



## Engaging with Buddhism

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### Abstract

In his new book, Jay Garfield invites philosophers of all persuasions to engage with Buddhist philosophy. In part I of this paper, I raise some questions on behalf of the philosopher working in the analytic tradition about the way in which Buddhist philosophy understands itself. I then turn, in part II, to look at what Orthodox Buddhism has to say about the self. I examine the debate between the Buddhist position discussed and endorsed by Garfield and that of a lesser-known school that he mentions only briefly, the Pudgalavāda (“Personalists”). I suggest that the views of the Pudgalavādins are strikingly similar to a position held, in the twentieth century analytic philosophy, by Peter Strawson.

**Keywords** The self · Persons · Peter Strawson · Pudgalavādins · Karma

### On the Very Idea of Engaging with Buddhism

The question of how (contemporary) philosophy engages with that which is outside its immediate orbit is an extremely important one. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there was much discussion among analytic philosophers concerning the way in which contemporary philosophy engages with its (own) history. Richard Rorty, John Schneewind, and Quinton Skinner published a volume of papers devoted to this question entitled *Philosophy in History*.<sup>1</sup> In their introduction, the

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<sup>1</sup>R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

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authors compare and contrast a book that they invent and call *An Intellectual History of Europe* with another that they call *A History of Western Philosophy*. The former records as best as can be what was said in the past while the latter attempts to engage with the past as a way of enriching our understanding in philosophy today. The authors argue in defense of the latter volume—*A History of Western Philosophy*—and they insist that what the historian of philosophy should do is ‘help the dead philosopher put his act together for a new audience.’<sup>2</sup> The authors quote approvingly a line from Gadamer (which is in turn borrowed from the poet Hölderlin) that we enter the ‘conversation that we ourselves are,’ suggesting that this conversation takes place not just with those around us today, but those who have gone before us—‘the mighty dead.’ The authors accuse analytic philosophy in particular for turning its back on any such conversation, and they suggest that this attitude is inherited from the positivists, who were of the view that the only fitting conversational partners for philosophers were scientists. A scientist is interested in her discipline’s history merely as something to be studied, as something in the past. The orientation of science is forward looking (not backward looking) and (in the words of Bernard Williams) vindictory.<sup>3</sup>

In his book, *Engaging Buddhism*, Jay Garfield takes things a step further.<sup>4</sup> Jay writes this book in the hopes of opening out the conversation.<sup>5</sup> Much as Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner identify analytic philosophy as aloof and hubristic, Jay lays these charges at the door of Western philosophy as a whole. ‘The conversation that we ourselves are’ should, as Jay sees it, be a conversation without borders or cultural boundaries. He believes that philosophy must engage not only with its own history but also with an extended history ‘beyond Europe and its diaspora’ (321). In terms of the debate set out by Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner, Jay would see his book as a *History of Philosophy*—with the word *Western* excised.

Jay explains that in writing this book, he is interested in ‘building bridges.’<sup>6</sup> In a manner reminiscent of Gadamerian conversation, he sees his project as one of putting distinct traditions into dialog with one another and of recognizing a commonality of purpose.<sup>7</sup> I would add that we learn from engagement with philosophical texts from distant cultures in part because these texts throw light on what might be considered necessary and what a product of our contingent arrangements.<sup>8</sup> It should be clear that for Jay, building philosophical bridges is not just a matter of writing an *Intellectual History of Buddhism*.

<sup>2</sup> As philosophers, we do not want only to understand why something was thought or done in the past, but we want to know whether this has anything interesting to tell us, whether it helps to answer our concerns.

<sup>3</sup> See B. Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” in A.W. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). All parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.

<sup>5</sup> He aims to invite Western philosophers to engage with philosophy wherever it may be found, be that India or Africa or some other place (or with some other group, such as Native Americans).

<sup>6</sup> Jay prefers this metaphor to that of merging streams, the metaphor used by Mark Siderits and which suggests a fusion of different philosophical traditions. Jay also distances himself from the project, attributable to the late nineteenth century Indian philosopher Brajendranath Seal, of comparative philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> He writes (in connection with the work of Nāgārjuna): ‘if it did not have this contemporary relevance, there would be no philosophical reason to engage with his corpus’ (328).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner. Cf. also what Jay writes in his discussion of the self where he champions the ‘hermeneutic power’ of engaging with philosophy cross-culturally. He points out that this exercise helps us to ‘foreground and...interrogate’ prejudices that arise from uncritical acceptance of ideas ‘whose religious and cultural origins are unacknowledged’ (p. 97).

