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Is This Me?

A Story about Personal Identity from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa / Dà zhìdù lùn*

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ABSTRACT

In a Buddhist treatise from around the fourth century CE there is a very remarkable story which serves as a thought experiment calling us to question the nature of self and the identity of persons. Lost in Sanskrit, the passage is fortunately preserved in a Chinese translation, the *Dà zhìdù lùn*. We here present the first reliable translation directly from the Classical Chinese, and discuss the philosophical significance of the story in its historical and literary context. We emphasise the philosophical importance of embedding the story in two framing narratives, and demonstrate that the story taps a range of intuitions, and indeed fears, about the survival of the self which have also played a large role in the history of the topic in the West, and which continue to be of great contemporary concern.

KEYWORDS personal identity, selfhood, *Dà zhìdù lùn*, framing narratives, Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophy

1 Background Philosophical Significance of the Story

In his *Life of Theseus*, Plutarch (46–c.119 CE) famously reports a philosophical puzzle about Theseus’s preserved ship:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time

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of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel. (*Thest.* 23.1. Trans. B. Perrin)

Demetrius Phalereus, governor of Athens and early follower of Aristotle, lived around 350–280 BCE, and there can be little doubt that the philosophical puzzle Plutarch is here reporting had already been in circulation for a considerable time prior to his report.¹

The puzzle has, in effect, the form of a dilemma. On the one hand it is entirely natural and intuitive to think that material objects can survive the gradual replacement of their constituent material parts, that the table at which I am currently sitting is the same as the one at which I sat yesterday, despite the slight erosion of surface atoms and, perhaps, the addition of a few drops of rain and sea-water spray. To say this, however, is to concede that the actual matter of the table isn't essential to its identity. As Thomas Hobbes would later point out, the alarming implication is that were I to gather up all the old timbers, one by one, and use them to reassemble a ship, this ship, although materially constituted by the very timber of Theseus's original ship, would not *be* that ship (*De Corpore* 2.11.7). We might, on the other hand, insist that the material from which an object is made is what makes it the very object it is, the point being that a structurally identical clone of the original, even if completely indistinguishable from it, is still a clone, and if the ship and its identical clone were moored up next to each other, we would not hesitate to say that one *is* the ship and the other is a clone. Then, however, we seem forced to the unpalatable conclusion that Heraclitus was right after all, and nothing endures beyond the moment of a first change.

Given the immense influence that Plutarch's puzzle has exercised over Western philosophical reflection on the metaphysics of identity for two millenia, it cannot but be a matter of great significance to the global history of philosophy that an astonishingly similar puzzle should have appeared as a story in an ancient Buddhist philosophical treatise. The name of the treatise is the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, or *Great Instruction on the Perfection of Wisdom*. While mysteriously enough, we find no reference to this treatise in the extant Indian and Tibetan literature, Madhyamaka was known in East Asia as the Four Treatises School 四論宗—the fourth treatise is the Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, the *Dà zhìdù lùn* 大智度論. It has traditionally, but certainly erroneously, been attributed to the late second-century CE founder of the Madhyamaka system of Buddhist philosophy, Nāgārjuna. Étienne Lamotte, who rendered one third of the text from Chinese into French under the title *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna* (*Mahāprajñā-*

¹This would date the preservation of the ship of Theseus to the time of Alexander. Alexander's invasion of northern India in 325 BCE, as is well known, led to the formation of a syncretic Graeco-Buddhist tradition, as witnessed in Gandhāra sculpture and *The Questions of King Milinda*, a treatise purporting to record a conversation between the Greek king Menander and a Buddhist monk, Nāgasena.

pāramitāśāstra)² (5 vols., 1944–1980), later contested this attribution, and reached the conclusion that the treatise was more likely to have been composed at approximately the beginning of the fourth century CE. Some contemporary scholars think that the erroneous attribution to Nāgārjuna may have begun with Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (c. 344–413 CE), who “translated” the text into Chinese at the beginning of the fifth century; others indeed have wondered if Kumārajīva may not have substantially composed the text himself.³ As for the life-history of the story itself, it is very probably considerably older than its record in this text, its origins seeming to lie in an account of the legend of the Buddhist Emperor Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE), the *Aśokāvadāna*.⁴

The story tells the tale of a traveller’s unfortunate encounter with a pair of demons, one of whom is bearing a corpse. As the first demon tears off one of the man’s arms, the second demon takes an arm from the corpse and uses it as a transplant. This sport continues until the man’s whole body has been replaced, torn limb from limb, with the body-parts of the corpse. The man is given to ask himself, “What has become of *me*?”, his understandable existential angst being addressed by a group of Buddhist monks to whom the man would tell his story on his return, who provide one sort of therapy for the man’s angst. The traveller’s encounter with the monks provides an internal narrative frame for the story, an “inner” frame which itself embeds a retelling of the story. Meanwhile, the whole narrative is presented within a second frame, the “outer” framework of a philosophical debate about the material constitution of subjects, and its role there is to support the Mādhyamika analysis of the concept “I”. We will reflect on the embedded story taken alone in §1 of this essay, on the meaning of the inner framework in §2, and on the outer framework in §5. The translation of our text is given in §4, and it may help the reader to go through it once now.

