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VAIBHĀṢIKA METAPHORICALISM

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Contrary to what almost everyone thinks, there is no such thing as a persisting, separate, individual self. Westerners have often regarded this view, known as the doctrine of no-self (*anattā/anātman*), as the most intriguing and important claim made by the Buddhist philosophical tradition. One promising way to understand the doctrine is to compare it to the work of those contemporary analytic philosophers who have rejected the belief in a substantive self—most notably Derek Parfit. As a result, scholars of Buddhism have now produced a significant literature on the relation between the view about personal identity developed by Derek Parfit and the ideas expressed in various Buddhist texts. Writers who have considered this question, such as Siderits, Williams, Giles, Stone, Duerlinger, and Perrett, take different substantive and interpretive positions, but most of them agree on the structure of the debate. According to the majority of these writers, the key interpretive task usually is to determine which of two positions any given Buddhist school was trying to defend: Reductionism or Eliminativism. Although there is general agreement that these are the two available options, there is quite a bit of disagreement about what the positions are.

As I will show, the source of this disagreement is that instead of two positions, the literature actually contains three, which I will call Constitutive Reductionism, Eliminative Reductionism, and Eliminativism. (In fact, Eliminativism itself has two versions: Hybrid Eliminativism and Radical Eliminativism.) Each one of these positions strikes some writers as the best available view about personal identity, and each one seems to some to be the best available interpretation of the views about no-self held by at least some Buddhists. But if we take a close look at the ideas of one Buddhist philosophical school, the tradition of the Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma, we will see that their version of no-self differs significantly from most of the interpretations that have been proposed. Siderits' Eliminative Reductionism does come close to offering a satisfactory account of the views of Vasubandhu and similar thinkers but still faces certain remaining philosophical and interpretive problems. There is another interpretation—I will call it Vaibhāṣika Metaphoricalism—which does a better job of capturing what texts such as the *Treasury of Metaphysics* (*Abhidharma-kośa*) understood the no-self doctrine to be.¹

All parties to the debate agree on certain elements of the doctrine of no-self held by most Buddhist philosophical schools. According to all the positions I will discuss, people are not separate, special entities, existing in addition to the simple physical and mental entities of which they are composed. That is, if people exist, their existence “just consists in the existence of certain other sorts of things.”² All parties also

agree that a proper understanding of the ontological status of people would have significant normative consequences.

One way to expand on this view would be to argue that there are people, since what it takes for people to exist is for there to be physical and mental simples standing in certain relations, and these entities do in fact exist and stand in these relations. This view seems the natural reading of the following passage from Parfit:

Even Reductionists do not deny that people exist. And, on our concept of a person, people are not thoughts and acts. They are thinkers and agents. I am not a series of experiences, but the person who *has* these experiences. A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is *what has* experiences, or the *subject of experiences*. This is true because of the way in which we talk.³

Because of our linguistic conventions, whenever certain more basic entities exist and stand in appropriate relations, it is true to say that there are people. Parfit has introduced a term, "Constitutive Reductionism," to distinguish this view from more radical alternatives. I will follow his usage.

Constitutive Reductionism has some philosophical plausibility, and some philosophers believe that it is the correct understanding of the metaphysical status of persons. Moreover, several writers have regarded it as substantially equivalent to the views about no-self defended in certain Buddhist texts. According to James Duerlinger, for example, Constitutive Reductionism is the view of Ābhīdhārmikas such as Vasubandhu. Duerlinger argues that "since Vasubandhu claims that we are the five aggregates as a collection *in a causal continuum*, his view may be counted as a version of the reductionist view of personal identity."⁴ If we are the five aggregates, and the five aggregates exist, then we exist. It is not hard to understand why Duerlinger thinks this, since Vasubandhu does, in fact, repeatedly say that a term such as "person" is a way of designating or referring to the five aggregates.⁵

Duerlinger is not alone in attributing Constitutive Reductionism to certain Buddhist thinkers. Paul Williams regards this position as the view of Saṃgharakṣita in particular, and of the Abhidharma in general.⁶ Roy Perrett is less cautious. He cites a quote in which Parfit asserts the existence of people, and then says that "the Indian Buddhist Reductionists I just mentioned would all have agreed with Parfit on this; they were not Eliminativists about persons."⁷ These Buddhist Reductionists who believed in persons, according to Perrett, include "the Theravādins, the Vaibhāṣikas, the Sautrāntikas, the Yogācārins, and the Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas"—all Indian Buddhists, in fact, except for the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas, to whom he attributes a different view, and the Vātsīputrīyas, who took issue with the doctrine of no-self.

The Constitutive Reductionist view of Buddhist philosophy is clearly popular, but it is also pretty clearly incorrect. Buddhist thinkers such as Vasubandhu constantly make statements that are difficult, if not impossible, to square with this interpretation. In *Treasury of Metaphysics* II.46b, for example, we find: "Blinded by ignorance, foolish persons imagine that the series of conditioned phenomena is a 'self' or belongs to a 'self,' and, as a consequence, they are attached to this series."⁸ Vasubandhu seems to be claiming (in the name of the Sautrāntikas, the school whose

positions he usually defends) that the Constitutive Reductionist view, on which I *am* no other than a series of mental and physical simples, is just as delusive as the view that I am a special entity that *has* that series and is just as likely to produce misery.