As the task is to enter into dialog, we may begin by asking who is the ‘we’ that is doing the engaging here. To his credit, Jay moves comfortably between analytic philosophy and philosophy from the phenomenological tradition. But this is not the case for all philosophers in the West. We do not have to go as far as Buddhism to find deep differences among the practitioners of philosophy. I fear there are further bridges to be built and conversations to be engaged in just within the philosophy of the West.

We may also ask how we are to identify our conversational partner. Jay acknowledges that the Buddhist tradition is but one of the many philosophical traditions that come from Asia, and that within Buddhism we find a wide range of diverse views. For the purposes of this book, however, Jay aims to concentrate on the broad picture. One unifying factor is the Buddha himself, as much of Buddhist philosophy is concerned with the correct interpretation of his teaching. A very basic question that is sometimes raised in connection with these teachings is whether we should take them as constituting a philosophy at all or whether they should be viewed as a religion.<sup>9</sup> According to Siderits, if religion is taken to be a commitment for which no reasons can be given, then Buddhism should not be viewed as a religion, as there is an expectation at the heart of Buddhism that all claims be examined and submitted to rational scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, if by religion is meant a set of teachings that address soteriological concerns, then we can think of Buddhism as a religion—a religion with a philosophical dimension, we might say.<sup>11</sup> When we turn to consider how philosophy has developed in the West over the centuries, we find that religion has played only one part—and arguably not a major part—in its development. Even before the appearance of positivism, Western philosophy has had an important relationship to science, and it is in connection with this that I want now to raise some questions about Buddhist philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier, I mentioned that Williams sees science as forward looking and vindicatory, but he does not take this to mean that science has a monopoly on progress. Williams claims that analytic philosophy in particular can be identified as a subject that sustains ongoing cumulative research that can achieve what he calls an ‘objective discussion’ which can be taken to represent intellectual progress.<sup>13</sup> It is in this way that analytic philosophy can be seen to be progressive without being vindicatory. We might pause and ask about the progressive nature of Buddhist philosophy. Jay acknowledges that Buddhism ‘officially denies its own progressive character,’ but he points out that, unofficially as it were, it has developed over time (p. 333). Viewed in this way, Buddhism may be taken to fit with Williams’ vision of Analytic philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Of course, how one draws the line here is itself debatable.

<sup>10</sup> M. Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Great Britain: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007). Siderits tells us that no Buddhist is expected to accept a claim just because it comes from the Buddha (p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> Christianity or Judaism come to mind as not dissimilar.

<sup>12</sup> Western philosophy may be thought to have given birth to much of modern science, and one can read much of philosophy since the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries as attempting to position itself vis-à-vis science. The question I want to raise here is touched on by Bimal Krishna Matilal in the introduction to his book, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that ‘objective discussion’ is not quite the same as agreement.

<sup>14</sup> Others, however, may be more concerned about the official version. Furthermore, as far as Buddhism aims to interpret the teachings of the Buddha, it is a real question just how progressive it is able to be. I am taking progressive to be progressive towards the truth, not towards the correct understanding of a particular teaching (which is in turn taken to be the truth). This worry may be another angle on the question, also discussed by Siderits, whether Buddhism can really be taken to allow for the ‘free exercise of rational enquiry’ given its concern with ‘scripture.’

Williams traces the reason why philosophy can be progressive without being vindicatory back to the fact that philosophy is at its heart, in his view, a humanistic discipline. In this connection, Williams mentions yet another point that may have relevance to our attitude towards Buddhism. Williams notes that science and philosophy express their claims in a different manner. Science is minimally expressive—that is, it is not expressive of feeling or displaying of literary imagination. Philosophy, on the other hand, in so far as it is a humanistic discipline, should eschew the minimally expressive. That said, Williams leaves it open just what form of expression is suitable to philosophy compatible with its progressive nature. It is fair to say that, while it may not be minimally expressive, analytic philosophy has always aspired to clarity and logical rigor. When we turn to Buddhist philosophy, Jay tells us that many texts here are written in ‘highly allusive verse...often antinomian, or at least highly suspicious of the role of reason and language in human cognitive life’ (p. 331f). But Jay also insists that these Buddhist texts can be assessed by the probative force of reason and logic. However, this contrast between the allusive and the logical with the poetical and the narrative may raise questions for some about the suitability of Western philosophy’s engagement with Buddhism.<sup>15</sup>

These considerations lead me to the following question for Jay: it would be interesting to understand just how Buddhist philosophy situates itself with respect to science. In asking this, I do not want to suggest that the West has had a monopoly on scientific development, nor, I trust, am I falling into the trap of spiritualizing the East in contrast to the mechanistic outlook of the West.<sup>16</sup> Rather, I want to raise a meta-philosophical question—a question about the very enterprise of philosophy, and to ask how Buddhist philosophy understands itself.