The most striking similarity with the story of Theseus’s ship is, of course, the use of a trope of gradual replacement as an intuition pump, leveraging our willingness to hold that objects can survive the loss of a single part to drive us to the much less intuitive conclusion that they can endure complete material

²The title of the text was initially reconstructed as *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*. However, after considerable scholarly attention has been paid to several manuscript fragments discovered in Kucha (庫車), which give the original title of the text in Chinese transliteration “摩訶般若波羅蜜優波提舍”, there is now a consensus that the title should be *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, see Po-kan Chou, “庫車所出《大智度論》寫本殘卷之研究——兼論鳩摩羅什之翻譯”. *Tàidà lishí xuèbào* 臺大歷史學報 17 (1992), 65–106.

³The literature is very extensive. See, for instance, Junshō Katō, “羅什と『大智度論』”. *Indotetsugaku Bukkyōgaku* 印度哲学仏教学 11 (1996): 32–59. Étienne Lamotte, *Der Verfasser des Upadeśa und seine Quellen*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1973; Po-kan Chou, “The Problem of the Authorship of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*: A Re-examination”, *Tàidà lishí xuèbào* 臺大歷史學報 34 (2004): 281–327; *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-pariprcchā-Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*. Edited with an Introductory Essay by Ryusho Hikata, Fukuoka: Kyushu University, 1958, lii–lxxv.

⁴An English translation of the extant Sanskrit text preserved in the *Divyāvadāna* is available in John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. Our story’s precursor is not found in the *surviving* Sanskrit text but can be traced to a fourth-century (?) Chinese collection of miscellaneous Aśoka legends (see §2).

substitution. Neither possibility, that he has survived and is the same person as before, or that he has not survived and is no more, strikes the story's hapless hero as particularly compelling. Indeed it is this very fact, that the question about identity seems to permit no satisfactory answer, that the text's narrator takes to be its principal philosophical lesson.

We want to say more about the philosophical lesson of the story, as seen through the eyes of Buddhists in the Madhyamaka tradition. But let us first mention what seems to us the nearest analogue of our Buddhist story in the West. We have in mind a story published in 1957 by the Polish science fiction author Stanisław Lem. Lem composed a sequence of "dialogues" after the style of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*.⁵ The first of these has Hylas attempting to persuade a sceptical Philonous that he has solved the puzzle of immortality by inventing a "resurrection machine":

HYLAS: As you know, nothing exists beyond matter. These clouds, these autumn trees, this pale yellow sun, we finally - these are all material objects, that is, collections of atoms; the various properties of the objects, however, are due to the difference in their atomic structures. Because those are the same oxygen, carbon, or iron atoms, whether they are in stones, leaves, or in our blood. Those formations differ solely by their construction, by the different positions of their particles, that is, by their structure. Therefore one can say quite generally that there are only atoms and their structures. Hence I posed myself the question what is the reason that I still feel to be the same Hylas which used to play here as a little boy, despite all the years which passed in the meantime. Is this feeling of individual identity - I am asking myself - caused by the identity of the building material of my body, i.e., the atoms of which it is composed? But it cannot be like this. For we know through science that the atoms of our bodies are constantly replaced owing to the meals and drinks that we take and the air that we breathe. Bone, nerve, and skin cells continuously exchange their atoms so fast that after a couple of weeks all material particles which made up my organism can be found floating in the waves of a river or in a cloud; nonetheless I continue to exist and I feel the continuity of my personality. What is this due to? Surely not my unchanged atomic structure. Just take into consideration that the new atoms of my body are not the same which were there a month ago, they are, however, of the same kind, and that is quite enough. Thus I posit: The identity of my existence depends on the identity of my structure.

PHILONOUS: Agreed. And then?

HYLAS: In the future people will make better and increasingly true copies of the atomic structures of all material products of the Creation. Today already they are able to produce artificial diamonds or sapphires, artificial urea and even artificial, synthetic protein. Some day they will undoubtedly master the art of building, first, the molecules of the living body, then the body itself - from atoms. In this moment they achieved immortality, because they will be able to bring back to life every deceased, through perfect

⁵Stanisław Lem, *Dialogi*. Kraków, 1957, Dialog I, "Atomic Resurrection", translated by Frank Prengel.

arrangement of atoms according to the structure which his body showed in his lifetime. This process of resurrection will take place - as I see it - in a machine which is fed with the appropriate scheme, a kind of a building plan, i.e., the structural formula of a particular human according to which the machine makes protein molecules, cells, tendons, nerves from atoms - and then this human leaves the machine, bright and cheery and perfectly healthy.

Philonous, unconvinced, asks Hylas what he thinks about the following case, which is none other than our case from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, the first demon now replaced by a band of thugs, and the second by the resurrection machine:

PHILONOUS: Suppose the thugs cut your hands off, the machine however creates new, living hands for you, which naturally grow on your arms. Will you continue to be yourself?

HYLAS: Of course.

PHILONOUS: And now the thugs cut off your head, but I can successfully create a copy of your body by means of the machine, and that copy in turns grows on your head. Will it be you who returns to life in this way, or just your double?

HYLAS: I myself.

PHILONOUS: And if I make a complete copy with all the limbs after your death, it will not be you anymore?