In a number of passages, Vasubandhu denies, or quotes authoritative sources that deny, that people exist at all. So, for example, there is no such thing as “me”:

The Sūtra about Bimbisāra says “A fool, an ignorant person, an ordinary person, follows the concept of ‘the self.’ But there is neither me here, nor mine, but only the arising of suffering.”⁹

Another very illuminating passage lets us see the early Buddhist ontology at work:

Either you say there is no self, and nothing belonging to a self, or you say the contrary. There is no sentient being here, nor is there a self, but simple entities, each with a cause. There are twelve categories of being, the spheres, and there are aggregates, and components; having thought about all these, one still doesn’t perceive any person. Everything that belongs to you is empty. Perceive it as empty; perceive it as external. He who meditates on emptiness does not exist.¹⁰

It is not hard at all, meanwhile, to understand why Parfit sees himself as disagreeing with the Buddhist view, since he quotes, as an expression of that view, a verse from Buddhaghosa that clearly clashes with Constitutive Reductionism:

The mental and the material are really here,
But here there is no human being to be found.
For it is void and merely fashioned like a doll,
Just suffering piled up like grass and sticks.¹¹

Constitutive Reductionists say that people exist, then qualify this statement by saying that their existence is not ontologically fundamental, since it just consists in the existence of various more basic entities. But Buddhists, at least sometimes, are prepared to deny the commonsense propositions that Constitutive Reductionists continue to accept; Buddhists are willing to deny that people, sentient beings, selves, and human beings exist. So, Duerlinger, Perrett, and Williams are wrong: Buddhist philosophers such as Vasubandhu are not Constitutive Reductionists. So, then, are they Eliminativists? To settle this issue, let us examine the theses of the main proponent of the Eliminativist interpretation, Jim Stone.

Stone thinks we should come right out and say that there are no people, and he thinks that the Buddha agrees with him.¹² This view proposes a significant revision of our speech practices. Stone provides several complex arguments for his view, but his basic case is relatively simple. He argues that if any form of Reductionism is true, then persons do not have the kind of moral significance that they are ordinarily regarded as having. Following Locke, he further claims that the concept of a person is intrinsically normative: “Persons are *essentially* morally interesting. Therefore, if Reductionism is true there are no persons.”¹³ In other words, the concept of a person embodies certain moral assumptions. It is a thick concept of a particular type, like

“unchaste,” “natural slave,” or “bourgeois oppressor.” To describe someone using one of these thick concepts presupposes a certain moral theory that might be controversial. If we decide that the theory in question is false, we must stop using the concept, or at least modify it significantly. Stone holds, then, that since it is important to get our normative view right, we should explicitly disavow the misleading normative consequences of claiming that there are persons. In the same way, someone might claim, in the appropriate context, that there are no unchaste people, natural slaves, or bourgeois oppressors.

Unfortunately, by espousing Eliminativism, Stone ends up defending, and attributing to the Buddha, a hopeless view. The early Buddhists did not think that their critique was restricted to people only. A faithful interpretation of their position on people has to be able to generalize to chairs and dogs. The Eliminativist position seems in danger of eliminating virtually our entire language. The only possible escape route for Stone requires noting that his case against “person” depends crucially on the assertion that that concept is intrinsically normative. If “chair” and “dog” are not normative in this way, perhaps we can continue to use these words, while ceasing to use the word “person” and its close relatives. When we start with Eliminativism about people, and try to generalize to all composite things, we get two alternative views. One, which I will call General Eliminativism, argues that all words in our language that refer to composite things should be dropped. This view tells us to abandon virtually all the nouns in natural languages. If practically implemented, it would result in chaos. The alternative, Hybrid Eliminativism, tells us to stop talking about people, but to continue using words for other kinds of composite entities. This view is based on the idea that the concept of a person has misleading normative implications that other concepts of composite things lack.

General Eliminativism should have little appeal for anyone. Hybrid Eliminativism, whatever plausibility it might have for modern writers, would have seemed impossible to ancient Indian Buddhists, who, of course, believed in reincarnation. If we hold that, in many instances, the same entity that is now a person has been a dog before, and vice versa, then our philosophical treatment of “person” should be symmetric with our account of “dog.” Buddhists do treat these terms symmetrically, but how they treat them is inconsistent both with Constitutive Reductionism and with Eliminativism: they deny the existence of all sentient beings in the same breath in which they deny the existence of selves or people, but they still constantly use nouns purporting to refer to sentient beings and people, in their stories and examples, when giving practical advice, when addressing particular beings, and so on.

To complicate the picture even further, many Ābhidhārmika texts employ an expression that would seem to suggest some sympathy with Eliminativism. They frequently replace the term “person” with the alternative term “stream” (or “series”; either English meaning could be expressed by the two Sanskrit terms *“santati”* and *“santāna”*). This move might be seen as analogous to replacing the term “caloric” with the term “heat.” There is no stuff called caloric, but equally, if we think about it, there is no stuff called heat. The reality of the matter is the mean kinetic energy of tiny particles. The term “heat” is to be preferred because it allows us to make a break

with the idea that there is any such stuff, even while appearing to assert that there is. Similarly, one might say, “*santati*” appears to refer to a persisting substance, but is used precisely in order to disavow this apparent presupposition. If Buddhists were Constitutive Reductionists, they would have no need to introduce terms such as “*santati*”; if they were Eliminativists, they would use such terms all the time, and never mention people or animals. Neither view explains what they actually say.