If we ask how Western philosophy understands itself, we find that this is a matter of some debate. I have already explained the view of Bernard Williams.<sup>17</sup> But many philosophers today would disagree with Williams. Tim Williamson, for example, insists that philosophy is just as concerned about things as they are in the world as is the scientist.<sup>18</sup> Colin McGinn agrees with Williamson, but McGinn concentrates on pointing out the similarity in method here: both science and philosophy, he says, engage in systematic study of the natural world

<sup>15</sup> It should be clear that, although I raise these concerns, I myself should not think they stand in the way of proper engagement here.

<sup>16</sup> I have in mind here Amartya Sen’s observation that the West has a tendency to accentuate the spiritual in Indian thought, and he sees this as part of a Western attitude that involves romanticizing or adopting an exoticist approach towards the East.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Edmund Husserl—hardly an analytic philosopher—might be thought to view philosophy in a way that overlaps somewhat with Williams’. Husserl rejects the idea of philosophy as a rigorous science. For Husserl, philosophy is not to be thought as somehow falling short of the aspirations of science, but should not be thought of as a science at all. Husserl writes: ‘this philosophy believes that it has definitely attained the rank of an exact science. So sure it is of this that it looks down disdainfully on all the other modes of philosophizing. They stand in relation to its exacting scientific philosophizing as the muddy natural philosophy of the Renaissance to the youthful exact mechanics of a Galileo, or like alchemy in relation to the exact chemistry of Lavoisier’ (31–32). What Husserl goes on to point out is that the experimental method misses the fact that it cannot justify its own presuppositions (39–40). E. Husserl, *Philosophy as a Rigorous Discipline*, trans. in Quentin Lauer, S.J. (ed.), (New York: Harper & Row, 1965 [1910].

<sup>18</sup> Philosophy, according to Williamson, is primarily interested in the world and only secondarily interested in the words we use to talk about the world or our ideas of it. Here, Williamson is distancing his view of analytic philosophy from that of analytic philosophy as it was practiced in Oxford in the heyday of Oxford philosophy (while Oxford philosophy continues to flourish, one may consider its ‘heyday’ to have occurred roughly in the middle years of the twentieth century). See T. Williamson, ‘Precis of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*’, *Philosophical Studies*, 2009.

through observation and experiment.<sup>19</sup> Despite their differences, Williamson, McGinn, and Williams all agree in the progressive nature of philosophy and with a striving for an objective discussion that is straightforward, non-obfuscatory, and logically rigorous. It would be interesting to understand better how Buddhist philosophy situates itself in with respect to these issues.

I want to end this section by raising one last question concerning Buddhist philosophy, which may be thought to be connected with the meta-philosophical question just raised. However one thinks about Western philosophy in relation to science, one can think that both science and philosophy have this much in common: both are concerned with issues and problems that can be said to be just there. I believe Bertrand Russell said that this was why he was interested in numbers (because they were there). Interest in exploring these matters has been compared to the urge to scratch an itch (cf. Quine and Wittgenstein). It can be argued that the driver in Western philosophy seems to be fairly diffuse and without particular direction. Things seem otherwise for philosophers in the Buddhist tradition. Jay tells us that first and foremost among the commitments that unify the Buddhist tradition is a commitment to the ubiquity of *dukkha* (suffering) in the world. This is followed by further commitments to the elimination of *dukkha* through an understanding of the true nature of things.<sup>20</sup> Appreciating these commitments is enough for me to raise my final question: how does the framework of soteriological concern affect the way in which Buddhism engages with its philosophical questions? Another way to pose this question is to ask how constraining the soteriological framework is on the Buddhism philosophical enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

In the next section, I will turn to consider a particular philosophical concern and engage with the Buddhist perspective on it. As part of this discussion, I will highlight how Buddhist soteriological concerns may be thought to influence a way of thinking, and contrast it with a way of thinking in Western analytic philosophy.