Neither version of the story discusses the brain, as apart from the rest of the body. Perhaps, though, we can easily enough imagine the cells of brain undergoing an analogous process of gradual replacement, one cell at a time, a feat that, if technically tricky for a large-handed demon, poses no difficulty for the technologically advanced resurrection machine. Philonous proceeds to offer a series of *reductio ad absurda* of the idea that identity is preserved, asking, for example, who would be Hylas if the machine were turned on before Hylas has died.⁶ The most awe-inspiring of the reductios is, though, this one:

PHILONOUS: I will not examine one more person, I will not torment your soul which seems scared to death with questions that would be quite inappropriate under the prevailing circumstances, the only thing I will do is this: First I will kill you, then I will make a copy of you, not only one, dear Hylas, but infinitely many, to be sure. Because when you have died (and you have only five minutes left to live) and I make numerous copies of

⁶Contemporary philosophers have developed similar scenarios in the decades subsequent to the publication of Lem's story. Derek Parfit (*Reasons and Persons*. Oxford, 1984) offers a similar thought experiment involving what he called a "teletransportation" machine. John Perry's *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Hackett Publishers, 1978) structurally resembles Lem's story, and the theme is echoed in Daniel Dennett's science-fictional essay "Where am I?", *Brainstorms*. MIT Press, 1981, 310-23. This reconfirms the importance of our story to the history of the philosophy of personal identity.

your person, then you will exist as a multitude of Hylasses, as an incalculable multitude, since I promise you that I will not stop until I populated all planets, suns, stars, moons, spheres, and celestial bodies with Hylasses, and that's because of the love that I feel for you. What do you think about that? Could you become omnipresent in the universe this way, you alone?

HYLAS: That would be very strange. Is there a logical contradiction in it?

PHILONOUS: I didn't say that, you have to find out for yourself. Thousands of Hylasses will live their life, applying themselves to various occupations and pleasures. But how is it, will your one self be divided and existing in all of them at the same time, including them all? Or will all copies be linked into a single entity by the mysterious ties of a single personality?

HYLAS: That's impossible. Every such individual must have his private, own, subjective self, it's just similar to mine.

PHILONOUS: Each one - that's what you are saying - has a self similar to yours? And not the same?

HYLAS: Not the same, because then they were a single human, which is a contradiction.

PHILONOUS: Excellent. Each one then has a similar self as you have, Hylas. And which one of them has the same as you and represents your continuation? Why are you silent? What does logic say now?

Logic says, of course, that identity is transitive. Nāgārjuna is known in particular for his fondness of dilemmas. He was so fond of them, indeed, that he excelled in converting them into tetralemmas (*catuṣkoṭi*). To any question, he said, there are four possible answers: yes, no, both, and neither. The unique twist, and what defines Madhyamaka as a philosophical system, is to then affirm that none of the possible answers is viable; each one can be shown to end up entailing some absurd or impalatable consequence, which is called a *prasaṅga*.⁷ Our story of demonic body-swapping can be read as having just such a structure. If the man thinks he is just the same as before, the absurd conclusion (drawn out much better by Lem's Philonous than in the story itself) is that it becomes indeterminate how many of him there are, or which of the many is the real him. If he thinks, to the contrary, that he is not, then, not having survived, who is the new person now asking all the questions? If, for any given individual body-part, he can survive its being replaced in transplantation, how can it not be that he can survive the transplantation of every one of his body-parts, limbs, organs, brain cells and all?

Nāgārjuna has a very specific reason for wanting to use the logic of the dilemma, or tetralemma, in this way. His philosophical claim is that if some concept is such that there is no answer to the questions "Is it F? Or not? Or both? Or neither?", then what this proves is that there is something awry with

⁷For details, see Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67–90; Tom Tillemans, *How Do Mādhyamikas Think? And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016), 95–110.

the concept itself. Much as Peter Strawson argued that if a name lacks a referent then statements involving it are neither true nor false, Nāgārjuna claims that if every horn of the tetralemma ends in absurdity, then the concept involved must itself be an empty one. He used exactly this method in his magnum opus, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, “Fundamental Verses on The Middle Way”, each chapter taking up some one concept (cause, time, movement, self, *nirvāṇa*, etc.), and constructing a tetralemma of the sort we just described.⁸ The traveller in our story has no good answer to the question, “What has become of *me*?”, and for the narrator of the text this is the best proof possible of the emptiness of the concept of personal identity.⁹

Philosophers belonging to other Buddhist schools would not have agreed that this is the moral of the story. Some offered up a principle of personal identity according to which the man’s question has a definite answer: the Sarvāstivāda thinkers held that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity rather than, as with Cārvāka physicalists, that it is a matter of material constitution.¹⁰ There are, analogously, philosophers of a more swash-buckling persuasion who will say that it is spatio-temporal continuity, rather than strict material constitution, in virtue of which the later ship is the same as Theseus’s original;¹¹ and even that we survive death because we are higher-order individuals, and, like the kind *tiger*, consist in different populations at different times (so that Hylas, as a kind, sometimes consists in a population of one and sometimes of incalculably many).¹²