Neither Constitutive Reductionism nor Eliminativism is able to explain what we find in Buddhist texts, because neither incorporates an appropriate understanding of the distinction between conventional truth (*samvṛttisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). One writer who understands the crucial relevance of this distinction to our discussion is Mark Siderits. *Pace* Perrett, Siderits’ interpretation is neither a version of Constitutive Reductionism nor a version of Eliminativism; I will refer to it as “Eliminative Reductionism.” Siderits’ account correctly represents many aspects of the position of at least some Buddhist texts, and the interpretation of these texts that I will offer is a variety of Eliminative Reductionism. However, the interpretation that I favor clarifies certain aspects on which Siderits is silent.

Siderits, like Parfit, believes that “we could give a *complete* description of reality *without* claiming that persons exist.”¹⁴ Although Parfit uses this complete-description test to defend Constitutive Reductionism, the test could also be used to attack Parfit’s position. Siderits holds that entities that meet the conditions of the complete-description test “are thereby shown to be ontologically superfluous, and thus have no place in our ultimate ontology.”¹⁵ There may be some space to wonder whether the entities in our ultimate ontology might be a mere subset of the entities that exist. But when Siderits says “ultimately there are no persons,”¹⁶ he evidently means that when we are taking our discourse fully ontologically seriously, and are free from delusions and misleading fictions, we will realize that there are, *simpliciter*, no persons. Siderits thus wants to eliminate a metaphysically serious ontological commitment to persons; hence the term Eliminative Reductionist.

For practical purposes, though, Siderits thinks it is highly useful to talk as if there were people. He appeals to the distinction, found in many Buddhist texts, between ultimate truth and conventional truth.¹⁷ Although in ultimate truth there are no people, Siderits claims, the pragmatic utility of talking as if there were people makes it the case that asserting the existence of people is asserting a conventional truth. Thus, according to Siderits, being conventionally true is a way of being false.

Siderits is not alone in claiming that there are no people but that it is convenient to talk as if there were. Giles also advocates this Eliminative Reductionist view, and he attributes a version of this view to the Pāli Canon.¹⁸ An appearance of disagreement between these thinkers is created by the fact that Giles calls their common view Eliminativism, whereas Siderits calls it Reductionism. Meanwhile, Perrett, who thinks there are people, cites Siderits, who does not, regarding him as a fellow defender of “Reductionism.” Evidently, the labels scholars use to describe their positions have led to considerable confusion.

To see how Siderits interprets the notion of conventional truth, we must understand in precisely what sense he thinks it is useful to use such words as “person.”

Like Parfit, Siderits argues that “persons would not have the sort of rational and moral significance ordinarily ascribed to them unless they were themselves ultimately real entities.”¹⁹ Since Siderits does not believe in people, he holds that some of our attitudes toward what we take to be people are unjustified. But he also thinks that there can be a consequentialist justification for having “such anticipatory attitudes as dread and such retrospective attitudes as regret” even though these “cannot rationally be justified at the ultimate level of truth.”²⁰ Just as a certain degree of civic pride might help reduce crime and keep a city’s streets clean, even though there really are no cities, in the same way, a disposition on the part of people to be especially concerned about their own future pleasures and pains might have overall beneficial consequences, even though there really are no people.

Although the perspective of self-interested prudence may be superior, in many respects, to a hedonistic concern for the pleasure of the next few minutes, it does not represent the highest possible human state; as Siderits explains, “the utility of the me-construction can be improved upon.”²¹ According to the Buddhist tradition, recognizing the nonexistence of persons is supposed to transform one’s motivational structure. Those who have fully realized no-self will no longer invest their energies in worldly pursuits and close personal relations. In fact, “liberation from the cycle of rebirth is said to result from the realization that there is no self.”²² Those who have been fully liberated do not continue to act in any way that is recognizably the promotion of their own self-interest.

As Siderits and others have recently emphasized, there is a philosophical connection between the metaphysical doctrine of no-self and the ethical perspective of universalist consequentialism that seems to be at work in much of Buddhist ethics. This connection is found most explicitly in the work of Śāntideva, the great eighth-century Mādhyamika. Śāntideva’s strategy for justifying Buddhist ethics involves arguing that if persons do not ultimately exist then all manifestations of suffering have the same kind of significance. Therefore, I have as much reason to eliminate the suffering of others as I do to eliminate my own suffering. Any bias in my own favor is ultimately unjustifiable.²³ The ethical theory that results from this kind of approach would have to be a close relative of Western utilitarianism, or, more generally, universalist consequentialism.

Śāntideva’s strategy, if it worked, would make the no-self doctrine a view of great ethical interest and importance. It is, however, open to a serious objection that has recently been raised by Roy Perrett. Suppose we assume, first, that whatever is reducible to a more basic level of reality has no intrinsic value, and that whatever moral significance it has is dependent on that of the more basic level. And suppose we assume, second, that mental states are reducible to physical states. It would seem to follow, then, either that such states as suffering have no moral significance or that their significance is derived from that of certain physical states. But this claim seems to get the situation just backwards. The position or momentum of elementary particles, the strength of electromagnetic fields, and similar physical states would seem to have no intrinsic value, and if they do, we are inclined to say that their value is dependent on their relationship to mental states such as suffering.