## Engaging with Buddhism on Issues to Do with the Self

In Chapter 4 Jay introduces some Western positions with respect to the self, and then turns to outline ‘the Buddhist landscape’ here. Among the questions he considers is that of how to account for synchronic unity at a time. Synchronic unity is bound up with such human phenomena as agency, responsibility, rationality, and subjectivity, and one rather natural way of accounting for such phenomena—one attributable to the pre-Buddhist, Brahman philosopher—would be to take seriously the idea that there exists a real, determinate metaphysical self. Buddhist philosophers appear to be united in their rejection of this Brahmanical self.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> C. McGinn, ‘The Science of Philosophy,’ *Metaphilosophy* 46 (1), 2015, p. 84. McGinn quotes, with approval, Galen Strawson who writes that ‘philosophy is one of the great sciences of reality.’

<sup>20</sup> That is, through an understanding of the true nature of existence as impermanent (*anitya*), interdependent (*pratitya-samutpāda*), and having no intrinsic nature (*sūnyā*). These commitments culminate in a proposal of an ethical orientation to the world characterized by *mudītā* (an attitude of rejoicing in the welfare and goodness of others).

<sup>21</sup> I recently came across a similar question in Matilal’s work (*op cit*, ‘Introduction’). Matilal claims that the concern was put to him by Arthur Danto in a private correspondence (see p. 17, footnote, 23).

<sup>22</sup> Jay writes that, on the one hand, ‘subjectivity, agency and rationality are not committee phenomena, but individual phenomena, and individuation requires determinacy,’ while noting that, on the other hand, identity requires individuation and it is ‘hard to see how we are to individuate the self synchronically and informatively’ (p.95f).

This does not mean, however, that there is agreement within the Buddhist tradition about how to account for synchronic unity and the human phenomena associated with it.

As far as bodies may be thought to raise fewer questions than substantial selves, we might ask whether we can get the required individuation here by reference to a particular body. But it is hard to see how bodies alone can do the job. Most Buddhist philosophers do not dispute the inadequacy of body alone in the individuation of selves.

Jay introduces a variety of responses to the problem here by playing them off the position he ultimately favors, one put forward in the sixth century by Candrakīrti—a philosopher of the Madhyamaka School. Here, we find an important role played by the idea of conventional designation. Where certain words (e.g., ‘I’) appear to refer to discrete entities (i.e., selves), we should neither understand this reference to be to a substantial self, nor should we understand the reference to be to any of the five *skandhas* (that is, *piles* of phenomena)—which include material form, feeling, perception, disposition, and consciousness. What we need to understand is that the apparent denotations here are fictional. The *skandhas*, Jay tells us, are causally responsible for the conventions that enable these terms to be used and these conventions constitute the fictions that are the referents of these terms (cf. 108). An analogy is made to the way in which we understand a chariot: in both the cases of the chariot and the self, we have fictional denotation which is to be explained in terms of the elements that give rise to the fiction in accordance with what we find useful. Jay summarizes the Buddhist position he champions as one where ‘conventionally there are persons, but ultimately there are none’ (p. 108). The Buddhist landscape here may be thought to be minimalist, bleak even. I shall refer to Jay’s position as the ‘Buddhist Orthodoxy’. This Orthodoxy does not stand unopposed. Jay introduces us to the opposition of the *Pudgalavāda* school. The *Pudgalavādin* agrees that there is no substantial self, but does not agree that selves or persons are simply useful fictions. Rather, he holds that there is a real continuing person, distinct from the *skandhas* but related to them in a very particular way—a way which was held to be *inexpressible*.<sup>23</sup> Jay tells us that the *Pudgalavādin* position was opposed by Candrakīrti<sup>24</sup> for three reasons: firstly, a self about which so little could be said is hardly explanatory of anything; secondly, such a self is both too intangible and too abstract to serve either as the object of self-grasping or as the foundation of egoism and suffering; thirdly, and most importantly, Candrakīrti argued that the *Pudgalavādins* misunderstand the nature of the supervenience base that is thought to determine personhood. They understand this base narrowly, as comprised of constantly changing psycho-physical aggregates. Candrakīrti argues that we need to consider, in addition to the psycho-physical aggregates, ‘the network of social conventions and dispositions that constitute our common practice of personal discourse’ (110). If we widen our understanding of the supervenience base in this way, we can account for our conventionally useful idea of a person. It is important, says Jay, that the supervenience base is designed to account, not for a real self, but only for a conventional self.

In this section, I want to explore in a bit more detail the *Pudgalavādin* position, as defended by a colleague of Jay, Amber Carpenter, in her paper ‘Persons Keeping Their Karma Together.’<sup>25</sup> What I want to extract from Carpenter’s work is a more detailed

<sup>23</sup> Hence, proponents of this position were sometimes referred to as *Vasiputriya* or *inexpressibilists*.