The lasting philosophical significance of our ancient Buddhist story can be witnessed in the fact that questions very similar to the ones it raises are currently at the cutting-edge of contemporary debates about transhumanism and artificial intelligence. How will the emergence of new technologies influence our understanding of what it is to be us? Consider what Susan Schneider says in her highly praised new book, *Artificial You: AI and the Future of Your Mind* (Princeton University Press, 2019). Schneider introduces the notion of an isomorph: “It is 2060. You are still sharp, but you decide to treat yourself to a preemptive brain rejuvenation. [...] During the surgery, the doctor [...] be-

⁸P. L. Vaidya ed., *Madhyamakāśāstra of Nāgārjuna, with the Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti* (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1987). Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura (trans.), *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

⁹Affinities have been found between the philosophical method of Nāgārjuna and that of the Pyrrhonian sceptic, Sextus Empiricus (second/third century CE). For two very recent studies, see C. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho’s Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2015); M. J. Neale, *Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism: Doctrinal, Linguistic and Historical Parallels and Interactions between Madhyamaka Buddhism and Hellenic Pyrrhonism* (University of Oxford, DPhil thesis, 2014). See also Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lexington Books, 2008), and Jay Garfield, “Epoche and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West,” *Philosophy East and West*, 40.3 (1990), 285-307. Regrettably, there does not appear to be a discussion of the ship of Theseus in the extant works of Sextus.

¹⁰See Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 115–82; *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98–126.

¹¹David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).

¹²Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

gins to remove groups of neurons, replacing them with silicon-based artificial neurons. She starts with your auditory cortex and, as she replaces bundles of neurons, she periodically asks you whether you detect any differences in the quality of your voice. You respond negatively, so she moves on to your visual cortex. You tell her your visual experiences seem unchanged, so again, she continues. Before you know it, the surgery is over. ‘Congratulations!’ she exclaims. ‘You are now an AI of a special sort. You’re an AI with an artificial brain that is copied from an original, biological brain. In medical circles, you are called an “isomorph”’ (Schneider, *Artificial You*, 26-7). This patches up a lacuna in the Buddhist story, which did not explicitly address the brain. The idea of an isomorph is that of a person functionally identical to an original biological human being but whose constituent body-parts, included parts of the brain, have been replaced by artificial components. For enthusiasts of AI, the isomorph introduces the possibility that one can extend one’s lifespan indefinitely, simply by upgrading worn-out parts. Indeed, the reluctant protagonist of our Buddhist story might be considered to be an isomorph of a special sort, one in which the replacement parts are carbon-based and not silicon.

Yet it was certainly not our author’s intention to suggest that becoming an isomorph is the key to immortality. Nor is that the lesson drawn by the monks in the story’s “inner” frame. Philosophers of AI have started, likewise, to worry that technological enhancement, for all its promise of superintelligence and radical life extension, may not allow the survival of *you*, the very person that you are. Are you just a pattern, a functional arrangement in which the identity of the parts does not matter? Or does the material from which you are composed matter, in some essential way, to your being you? Schneider says that her intuitions offer her no guidance: “Why is spatiotemporal continuity supposed to outweigh other factors, like being composed of the original material substrate? Here, to be blunt, my intuitions crap out” (Schneider, *Artificial You*, 93). The “crapping out” of one’s intuitions is very much what Mādhyamika philosophers take to be the philosophical point of the traveller’s existential angst in the body-swapping story!

We mentioned before the variant in the story of the ship of Theseus, according to which the original planks are preserved and used to reconstitute a ship, and our intuitions fail us as to which is the true ship, the one built from the original planks or the one which resulted from gradual replacement of parts. In his science fiction novel *Mindscan*, Robert Sawyer brilliantly illustrates the danger when it comes to my survival as me. Suffering from an irremediable brain tumour, the protagonist, Jake Sullivan, agrees to have his mind transferred to an android body which is an artificial replica of his own, biological body. The android will inherit all Jake’s legal possessions; meanwhile, the dying biological body will be taken to a colony on the moon where it can live out its final days with others. Jake anticipates his new existence, free of disease and with a bright future ahead of him. But then

“All right, Mr. Sullivan, you can come out now.”

It was Dr. Killian’s voice. [...] My heart sank. *No...*

“Mr. Sullivan? We’ve finished the scanning. If you’ll press the red button...”

It hit me like a ton of bricks, like a tidal wave of blood. No! I should be somewhere else, but I wasn’t [...] I reflexively brought up my hands, patting my chest, feeling the softness of it, feeling it raise and fall. *Jesus Christ!* [...]

I shook my head. “You just scanned my consciousness, making a duplicate of my mind, right?” My voice was sneering. “And since I’m aware of things after you finished the scanning, that means I—*this* version—*isn’t* that copy. The *copy* doesn’t have to worry about becoming a vegetable anymore—it’s free. Finally and at last, it’s free of everything that’s been hanging over my head for the last twenty-seven years. We’ve diverged now, and the cured me has started down its path. But *this* me is still doomed.”¹³

This story perfectly captures some of the phenomenological dread experienced by our story’s protagonist. It is fundamentally a dread of entrapment, of finding oneself somewhere one doesn’t want to be, whether that be, as with Jake in Sawyer’s story, the horror of finding oneself alive and unwell in one’s original body, or, as with our traveller, the fear of discovering oneself embodied as a corpse.