For many philosophers this argument would serve to discredit the first premise, but Buddhists could avoid that consequence by discarding the second premise. For thinkers such as Vasubandhu, mental states are not reducible to physical states and do not even supervene on them.²⁴ Mental *dharmas* are entities with real, and not merely nominal, existence; they form a separate category of ontologically basic components of the world, in addition to the physical *dharmas*. Now, in contemporary philosophical discussions, we may not wish to follow Vasubandhu in rejecting the supervenience of the mental on the physical. But even if we are prepared to accept supervenience, we probably should not be willing to accept reducibility. There are non-reductionist views about the relationship of the mental and the physical that accept supervenience. Reductionism about persons might go most naturally with non-reductionism about mental states—and a defender of these two views can hold the normative position that mental states are what matter.²⁵ So, despite Perrett's objection, Reductionism can have the kind of ethical implications that Siderits takes it to have.

Siderits has contributed greatly to our understanding of Buddhist Reductionism, perhaps most importantly by emphasizing the importance and relevance of the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. Several of his crucial claims about the distinction, moreover, seem to me to be correct. Like Siderits, I interpret thinkers such as Vasubandhu as holding that ultimate truth is just truth *simpliciter*, and real existence is just existence. By contrast, conventionally "true" statements are, in fact, false, and nominally "existent" entities do not, in fact, exist. And Siderits has offered an explanation of why conventional truth is important that has some plausibility. However, Siderits' account of the value of conventional truth is open to an objection that has been advanced by Williams, who writes:

The point of the construction of persons is to maximize overall utility. But according to Siderits' own model, the construction of persons does not maximize overall utility. That is why with Śāntideva we need to adopt the impersonal model and practices of the bodhisattva. Thus, the construction of persons fails in its point, and indeed, it is going in quite the wrong direction. But why, then, did it ever take place?²⁶

If the role of conventional truth is only to make possible the adherence to principles of prudence, Williams' question will not be so easy to answer.

Recall that, as we have already seen, Vasubandhu is perfectly prepared to deny the existence of people, sentient beings, and so on. He considers these denials to be the ultimate truth, but he also agrees that, at the level of conventional truth, people do exist. Therefore, it seems, conventional truth must be a kind of falsehood. Moreover, things that exist only within conventional truth are called *prajñaptisat*, "nominally existent." Now if someone argues that, say, Pegasus exists only as a term, or only as a concept—the two literal readings of this Sanskrit term—it would seem most natural to interpret that claim as an indirect, and perhaps clumsy, way of saying that Pegasus does not exist at all, but some people talk as if he did.²⁷ This interpretation has been adopted by some scholars; for example, Bronkhorst seems to hold it, as does De Jong.²⁸

Williams' question can, then, be put in something like the following form: If nominally existent entities do not exist, why say that they do? If conventional "truths" are false, why assert them? Put another way, if conventional truth isn't a kind of truth in the straightforward, literal sense, what kind of truth is it? Siderits' answer to this question may not be fully satisfactory; perhaps we need another answer.

To begin to develop such an answer, let us consider a passage from the *Vibhāṣā*. The *Vibhāṣā* was the single most important textual authority for Sarvāstivādins and a major influence on the *Treasury of Metaphysics*. In the French translation of de la Vallée Poussin, the passage in question reads: "pour les 'choses agglomérées' elles s'appuient sur les entités réelles: c'est par métaphore qu'on leur attribue l'existence; tantôt elles existent, tantôt n'existent pas." In English we might render this: "as for 'composite things,' they depend on real things: it is only by metaphor that they are said to exist; sometimes they exist, sometimes they do not exist."

This passage strongly suggests that the Vaibhāṣikas regarded conventionally true language as nonliteral, as embodying some sort of pretense or metaphor. Unfortunately, since the *Vibhāṣā* is lost in Sanskrit, we must rely on its Chinese translation, and the Chinese word *jia*, translated as "metaphor," might also mean "misleading appearance."²⁹ Thus, the passage might mean that foolish ordinary people, misled by a false semblance, incorrectly attribute existence to composite things. But there are also passages in the *Treasury of Metaphysics* itself that can naturally be interpreted as endorsing a view based on metaphor.

One of these occurs in chapter 3 as part of one of the several discussions in the *Treasury* whose purpose is to reject the real existence of a self or soul.³⁰ Vasubandhu first explains how reincarnation does not require the existence of a self. The question is then raised, "Now, what kind of self don't you reject?" Vasubandhu's reply is: "If the term 'self' is metaphorically applied (*upacaryate*) to the aggregates alone, we do not reject that." As is well known, the verb used here (*upa-√car*) refers to the nonliteral application of a term. Another, similar passage occurs in chapter 9, in which Vasubandhu's opponent argues: "The person is not the aggregates, [which are many,] because it says in a Scripture, 'One person arises in the world.'" Vasubandhu's reply is: "No. This is a metaphorical expression, designating a collection, like the terms 'one sesame seed,' 'one grain of rice,' 'one heap,' 'one word.'" It seems, then, that someone who understands that what we consider to be a single, unitary self is, in reality, only the many aggregates can nevertheless appropriately use the term "self" metaphorically.