<sup>24</sup> In his *Introduction to the Middle Way* and *Lucid Exposition*.

<sup>25</sup> A. Carpenter, ‘Persons Keeping Their Karma Together: The Reasons for the Pudgalavāda in Early Buddhism’, in *The Moon Points Back: Analytic Philosophy and Asian Thought*, J. Garfield, G. Priest, and K. Tanaka, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). All parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.

account of the reasons for being dissatisfied with what I am calling the orthodox Buddhist position of *anātman*. And, in the spirit of engagement, I want to point out the ways in which the *Pudgalavādin* position with regard to the self may be thought to bear a notable resemblance to some very important works in Western philosophy by P. F. Strawson.<sup>26</sup>

Carpenter begins her paper by defending the *Pudgalavādin* position as one that puts itself forward, not in opposition to, but as a correct interpretation of, the Buddha's teachings with regards the reality of the self.<sup>27</sup> The *Pudgalavādins* are in agreement with more Orthodox Buddhists in their rejection of the substantial self of the Brahmin eternalists, but part company from this orthodoxy when it comes to the acceptance of the idea of persons as useful conventions. In opposition to this aspect of Orthodox Buddhism, the *Pudgalavādin* insists that persons 'really and ultimately' exist and that there is a difference between that which is substantial and that which is ultimate. It is an ultimate truth that some elements belong to each other and not to other elements. In effect, they hold that the distinction between conventional reality and substantial reality is not exhaustive (p. 10).<sup>28</sup>

In her search to understand what drove the *Pudgalavādin* to look for a truth that could be held to be ultimately real but not substantial, Carpenter asks the question, What is the *pudgala* and what is it for? The reply is that the *pudgala* is a subject, an agent, and a unifier. She tells us that, of these, what was of greatest concern to the *Pudgalavādin* was the idea of unity in multiplicity, and of the attendant questions of individuation (12). According to the Brahmanical philosopher, without a (substantial) self, 'it would be possible for Devadatta to recall what Yajñadatta once experiences'; yet, Devadatta recalls only Devadatta's experiences (p. 14). One response to this, by the Abhidharma metaphysician Vasubandhu, was to point out that it is a simple matter of fact that experiences do not ever take a 'trans-personal' order.<sup>29</sup> The *Pudgalavādin* finds Vasubandhu's response inadequate.<sup>30</sup> Causal connectedness does not suffice to individuate groups of aggregates or causal streams, as causal continua can be observed to overlap and intersect.<sup>31</sup> The *Pudgalavādin* not only reject this radical position but

<sup>26</sup> I say this mindful of the fact that Jonardon Ganeri has recently suggested that Strawson's position should not be thought along the lines of the *Pudgalavādin*. It should be clear that in what follows I am not suggesting that these positions are similar but, rather, that they are driven by similar concerns—and that there is a striking similarity in the argumentation used against their opponents. See J. Ganeri, *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, & the First-Person Stance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> As some have taken the *Pudgalavādins* to be heretics, this defense by Carpenter seems apt. Carpenter suggests that the desire to ex-communicate the *Pudgalavādins* was a result of failure of discipline and not failure of doctrine.

<sup>28</sup> Carpenter suggests that it is because the *Pudgalavādins* operated within a metaphysics that allowed only for a substantial—conventional distinction that they were forced to adopt the language of *inexpressibility*. See Carpenter, 6–11.

<sup>29</sup> N.B. that Vasubandhu can be read as opposing not just to the *Pudgalavādin* but the *Madhyamaka* of Candrakīrti. Carpenter considers, but rejects, the possibility that we can bolster Vasubandhu's response here, as Siderits attempts to do, by appeal to 'maximum causal connectedness'. See Carpenter, p. 15, footnote 58.

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter explains that the *Pudgalavādins* position themselves as neither Brahmanical nor Ābhidharmika (p. 12), but as a middle way between the extreme of the substantialism of the eternalist and the nihilism of the Abhidharma Buddhist. In saying this, Carpenter is mindful of the fact that it is the non-*Pudgalavādin* Buddhists who would claim to present the middle way. See pp. 12–13.