2 Historical and Literary Aspects of the Text

The text of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, rather like the ship of Theseus, underwent a gradual linguistic change: the planks of that great treatise as comprised by the original Sanskrit lines, were lost, and what we now have is their replacement in Classical Chinese. The name of the treatise in Chinese, given by Kumārajīva and his assistants, is 大智度論 (*Dà zhìdù lùn*). From the accounts of his contemporaries, as well as from later biographical sources,¹⁴ we may gather the following information. At the request of Yáo Xīng 姚興, the ruler of Later Qin 後秦, in the translation bureau at Cháng’ān, approximately between 402 and 406, and aided by a staff of over 500 assistants, Kumārajīva translated the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* alongside the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經 (T223). The former, as the title makes clear, is an *upadeśa* (論)—a commentary in question-and-answer form—on the latter.¹⁵ A few manuscript fragments discovered in Kucha (Kumārajīva’s birth

¹³Robert Sawyer, *Mindscan* (New York: Tor, 2005), 44–5.

¹⁴The most important accounts of the production of the *Dà zhìdù lùn* that survive are those of Sēngruì 僧叡 and Huiyuán 慧遠 recorded in Sēngyòu’s 僧祐 *Chū sānzàng jì jì* 出三藏記集 (T2145.55.52c27-53b27, 74c11-76b18). In the case of the Chinese canon, our references are always to the *Taishō Tripitaka*. For a helpful introduction to the life and work of Kumārajīva, see Richard H. Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1967, 71–95.

¹⁵The *Dà zhìdù lùn* itself explains what an *upadeśa* (also translated as “章句” or “論議經”, or transliterated as “優波提舍”) is, see T1509.25.308a17-b4. Regarding the genre of *upadeśa* and its influence on Chinese commentary traditions, see Sòng Wáng 王頌, “南北朝佛教解經學文體源流略考”, *Zhèxué mèn* 哲學門 35 (2017), 1–15.

place) suggest that parts of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* may have already been translated into Chinese before Kumārajīva began his project;¹⁶ yet the *Dà zhìdù lùn* was the first “full” Chinese translation.

Kumārajīva enjoyed a reputation as a faithful translator. Echoing a tale recorded in the *Dà zhìdù lùn* about “unscorched tongues” (T1509.25.127a9-14), he is alleged to have said on his deathbed that if his translations exhibited no deviations from the original then his tongue would withstand the cremation fire. Not surprisingly, according to the hagiographies, his faithfulness was later confirmed on an inspection of the cremation ashes.¹⁷ Despite the beauty of this legend, and although we may believe that Kumārajīva did his utmost to avoid translational error, there is testimony that he substantially abbreviated the original Sanskrit text to cater to Chinese readers’ literary taste for laconic brevity.¹⁸ Explanations of Indian customs obviously oriented toward a non-Indian audience, as well as numerous references to Chinese (秦言, lit. “the language of Qin”) throughout the *Dà zhìdù lùn*, have made scholars wonder how freely Kumārajīva and his assistants intervened in the text (the audience they served, far more liberal than modern readers, do not seem to have a problem with “Nāgārjuna” elaborating the distinction between “the general marks” and “the specific marks” of *dharmas* by alluding to the “white horse is not horse” debate in the Warring States period provoked by Gōngsūn Lóng 公孫龍, a prominent figure of the “School of Names” (T1509.25.294a20-22)).

Given these “suspicious” elements, it should be no wonder that the origin of the text has become a subject of dispute. Seemingly motivated by a wish to make a work such as the *Dà zhìdù lùn*, which has had an enormous influence on East Asian Buddhism, more “East Asian”, some modern commentators go so far as to conjecture that it might be an entirely Chinese composition.¹⁹ Yet, on the other hand, the text contains various clues that lead many to insist that its bulk is a translation of a Sanskrit work by an early fourth-century Central Asian Sarvāstivādin, or Sarvāstivādins converted to the Mahāyāna.²⁰ Although, unfortunately, the evidence we have is not sufficient to settle the question, it is nevertheless safer to say that the Chinese elements scattered around the text should be understood as part of Kumārajīva’s effort to tailor the Sanskrit materials to its new audience, as we have no special reason to question

¹⁶See Chou, “庫車所出《大智度論》寫本殘卷之研究” on the dating of these fragments.

¹⁷Huijiāo 慧皎, *Gāosēng zhuàn* 高僧傳, T2059.50.332c26-333a6.

¹⁸This is from Kumārajīva’s assistant Sēngruì and his correspondent Huiyuán, both of whom nevertheless knew no Sanskrit. See T2145.55.75a28-b1, 75b13-18, 76a29-b2.

¹⁹This opinion is most clearly voiced in Miyaji Kakue’s 宮地廓慧 “智度論の本文批評に於ける一觀點”, *Ryūkoku Daigaku Ronsō* 龍谷大學論叢 304 (1932): 514-42. The literature cited in §1, note 3 provides further references.