The Vaibhāṣikas seem to have thought, then, that conventional truth is an instance of the nonliteral use of language. Their view, thus, need not be Eliminativist, since it is perfectly legitimate to use figurative language for various purposes without believing it to be true. Moreover, their view need not be a form of Constitutive Reductionism, since they thought that, speaking literally, there are no people; only when we speak metaphorically should we say that there are people. The Vaibhāṣikas' view clearly shares many features with Siderits' Eliminative Reductionism, such as a reliance on the notion of conventional truth. We might say, then, that

the Vaibhāṣika position was a version of Eliminative Reductionism that was articulated in terms of a concept of metaphor. Having established this, we could go on to try to develop the view of the historical Vaibhāṣikas in more detail. The main obstacle to doing so would be that, so far as I am aware, the school lacked a sophisticated theory of nonliteral language.³¹ So, after we say that conventional truth is nonliteral, we would be hard pressed to fill in the details of just what that comes to.

Rather than proceed with this historical task, I want to attempt a more substantive one. By drawing on the work of Kendall Walton on fiction, metaphor, and pretense, including his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe*³² and his essay “Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe,”³³ we can expand the suggestions in the texts into a full-fledged theory of conventional truth, which combines ideas from historical sources and from contemporary analytic philosophy and offers a Buddhist perspective on contemporary discussions of selves and persons. In view of its historical inspiration, I propose to call this theory “Vaibhāṣika Metaphoricalism.” This view may or may not be correct, but it deals with certain problems in metaphysics in a way that has rarely been considered by Western philosophers, and it has several philosophical advantages. Considered as an attempt to eliminate the ontological commitment to composite physical objects, this theory is a relative of the metaphoricalist accounts of numbers and possible worlds developed by Steve Yablo.³⁴

A metaphoricalist account of the status of a certain class of problematic entities starts from the observation that people frequently talk as if there were such entities. They do so, at least in part, because (apparent) reference to such entities is useful: it allows them to say things concisely and conveniently that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to convey. The metaphoricalist proceeds to note that the usefulness of talk about the problematic entities does not depend on their existence. Even if they did not exist, we would still have pragmatic reasons to pretend that they existed and to talk about them within that pretense. Thus, for instance, Walton gives an account of statements such as “Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral” that does not require the real existence of fictional characters.³⁵ According to Walton, concise sentences that appear to presuppose the existence of fictional characters have the same meaning as claims that have no such presupposition but are complex and difficult to state. It makes sense, then, that we would pretend that there are fictional characters even though we know perfectly well that there are none.

These modern metaphoricalist accounts differ in one important respect from the view I would like to propose. According to Walton, ordinary people, including those who have not read *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, know, in some sense, that there are no fictional characters. The pretense account of the meaning of statements that seem to be about fictional characters applies to all the speakers of the language. In fact, in Walton’s view, even philosophers who claim to believe that fictional characters are really existing entities are also engaging in pretense when they seem to be referring to fictional characters. This view may be defensible. The meaning of our utterances is public and has some independence from our philosophical views. Moreover, as Walton repeatedly points out, we can imagine or pretend things to be true that we simultaneously believe to be true.³⁶ So, for example, if I am imagining what my life

would be like if I won millions of dollars in a lottery, one of the things that is true in my imaginary life, and therefore one of the things I am imagining might be that I have two hands. Therefore, it might be true that even philosophers who think that “Tom Sawyer” names a real entity are actually engaged in pretense when they utter sentences such as “Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral.”

No analogous claim forms part of the views of the historical Vaibhāṣikas. It is a common theme in the Abhidharma, and indeed throughout Buddhism, that ordinary people are deceived about the nature of reality. They believe that composite things exist; but there are no composite things, and so they are mistaken. In particular, ordinary people believe that they themselves exist. In ultimate reality, however, there are no ordinary people—just lots of momentary, simple physical entities called *dhar-mas*, associated with which are mental *dhar-mas*, including beliefs such as “I exist.” When these beliefs find expression through bodily and vocal action, no pretense is going on. What is going on instead is delusion, and this delusion plays a crucial role in causing the misery that pervades cyclic existence.

The account that the Abhidharma offers of most apparent reference to composite things is, then, not a form of metaphoricalism, but an error theory. Why, then, did the Vaibhāṣikas introduce the notion of nonliteral discourse at all? They did so because even beings whom they considered to be enlightened, most notably the historical Buddha, often made apparent reference to composite things. Since the Pāli Canon represents the historical Buddha as also denying the existence of any such composite things, he must have been speaking nonliterally when he appeared to refer to them.

Why would the Buddha make such dangerously misleading statements? According to the Abhidharma texts, he did so in order to make his doctrine more comprehensible to ignorant and unenlightened beings. If we introduce Walton’s theory of metaphor into this context, we can offer another reason. Talk that is apparently about composite things can be expressively useful. That is, it can allow us to say things simply and clearly that would otherwise take a great deal of time and effort. Walton’s example is “Crotone is on the heel of the Italian boot.” There may have been many important teachings that would have been difficult, or even impossible, for the Buddha to convey to his students without making apparent reference to composite things.