<sup>31</sup> Carpenter notes that "your intention to help may cause innumerable consequences—movements, sounds, feelings, and desires. But only some of these effects will be counted as being in the causal continuum designated 'you'" (p. 14). See Carpenter here for further considerations along these lines.

also reject the view championed by Jay, the idea that we can understand this unity by appeal to the idea of a useful convention; the idea is that certain happenings matter to us more than others do. Carpenter tells us that the *Pudgalavādin* reject this view because they think it leaves us without an answer to the question of *why* we find it useful that things should be arranged in this grouping rather than that, or without an answer to the question of why our convenience is served in one way rather than another.<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely in an attempt to respond to this question that the Orthodox Buddhist will appeal to the analogy of the chariot. We are told: ‘It is because of the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, ... [and the like] that the “chariot” exists as a denotation....’<sup>33</sup> But Carpenter suggests, in defense of the *Pudgalavādin* position, that the reply that works in the case of the chariot will not suffice in the case of the person. It is only useful to group aggregates in a particular way provided that we agree upon the ends for which such a grouping will prove useful. What we must take note of is the fact that ‘such ends ... [arise] only within conceptual reality, and that conventional reality is thus presumed in making judgements of convenience.’ (p. 15) What we are in danger of overlooking is that in the case of persons that conceptual reality already contains persons: King Milinda is able to conceive a desire to see Nāgasena only by presuming himself to be a whole (a self) and Nāgasena as the same person today that he wishes to see tomorrow. We must conclude that in the case of persons a circle lurks: it is convenient to grasp a group of aggregates together as a person given some ends, but these ends are conceivable only by reference to persons.<sup>34</sup> It’s considerations such as this that lead the *Pudgalavādin* to hold that the individuation of causal continua must be presupposed and not projected.

While the *Pudgalavādin* recognize the need for persons, they want to meet this need in a metaphysically minimalist manner. We can do this if we understand that the elements that constitute a particular aggregation have a certain disposition with respect to one another. Carpenter puts the point thus: certain *dharma*s ‘really do belong together’ (20). Here, another analogy is invoked, that of a fire and its fuel. Fires are distinguished by type and are named according to their kind of fuel: thus, we have log fires, grass fires, etc. The fire is identified according to, but is not identified with, its fuel; likewise, we can see that a person is identified according to the aggregates without being identical to them. What we have to appreciate is that there is some fact about the aggregates that makes it the case that certain elements are connected to each other while others are excluded. This is neither a useful way of conceptualizing what is there, nor a commitment to a substantial reality. It is a basic fact about the elements themselves that some of them belong together. Before I say a little more about what this basic fact amounts to, I want to turn to a discussion of these matters in another text—this time one in Analytic philosophy.

The text I have in mind bills itself as an essay in descriptive metaphysics—it is P.F. Strawson’s *Individuals*.<sup>35</sup> Let me read you the first lines of Chapter 3, which is concerned with the metaphysics of persons:

<sup>32</sup> Carpenter interestingly suggests a case when our convenience may not be served by the usual groupings. See pp. 15–16.

<sup>33</sup> See *Milindapanha*,—*Milinda’s Questions*, I.B. Horner (trans.), (Oxford: Pāli Text Society, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the only end that may not be thus dependent upon presuming persons would be aiming at nirvana—for this, thinking in terms of persons is a positive obstacle. (Cf. Siderits *Buddhism as Philosophy*, p. 83).

<sup>35</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959). All parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.



Each of us distinguishes between himself and states of himself on the one hand, and what is not himself or a state of himself on the other. What are the conditions of our making this distinction, and how are they fulfilled? (87)

Strawson's question here has important echoes of the *Pudgalavādin* question that I just considered concerning the conditions that make it the case that we do not attribute Devadatta's experiences to Yajñadatta. Strawson identifies two dominant (Western) traditions with respect to this issue, one of which he labels the 'no-ownership' view and which he characterizes in the following way: 'Experiences are not owned by anything except in the dubious sense of being causally dependent on the state of a particular body' (p. 96).<sup>36</sup> The no-ownership view may be thought to bear a certain resemblance to the Buddhist position that Jay champions. In both, there is a rejection of a substantial self, and in both, there is a belief that body and its causal position is where we should look to account for our concept of self. Where Jay's Buddhist appeals to a wide supervenience base to account for our convention of referring to persons, the no-ownership theorist explains our reference to persons as a mistake—the mistake of confusing an idea of ownership which is transferable and legitimate with one which is non-transferable and illegitimate.<sup>37</sup>

As Strawson sees it, however, the no-ownership view is not coherent. This becomes apparent when the no-ownership theorist tries to state the contingent fact which he thinks gives rise to the illusion of the 'ego' with logically non-transferable properties. The no-ownership theorist will find that he has to say something like this: 'All my experiences are uniquely dependent on the state of body B,' or 'All the experiences had by a certain person are had by body B.' The problem is that any attempt to eliminate the 'my' here (or the 'by a certain person') yields something that is either false or not a contingent fact.<sup>38</sup> Strawson concludes: 'The defining characteristic of this class is in fact that they are "my experiences" or "the experiences of the same person," where the idea of possession expressed by "my" and "of" is the one [the no-ownership theorist] calls into question' (p. 97).