²⁰See Lamotte, *Der Verfasser des Upadeśa und seine Quellen*, 5-21; Paul Demiéville, “Compte rendu de Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)*, tome II”, *Journal asiatique* 238 (1950), 375-95; Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Tokyo: Reiyukai 1978, 35-6, 93-4. Richard Robinson goes a little further than the others. While rejecting some Japanese scholars’ attribution of the whole text to Kumārajīva, the *Wunderkind* born of an Indian father and a Kuchean mother and known for his conversion from the Sarvāstivāda to the Mahāyāna, Robinson indicates that some parts of the *Dà zhìdù lùn* may have been authored by Kumārajīva (*Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, 38).

the integrity of the 500 witnesses of his translation work. The reference to his tongue suggests an additional possibility: since he used to *dictate* translations to his assistants, and explained during the dictation all kinds of difficulties and perplexities they might have with the original text, his oral glosses on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* may have merged into the *Dà zhìdù lùn* as written down by these scribes. Paul Demiéville therefore cautions that “Kumārajīva’s glosses that have slipped into the text of the *Dà zhìdù lùn* are very numerous, to the point that one never knows very well what belongs to him and what belongs to the Sanskrit original” (Demiéville, “*Traité*”, 386).²¹ Whether the *Dà zhìdù lùn* is, in some sense of the term, “identical” to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, and whether either is “identical” to the *Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, is a puzzle we shall have to leave to Plutarch’s philosophers. There is though, perhaps, no more perfect illustration of the Mādhyamika thesis that such questions are, ultimately, empty.

The body-swapping story itself is probably not the original invention of the composer(s) of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa / Dà zhìdù lùn*. It seems, like a number of other parables in this treatise, to have been taken from a second-century Sanskrit text called the *Aśokāvadāna* (*The Legend of King Aśoka*), which is only partly extant.²² The precedent for our story is not preserved in Sanskrit, but is, luckily, retrievable in the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* 阿育王傳, a Chinese text traditionally regarded as a translation of the *Aśokāvadāna* and dated to the early fourth century.²³ A large part of the *Aśokāvadāna / Āyù wáng zhuàn* is oc-

²¹We should also avoid assigning a mere passive role to the scribes. As Rafal Felbur writes, “the process of turning the text from a rough draft into a refined literary artifact could well have continued without Kumārajīva’s involvement, and [...] it is highly likely that he would not have been in any position to make suggestions at this stage in the process. This final product was then twice removed from ‘the original’: first by its oral translation and its mediation through public discussion, and second by the written transformation of the resulting translation by the scribes and polishers” (Felbur, “Kumārajīva: ‘Great Man’ and Cultural Event”, in: *A Companion to World Literature*, edited by Ken Seigneurie et al., Volume 1, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley 2020, 1-13, here 9).

²²The *Aśokāvadāna* may have been fashioned into its present form by the Buddhist Sanskrit community of Mathurā. See Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 26-8. It seems that the composer(s) of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* drew on the *Aśokāvadāna* as a repository for stories. In *juàn* 3 of the *Dà zhìdù lùn*, for example, we find the story transmitted in the *Aśokāvadāna* about the elder Mahākāśyapa entering a meditative trance; in *juàn* 11, the tale of a young bhikkhu whose breath smelled like perfume; in *juàn* 20 that of Aśoka giving his brother Vītaśoka a seven-day reprieve; and in *juàn* 12 and *juàn* 32 Aśoka’s gift of dirt.

²³There are conflicting accounts about the date of the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* (T2042). Confusion has been created by the fact that there are several different translations of the Aśoka legends. Most scholars follow Zhìshēng’s 智昇 *Kāiyuán shìjiào lù* 開元釋教錄 (730 CE), the most important Buddhist scriptural catalogue compiled in East Asia, which attributes a translation entitled *Āyù wáng zhuàn*, probably the one now under this title, to Ān Fāqīn 安法欽 and dates it to the Western Jin dynasty 西晉 (266-316 CE) (T2154.55.623a17-21). Recently, Antonello Palumbo has suggested that the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* should be dated to a period later than Kumārajīva (Palumbo, “Models of Buddhist Kingship in Early Medieval China”, in: *中古時代的禮儀, 宗教與制度* (*New Perspectives on Ritual, Religion and Institution in Medieval China*), edited by Yú Xīn, Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi gǔjí 上海古籍出版社, 2012, 287-338, here 311). Po-chien Lin 林伯謙, while insisting on the attribution to Ān Fāqīn, argues that the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* is perhaps a selective compilation of already translated Aśoka stories and therefore belongs to the category of *chāo jīng* 抄經 (compiled scriptures). But, as Sēngyòu makes clear (T2145.55.37c1-9), and as Lin himself emphasizes, *chāo jīng* should not be conflated with spurious scriptures. None of the ancient catalogues characterizes Ān Fāqīn’s

cupied with the career of Aśoka's teacher Upagupta, whose principal achievement consists in leading many disciples to arhatship. As recounted here, the story tells of a young disciple, born from a noble family, who wanted to return to secular life. Upagupta was aware of the disciple's deep attachment to his body and decided, in a very literal way, to cut it off. When the man was on his way from Upagupta's dwelling to his family, the master came to him in the night disguised as a demon carrying a corpse. After a second demon, also a product of Upagupta's magic, ripped off all parts of the disciple's body and the first demon replaced them with those of the corpse, the young man, so we are led to believe, immediately eliminated all his attachments. In a rather striking absence of any indication of pain, confusion or ensuing inquiry, the story bluntly ends with a brief mention of him returning to Upagupta's dwelling and attaining arhatship.²⁴

