aimed at an audience that accepts the conventional-truth understanding of "I" and all that goes with its uses. The argument does this by trying to show how it can be that while "I" does not denote anything ultimately real, its usage can be understood in terms of facts about the ultimately real elements. The argument cannot work without the two-schemes strategy. When Benovsky calls his pluralist-self view "non-eliminativist," he thereby rules out this two-scheme solution. There must be room for the singleness assumption to work if the argument is to succeed. Otherwise it seems there can be no reasons for anyone to do—or believe—anything.

Notes

- 1 – Note that while Buddhist Reductionists agree with the pluralist-self view that strictly speaking there is only the series of the many causally connected psychophysical elements, they are able to circumvent this difficulty of locating a unified persisting deliberative agent. They get around the problem by appealing to the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. They would say it is conventionally true that I, a persisting substance with various powers, might have done B rather than A. For details see my “Buddhist Paleocompatibilism,” *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 1 (2013): 73–87.
- 2 – Here also the Buddhist Reductionist is able to circumvent the difficulty faced by the pluralist-self view. This difficulty is closely related to an objection sometimes raised against Reductionist views, one I call “Micawberism” in my *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2015). The idea is that in the absence of a single persisting “I,” the agent is reduced to the passive state of “waiting to see what turns up.” Buddhist Reductionists can use their two-scheme approach to get around this difficulty. They can agree that ultimately there are no reasons, since ultimately there are no agents. At the same time they can also say that given the beneficial results of the practice of deliberation, it is conventionally true that there are deliberative agents, where the ultimate truth about causal series of psychophysical elements explains why it should be better, most things considered, that we think of ourselves as deliberators. It will thus hold conventionally as well that there are reasons.
- 3 – That the ignorance is “beginningless” will strike many as odd given that the cosmos is no more than 13 billion years old. Nowadays we might instead give a selectionist explanation of the universal acceptance of the singleness assumption.
- 4 – This is the argument found in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicāryāvātāra* 8.90–102. For a translation of this and Prajñākaramati’s commentary see The Cowherds, *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 241–248. I give my own reconstruction of the argument on pp. 119–40 of the same work.

The Self, Agency, and Responsibility: A Reply to Mark Siderits

Jiri Benovsky

Mark Siderits has raised a number of interesting issues and objections concerning the “pluralist view” of the self I put forward in “Buddhist Philosophy and the No-Self View.” In this short reply, I am going to focus on two main points he made, in the reverse order in which he made them.