Strawson's critique of the no-ownership theory is strikingly reminiscent of the *Pudgalavādin* critique of the more orthodox Buddhist position: where Strawson identifies incoherence, the *Pudgalavādin* identifies a circle. And we find more in Strawson's position to remind us of the *Pudgalavādin* position when we return to consider the question Strawson poses at the start of his chapter (quoted above): what are the conditions of our making this distinction between oneself and states of oneself on

<sup>36</sup> This view is taken by Strawson to arguably be attributable to Wittgenstein in his middle period, as well as to Schlick—both of whom make approving reference to Lichtenberg, who insisted that Descartes should not have concluded 'I think' but only 'There is a thought.' For the sake of this all too brief paper, I leave to one side the other, Cartesian, tradition, and Strawson's critique of this.

<sup>37</sup> Strawson sums up the no-ownership view, thus 'Only those things whose ownership is logically transferable can be owned at all. So, experiences are not owned by anything except in the dubious sense of being causally dependent on the state of a particular body; this is at least a genuine relationship to a thing, in that they might have stood in it to another thing. (p. 96)'

<sup>38</sup> Concerning the first disjunct: It is false that all experiences are dependent upon a certain body. Concerning the second disjunct Strawson writes: 'The theorist means to speak of all the experiences *had by a certain person* being contingently so dependent. And the theorist cannot consistently argue that "all experiences contingently dependent upon a certain body B" means the same thing as "all experiences of person P;" for then his proposition would not be contingent, as his theory requires, but analytic' (pp. 96–97)

the one hand and what is not oneself or a state of oneself on the other? I turn, finally, to consider this further similarity.

In order to appreciate this further similarity, I want briefly to return to Carpenter's understanding of the *Pudgalavādin*, who hold that the *pudgala* names some ultimate reality that makes it the case that some causal chains and connections really do belong together. What I want now to consider is what it is that accounts for this unity.<sup>39</sup> According to Carpenter, the *Pudgalavādin* understand this unity in terms of function and development. Function is important, but without development, there would be nothing to distinguish a chariot from a person. Chariots have a function, and this is why we find it convenient to designate certain bundles as 'chariots.' But, as we have already seen, persons are not like chariots. To account for a person, we need to appeal to something more than function. Carpenter suggests that the *Pudgalavādin* finds this something more in the idea of development—and that we think of this development in connection with function in the following way: the functional unity of a person unfolds or develops in a way that is dictated by the nature of the aggregates. Functionality and development together help us to distinguish which aggregates amount to which persons. And this cannot be accounted for in terms of useful conventions. This function and this development do not answer to our needs, but is something to which we are responsive. In this sense, we are talking about something real, but not substantial. It is, Carpenter explains, a 'bare, brute – but inexpressible – fact of the matter that certain groups of cognitions display a categorically different sort of integrity from the run-of-the-mill causal connectedness between aggregates in general' (p. 28). This brute, inexpressible, fact is part of what accounts for the fact that certain individuals do the sorts of things that they do (like kill, thief, tell lies, or drink wine<sup>40</sup>) and why they have the kind of impact they do on other individuals (killing them, harming them, and the like). In effect, the need for the *pudgala* is bound up with *karma*. Carpenter explains that *karma* is the name for the patterns by which different types of *dharma*, each with their own logic of succession internal to their kind, are organized with respect to one another (p. 31). She understands the *Pudgalavādin* to hold that '*karma* is not just any knocking together of discrete substances. Only a certain subset of such interactions qualifies as that peculiar phenomenon "action". Having its source in the unity-conferring configuration of intentions, perceptions, consciousnesses... that is a person, enables action to have moral and not just material characteristics...' (p. 29).