Juxtaposition of the *Dà zhīdù lùn* variant with the precedent certainly sheds much light on our narrator's various concerns. Let us, in the present essay, simply restrict our attention to the story's final scene. The variant repeats the structural pattern of departure-transition-return, and for Upagupta's disciple the return to his master's dwelling is already indicative of his awakening. Our protagonist, however, is said to return to "the land from where he came" enmeshed in deep confusion. There, at the end of his literal and figurative journey, he met a group of monks. Hearing him ask whether he still had a body, they are given to comment that he had rightly denied the existence of a self that survived the body-swapping. To help him take the final step toward awakening, they then instruct him that an "I" does not exist "from the very beginning, not just now". Their tone is solemn and assertive, but what they offer nonetheless seems to be facile advice. When our protagonist said that *he did not know* if *he*, now embodied as a corpse, was still a human being, let alone which person he was, he seems to have presupposed the existence of an "I" though without

Āyù wáng zhuàn as a *chāo jīng*, let alone as a spurious scripture (Lin, "《付法藏因緣傳》之譯者及其真偽辨", in: Lin, *Zhōngguó fójiào wénshǐ tànwēi* 中國佛教文史探微, Taipei: Xiùwēi zìxùn 秀威資訊 2005, 101-45, here 122). For our purposes suffice it to say that there is *no evidence* that the disciple's tale in the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* does not belong to the second-century *Aśokāvadāna*. The most plausible hypothesis is thus that the composer(s) of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* adapted the disciple's tale they found in the *Aśokāvadāna*, just as they took several other stories that have indeed been preserved in the extant Sanskrit text of this legend.

²⁴T2042.50.123b3-20. The story is translated in Jean Przyluski, *La légende de l'empereur Aśoka*, Paris: Paul Geuthner 1923, 380-1. In a Chinese text entitled *Āyù wáng jīng* 阿育王經, purportedly produced by 僧伽婆羅 "Saṅghabhara and dated to the Liang dynasty (502-557 CE), we have another version of the story: when the second demon dragged at the man's arm, the first demon prevents the arm from being ripped off by pulling it in the opposite direction. The two demons spent the whole night performing this dragging and pulling on every part of the man's body. In the end the man survived, bruised but intact (T2043.50.165b11-c2). A translation of this variant of the story, by Li Rongxi, is available in *The Biographical Scripture of King Aśoka*, Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research 1993, 164-5. Interestingly, that the protagonist's original body was eaten by the first demon, whom he in fact helped, seems always to be a problem for later readers. Chinese commentators changed the plot in having the second demon (they say he is the younger or the bigger one) bite off and immediately swallow the man's limbs and the first demon (the older or the smaller one) feel guilty and thus replace them by corresponding parts of the corpse (see e.g. *Āmituó jīng shū* 阿彌陀經疏, T1757.37.316a10-23).

reflecting on what is essential to an “I”, and what he pleaded for was a confirmation of his connection with the new body. The monks, we are tempted to say, misunderstood our protagonist as saying that he *knew* that the one who was now speaking was *not him*. The story’s narrator seems to grant the monks, insofar as they are his mouthpieces within the story, permission to deliver a message that is in overt tension with his own description of the man’s experience: namely, that it is possible for one to find an “I” in another’s body.

There are, however, more charitable and more nuanced ways of making sense of the monks’ instruction. We have touched, in light of contemporary philosophical discussion of personhood, on such an interpretation in §1. Here we add literary-critical aspects of the resolution. It is important to remember that, in the Upagupta version, the disciple seems serenely untroubled by the destruction of his young body, which “he had immensely loved” up until a moment ago, awakening spontaneously along with the descending sunlight.²⁵ This may have disturbed our narrator as a reader of that version of the tale, just as it does us. In his version, in notable contrast, the body-swapping is unmistakably presented as a misfortune that overtakes the protagonist. Directly after the scene of body-consumption, which is both chilling and stunningly amusing (why did the first demon not return the man’s original limbs to him but instead give him those of the corpse? We have reason to see the whole quarrel as a narrative trick, and the consumption a way to sidestep the Hobbesian problems discussed earlier), there comes an image that hits us with all its emotional weight: left to himself, in a place of silence, the protagonist started to think about what had happened to him, the things going beyond the limits of human experience and beyond his previous understanding of his self, and this not-understanding almost turned him into “a mad man”. Here the narrator uses the phrase “其心迷悶” to describe what the man experienced, which we have translated literally as “his heart bewildered”, but actually refers to extreme suffering, both mental and physical. Via Kumārajīva’s unscorched tongue, the narrator tells us that the traveller, in throes but silently, searched for the road back to the place from where he had commenced his journey. The narrator (unlike modern translators of his story) takes this to be more realistic than continuing the journey ahead, the encounter with the monks, which restores the traveller to human communication, is then added to make his final deliverance intelligible.