So, according to Vaibhāṣika metaphoricalism, what exactly is conventional truth? It is fictional truth within a game of make-believe played by enlightened beings. In a make-believe game for children, the players might pretend that tree stumps are bears. Then, if there are three stumps, it becomes appropriate to pretend that there are three bears. Now, the game I have in mind involves pretending that various very general propositions about the existence and nature of composite things are true. Many of these propositions can be found in works of philosophy such as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and Wiggins’ *Sameness and Substance*.³⁷ If we pretend that they are true, then the regularities in the appearance and disappearance of momentary simples often make it appropriate to pretend that there are composite material substances. When the game makes it appropriate to pretend that a statement is

true, then that statement is conventionally true. But if the game makes it appropriate to pretend that a statement is false, then that statement is conventionally false.

According to Vaibhāṣika metaphoricalism, much of our ordinary discourse is both metaphysically and normatively misleading. Nevertheless, it is useful in practice, and therefore it makes sense to pretend that it is true. But what explains the fact that it is useful? Shortly I will try to specify a sense in which conventionally true claims can be said to be approximately true.

In precisely what sense is discourse about, say, people, or ships, an approximation? I must first explain what it might be said to approximate. Consider again the Buddhist term “series” (*santati/santāna*). The series is not a really existing entity, since it is composite. By using the term “series,” a philosopher can conveniently designate many real *dharmas* existing in the past, present, and future, while disavowing any commitment to a substantive self or person.

This suggests that one might understand the notion of a series as a kind of abbreviation. Let us assume that tiny, momentary patches of color are really existing entities. Suppose that whenever a red color patch occurs next to a blue color patch, I decide to designate the result by the expression “rue.” So long as I do not reify the occurrence of rue, but understand that whenever it occurs it refers not to one entity but to two underlying real entities, no Buddhist could object to my use of the word “rue.” It is just a convenient abbreviation and, if understood as intended, carries no ontological implications. Perhaps the word “series” is similar.

Now, of course, we might ask whether the term “series,” if understood simply as an abbreviation, can possibly have the role in sentences that the word “person” could. More generally, if we were to suppose that terms for composite substances that are in use in everyday speech, such as “table” and “chair,” were abbreviations of this kind, a pressing question would arise about whether this conception of their semantics could do justice to the use we make of them. This issue has been carefully examined by the analytic philosopher Peter van Inwagen.³⁸ Rather than reducing tables and chairs to *dharmas*, he wishes to reduce them to atoms, but the logical requirements of the two positions are essentially the same. Using a technical device known as plural quantification, van Inwagen has shown that the content of even complex sentences such as “some chairs are heavier than some tables” can be stated while referring only to atoms, thus making it possible to understand the terms “chair” and “table” as convenient designations that ultimately refer only to atoms.³⁹ The paraphrase reads like this:

(VP) There are *x*s that are arranged chairwise and there are *y*s that are arranged tablewise and the *x*s are heavier than the *y*s.⁴⁰

Here it does not matter whether the *x*s are atoms, *dharmas*, or some other kind of simple entities; the strategy will be equally plausible in each case. I believe, however, that the illuminating strategy van Inwagen proposes, despite its technical ingenuity, is not fully successful in its own terms.

To explain this point, we must appeal to a series of philosophical examples that were not used by Buddhist thinkers but are very prominent in contemporary discus-

sions of reductionism. I refer to sorites cases such as Parfit's Combined Spectrum,⁴¹ various thought-experiments involving teletransportation, and fission cases such as the Ship of Theseus and Parfit's My Division.⁴² In these cases, our ordinary concepts break down. Every attempt we make to use substance concepts such as "person" or "ship" to describe such cases is unsuccessful, because we are forced to contradict one or more built-in features of these concepts in the process of constructing the description.⁴³ That is why these cases call into serious question the real existence of substances answering to such everyday concepts.

For definiteness, let us consider, in particular, the notorious story of the Ship of Theseus. In this story, the Greek hero Theseus travels between the sites of his adventures in a wooden ship. Gradually, the planks and other parts of this ship become old and worn. As this happens, Theseus replaces the planks with new ones. But meanwhile, a fanatical Theseus enthusiast follows his hero everywhere and collects the planks. At the end of twenty years, every part of the original ship of Theseus has been replaced with new materials. And every one of these parts has been collected by the Theseus fan, who reassembles them to make a ship. So which of the two ships is the same ship as the original Ship of Theseus?

Let me summarize why no description of this case that employs substance concepts can be successful. We cannot say that only the Theseus enthusiast has the real ship, because the hero has a ship that, by ordinary standards, is the same as the original one. We cannot say that the hero has the original ship, for a symmetrical reason. We cannot say that both the enthusiast and the hero have the real ship, for by the end of the story, they clearly have two ships; by the transitivity of identity, if each of the two is identical with the original ship, the two are one. We cannot say, with David Lewis, that there were two ships to begin with, for then the number of ships present in a given situation would not be supervenient on the local distribution of material form.⁴⁴ And various other ingenious solutions proposed by analytic philosophers all have similar defects: every one of them runs afoul of one or more features of our ordinary concept of a ship.