With this in mind, let us now return to Strawson. At one point in his consideration of the no-ownership theory, Strawson attempts to diagnose where the no-ownership theory goes wrong. He concludes that the no-ownership theorist fails through not reckoning with all of the facts. He then explains what he means here by pointing out that it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing experiences to oneself that one should also ascribe them to others who are not oneself (99). Now, when we consider how one does ascribe states of consciousness to others what we find is that one cannot ascribe states of consciousness to others if one can only identify them as subjects of experience. What we have to accept is that the concept of a person is primitive—it is the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing experiences and predicates ascribing bodily characteristic are equally

<sup>39</sup> Carpenter points out that the *pudgala* does not *explain* why persons do not intersect—as they hold that this is inexplicable. What the *pudgala* does is name a fact—the fact that some causal chains and connections are different from others.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Carpenter's reference here to Venkataraman's translation of the *Sammitīyanikayasātra* (25–26).

applicable (p. 102). Having arrived at this conclusion, Strawson then asks how this concept of a person is possible (p. 110), and he notes the ways in which our concept of a person is bound up with the ways in which ‘we act, and act on each other, and in accordance with our common human nature’ (112). Our nature—just like the developmental nature of the Buddhist *dharma*—is just a brute fact, and it is a fact that manifests itself in another fact: that we see ourselves as persons, as involved in producing actions and not just movements of a body. In this connection, Strawson raises yet another interesting question which may be thought to take us even closer to the *Pudgalavādin* position: what is it in the natural facts that makes it intelligible that we have [our] concept [of a person]? In the course of developing his response to this question, Strawson observes the following: one ascribes psychological predicates to others on the basis of observation of their behavior, and we understand the behavior of another ‘only by seeing [their movements] as elements in just such plans or schemes of action as those of which we know the present course and future development without observation of the relevant present movements’ (112). This, he tells us, is just to see this behavior as action; that is, we interpret this behavior in terms of intention. Strawson’s story about persons involves a complex interweaving of the first and third person perspectives, which, as far as I can see, plays no part in Carpenter’s defense of the *Pudgalavādin* position.<sup>41</sup> But the idea of a primitive nature—of the way in which we simply do understand the behavior of others—is as much a part of Carpenter’s understanding of this early Buddhist position as it is of Strawson’s. While Strawson points out that we see another’s behavior as actions of a certain sort, Carpenter understands the need for the *pudgala* to be bound up with *karma*. The parallel with Strawson’s observations, while not perfect, is striking. And it is certainly enough to lead one to believe that further exploration of debates in the Buddhist tradition may help to shed much needed light on philosophical issues that continue to plague philosophers the world over.

I want to end by noting what it is that the orthodox Buddhist found objectionable in (what I shall refer to as) this Strawsonian-Pudgalavādin position. If we return to what Jay tells us about Candrakīrti’s opposition to the *Pudgalavādin* position, we find the following three criticisms (vide supra): (i) a self about which so little can be said is useless; (ii) such a self cannot serve as the object of self-grasping; and (iii) such a self misunderstands the nature of the supervenience base. As I read Carpenter’s defense of the *Pudgalavādin* position, none of these criticisms hold. Nonetheless, Carpenter does acknowledge that there are reasons for the more Orthodox Buddhist to reject the interpretation of the *Pudgalavādin*. According to Carpenter: ‘admitting the ultimate reality of complex facts, rather than simple substances – of relations whose character is determined and indeed constituted by their relata – is not expressible within the framework of Buddhist metaphysics – and comes positively to be rejected’ (28).<sup>42</sup> This takes me back to the way in which certain frameworks may be thought to hinder philosophical progress.<sup>43</sup>

We should note that the engagement of Analytic philosophy with Buddhist philosophy is far from new. From 1977 until his untimely death in 1990, Bimal Krishna Matilal was the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford University.

<sup>41</sup> Although it would be interesting to see if one might find it there.

<sup>42</sup> She also writes: ‘The non-categorical metaphysics to which the Buddhists were committed ... prevented there being any intelligible way of expressing this problem’ (p. 31).

<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, if one understands concerns with salvation quite widely, one may argue that they ought to frame philosophical concerns. As Carpenter’s paper nicely brings out in connection with the *Pudgalavādin* view on the self, an overarching consideration here is our engagement with one another as moral beings.

Matilal engaged in philosophical discussion with some of the most influential Analytic philosophers in Oxford at that time—among them Peter Strawson. However, that earlier engagement saw philosophers continuing to work firmly entrenched in their respective traditions. What is new today is that several Western philosophers—Jay one of the foremost among them—are not just allowing their work to be influenced by Buddhism but are immersing themselves in the language and the culture to the point where they can work with these ideas without mediators. This is a very important step forward in our engagement with these ideas.

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