With respect to van Inwagen's strategy, what can be shown by appeal to examples such as these is that his paraphrases either cannot fully capture the content of our ordinary substance concepts or else, by capturing it, will become infected with its incoherence. Suppose we want to say that Theseus' ship is heavier than a certain chair. Our paraphrase will have to include the claim "There are some *x*s arranged shipwise." But which *x*s? In a case such as the Ship of Theseus, in which we cannot even say how many ships there are at any given time, we are unable to provide any definite identification of the *x*s that make up his ship while remaining consistent with our ordinary concept of a ship. Here, nothing that we can say will be consistent.

Paul Williams sees that a Reductionist will be unable to give a consistent paraphrase of an ordinary description of a fission case and tries to use the fact as an argument against Reductionism.⁴⁵ In this context, Reductionism's failure precisely is its success. The incoherence lies not in the Reductionist view but in the everyday concepts of which the Reductionist is unable to give a finally coherent account. For this reason, contemporary Reductionists such as Parfit make heavy use of fission cases to

undermine the belief that substances subject to such cases, such as people, should feature in our ultimate ontology. Specifically, an Eliminative Reductionist would claim that since it is impossible to give a successful explanation of a case such as the Ship of Theseus as long as we assume the ordinary concept of ships, then ultimately ships must not exist. So long as we regard the only ultimately true claims as the ones that can be formulated in terms of *dharmas* and do not try to model substance concepts, problems such as the Ship of Theseus can never arise for us.

I have concluded that although van Inwagen has given us a method of understanding ordinary substance terms as abbreviations for statements about *dharmas*, the method breaks down in certain cases. But these cases are rare and special. They do not commonly occur in everyday life. In this way, ordinary substance discourse is similar to Newtonian physics: it works extremely well for most practical purposes, and the cases in which it breaks down are, from the standpoint of ordinary life, rare and special. In other words, if we take the system of conventionally true statements and use van Inwagen's plural quantification strategy to express them in terms of *dharmas*, we get a theory that is approximately true. And that fact explains why conventional truth is so useful.

If I am right that conventionally true claims can be understood as approximately true, then the following example can serve as an illustration of conventional truth. Some physicists are attempting to understand the behavior of the game of billiards. Since modeling the interactions of real billiard balls, with all their complex irregularities, would be hopelessly difficult, the physicists make the simplifying assumptions that the billiard balls are perfectly spherical, infinitely hard, and homogeneous throughout. By doing so, they are able to set up and solve the equations that describe what the billiard balls will do. Over time, perhaps over several generations, these physicists forget that their assumptions were mere approximations. The term "billiard ball" in their language comes to *mean* "one of those perfectly spherical, infinitely hard, homogeneous things that rolls around on the table." These assumptions become so central to their concept of a billiard ball that when someone comes into the room with a hammer and proves that the things on their table are not infinitely hard, they become distressed and don't know how to describe the situation any more. According to the view I am describing, most of us are similar (at least in some respects) to the deluded physicists in this example.

I have stated that Vaibhāṣika Metaphoricalism is a version of Siderits' theory, Eliminative Reductionism, and that the two positions have much in common. Let me summarize the differences that have emerged, beyond the straightforward fact that my view employs a notion of nonliteral discourse. First, Vaibhāṣika Metaphoricalism can give an explanation of why conventionally true statements are useful. In a recent exchange between Siderits and Williams, in which Siderits alludes to the convenience of the practice of making conventionally true statements, Williams replies: "It is certainly convenient—indeed, so convenient that I suggest that persons are already given, and were they not there would be no societies at all."⁴⁶ If we can make out the claim that conventional truth is a form of approximate truth, we can explain this convenience without appealing to the real existence of persons. Second,

although both views explain the prevalence of conventional truth in terms of usefulness, they offer somewhat different explanations of how conventional truth is useful. For Siderits, its utility consists primarily in allowing us to exhibit prudence. But according to the view I have proposed, it also has representational value: like such metaphors as “Crotona is on the heel of the Italian boot,” it allows us to say, quickly and conveniently, things we would otherwise be hard pressed to say at all.

According to the Buddhist texts I am trying to interpret, such as the *Treasury of Metaphysics* of Vasubandhu, what we see and touch is real, because sensible qualities are real. The basic entities that make up the physical world are also real. But composite, persisting material substances are not real, and neither are human persons. They are the conceptual overlay that our mental processes superimpose on the vast swarm of momentary, simple entities that genuinely are real. This conceptual oversimplification gives rise to a form of discourse that includes words for enduring substances. Without making use of the expressive resources provided by this discourse, we would be unable to deal with pressing practical matters. But so long as we take our words and conceptions fully ontologically seriously, we will be blind to the true nature of the real world. We will also be blind to our true moral obligation: to the pure, universal compassion that sees the suffering of others as equal to our own, and is the strangest, and perhaps the noblest, part of the Buddhist worldview. This compassion may be the most important consequence of the striking metaphysical thesis known as the Buddhist doctrine of no-self.

Notes

- 1 – Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya*, ed. Swami Dvārikādās Śāstrī (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1970). This text has been translated into French by Louis de la Vallée Poussin; his French translation was itself translated into English by Leo M. Pruden as Vasubandhu, *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣyam* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1988).
- 2 – Mark Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionism,” *Philosophy East and West* 47 (4) (October 1997): 455–478, at p. 455.
- 3 – Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 223; quoted in Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionism,” p. 459.
- 4 – James Duerlinger, “Reductionist and Nonreductionist Theories of Persons in Indian Buddhist Philosophy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21 (1997): 79–101, at p. 85.
- 5 – Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya*, chap. 9 passim.
- 6 – Paul Williams, “On the Abhidharma Ontology,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9 (1981): 227–257. Williams has reiterated this position in several publications. See his “Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8 (1980): 1–45, at p. 1. See also his “On the Inter-

- pretation of Madhyamaka Thought," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 19 (1991): 191–218, at p. 206.
- 7 – Roy Perrett, "Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka," *Philosophy East and West* 52 (3) (July 2002): 373–385, at p. 377.
- 8 – Vasubandhu, *Treasury of Metaphysics* II.46b.
- 9 – Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya*, chap. 9; my translation.
- 10 – *Ibid.*; my translation.
- 11 – The quote comes originally from Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, trans. Ñānamoli (Colombo: R. Semage, 1956), p. 689.
- 12 – Jim Stone, "Parfit and the Buddha: Why There Are No People," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48 (1988): 519–532, at p. 532.
- 13 – *Ibid.*, p. 530.
- 14 – Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 212. Or, at least, he advocates this view in Siderits, "Buddhist Reductionism." In more recent work, he has made clear his belief that the Buddhist Reductionist position is open to serious objections from the Mādhyamikas. Thus, although he often writes as a defender of Buddhist Reductionism, Siderits' final view seems to be a version of Madhyamaka. See Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 113–138.
- 15 – Siderits, "Buddhist Reductionism," p. 456.
- 16 – *Ibid.*, p. 465.
- 17 – *Ibid.*, p. 464.
- 18 – James Giles, "The No-Self Theory: Hume, Buddhism, and Personal Identity," *Philosophy East and West* 43 (2) (April 1993): 175–200, at p. 175.
- 19 – Siderits, "Buddhist Reductionism," p. 466.
- 20 – *Ibid.*, p. 468.
- 21 – Mark Siderits, "The Reality of Altruism: Reconstructing Śāntideva," *Philosophy East and West* 50 (3) (July 2000): 412–424.
- 22 – Siderits, "Buddhist Reductionism," p. 466.
- 23 – His defense of this position is found in chap. 8 of Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 24 – See Charles Goodman, "The *Treasury of Metaphysics* and the Physical World," *Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (July 2004): 389–401, at p. 216.
- 25 – The Vātsīputrīya position that Vasubandhu criticizes in chap. 9 of the *Treasury* has some features in common with a theory of non-reductive supervenience.

Thus, Vasubandhu has certain arguments that could be deployed against a view of the mental that has this kind of structure. But Vasubandhu's own theory of the relation between the great elements (*mahābhūtas*) and derived form (*upādāya-rūpa*) also has several features in common with a Western theory of non-reductive supervenience. I explain this in more detail in Goodman, "The *Treasury of Metaphysics* and the Physical World."

- 26 – Paul Williams, "Response to Mark Siderits' Review [of *Altruism and Reality*]," *Philosophy East and West* 50 (3) (July 2000): 424–453, at p. 437.
- 27 – This is explained quite lucidly in Willard van Orman Quine, "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- 28 – Johannes Bronkhorst, "Quelques axiomes du Vaiśeṣika," *Les Cahiers de Philosophie* 14 : 95–110. See also J. W. De Jong, "The Problem of the Absolute in the Madhyamaka School," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 2 (1972): 1–6, at p. 1.
- 29 – I am indebted to Louis Gómez for pointing this out to me.
- 30 – Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya* III.17.
- 31 – Of course, Indian philosophy and literary theory did contain highly sophisticated discussions of nonliteral language; but it would be difficult to associate any particular such discussion with the Vaibhāṣika school, and the school's own texts, although they use the concept, do not (so far as I know) attempt to analyze it further.
- 32 – Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- 33 – Kendall Walton, "Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe," *European Journal of Philosophy* 1 (1): 39–56.
- 34 – For possible worlds, see his "How in the World?" *Philosophical Topics* 24 (1) (Spring 1996): 255–286. For numbers, see "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?" *Aristotelian Society*, 1998, supp. 72, pp. 229–261.
- 35 – Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, pp. 396–405.
- 36 – *Ibid.*, p. 13, for example.
- 37 – Aristotle *Metaphysics*, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 689–934; David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
- 38 – In Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). Note that although van Inwagen rejects the real existence of tables and chairs, he does believe in the real, ultimate existence of people and other living things.
- 39 – *Ibid.*, p. 109.

40 – Ibid.

41 – Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 236–244.

42 – Ibid., pp. 254–255.

43 – For an introduction to the general form that the problems take, see Parfit's chapter "Why There Is No Criterion of Identity that Can Meet Two Plausible Requirements," in Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 266–272.

44 – David Lewis, "Survival and Identity," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 17–40.

45 – For example, see Williams, "Response to Mark Siderits' Review," p. 439.

46 – Ibid., p. 432.