A reader familiar with Buddhist parables would not miss our narrator’s delicate touch here. Since in these narratives people who are feeling “迷悶” are

²⁵The disciple’s tale and the neighboring stories in the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* aim to convey a simple, ascetic ideal. In its associative horizon there clearly lies the practice of monks meditating on the body. In this technique they contemplate, using anatomical analysis, the various parts of their body as well as corpses in different stages of dismemberment, which leads them to reflect on the mortality and impurity of their own body. Patrick Olivelle gives a brief introduction to the corpse meditation and its root in Indian ascetic traditions in his “Deconstruction of the Body in Indian Asceticism”, in: *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush / Richard Valantasis. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, 188–210. Indeed, “seeing one’s body as a corpse” is a recurring motif in Upagupta tales, see John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, 83-5.

often represented either as wandering around like a lost dog, without knowing where to go, or as collapsing to the ground, there is even more pain in the traveller's painstaking return, and in his struggle to stand erect like a sane human being. Also keep in mind that the narrator could reasonably expect his audience to recognize the *topos* underlying the scenes: a sufferer falls into existential perplexity, for some reason or another, and an instructor appears whose role is to lead them to awakening. The monks, we may say, are not there to convey the story's philosophical lesson. Instead, they serve the thematic function of giving the protagonist a ready relief and, as *deus ex machina*, not only returning the abandoned, nameless man, a corpse among the living, to the human world but bringing him into divine fellowship. Even though we know that the deliverance through instruction is a *topos*, we should not doubt that this reflects the narrator's sincere concern. While appropriating the Upagupta tale for his own purposes, he reaches out hand—with a warmth that is missing in that version of the tale—to give our protagonist and us the readers, pierced with an ancient grief, a metaphysical consolation.²⁶ After all, it is in compassion, the composer(s) of the *Dà zhìdù lùn* say, that the essence of their teaching lies (T1509.25.256c15-23). As with many Buddhist philosophical treatises, the purpose of the text is as much as a protreptic as didactic, serving to lead its reader by example along a path of self-transformation.²⁷

Later Chinese commentators, fascinated by its literary and philosophical brilliance, ingeniously used the story to explain why Revata, an Elder at the Second Buddhist Council, had a puzzling byname in the *Wénshūshīlì wèn jīng* 文殊師利問經²⁸: “always speaking” (常作聲) (T468.14.492c3-4). Interpreting “always speaking” as a sort of inquiry, and appealing to the tradition that Revata also had the byname “a false combination” (假和合), which they apparently related to the monks' instruction to our protagonist “only because of the combination (和合 *saṃyoga*) of the four great elements your body is conceived as ‘my’ body”, generations of commentators, including Zhìyì 智顛 (538-597 CE), Kuījī 窺基 (632-682 CE), and Chéngguān 澄觀 (737-838 CE), all arrived at the bold hypothesis that Revata was himself the anonymous protagonist of the *Dà zhìdù lùn* story, the one who always asked: “Is this me?”²⁹ That is to say, they read the story not as an imaginary “thought-experiment” but as an actual “case-study”, much the way that case-studies from psychological literature are

²⁶For the therapeutic character of the no-self doctrine, see Jonardon Ganeri, “A Return to the Self: Indians and Greeks on Life as Art and Philosophical Therapy”, in: *Philosophy as Therapeia*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri / Clare Carlisle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 119-35.

²⁷See Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 100–17.

²⁸This is a translation of **Mañjuśrīparipicchā* (*Questions of Mañjuśrī*) produced by 僧伽婆羅 *Saṅghabhara in 518 CE.

²⁹See *Miàofǎ liánhuá jīng wènjù* 妙法蓮華經文句, T1718.34.16b29-c16; 阿彌陀經疏, T1757.37.316a10-23; *Dà fāngguāng fó huáyánjīng suīshū yànyì chāo* 大方廣佛華嚴經隨疏演義鈔, T1736.36.658a16-29. As further evidence of the longevity and cultural importance of our story, we may note that it has most recently been “reembodied” in an opera 歌仔戲 titled *Revata Encountered Demons* 離婆多遇鬼 (2014) by the Taiwanese Dà Ài Technology Company. The “body-swapping” episode is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz-OYutz3XU> (last accessed 9 January 2021); the “Is this me?” episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w8F-nfRxbA>.

used in empirically-informed philosophical analysis today. For there is in the text no lexical indication that the story is to be read as make-believe rather than as historical fact.

3 About the Translation of “Is This Me?”³⁰

This is not the first time that the story about body-swapping from the *Dà zhìdù lùn* has been translated into English. Most previous translations have been based on Étienne Lamotte’s French rendition,³¹ itself copied from a translation prepared by Édouard Chavannes.³² While the borrowed rendition is in the main trustworthy, Lamotte’s own translation of the dialogue between the narrator of our story and his opponent, which constitutes the “outer” framing context for the story, a frame which is essential for us to understand the intention of the narrator, is regrettably replete with serious mistakes.³³ In his book *Marvelous Stories from The Perfection of Wisdom*, Bhikshu Dharmamitra does provide a translation directly from Chinese (Seattle: Kalavinka Press, 2009, 64-9), but nevertheless fails to include the framing dialogue. It has therefore

³⁰In Chinese Buddhist literature it is customary to refer to the story translated here as “Two demons fought over a corpse” (二鬼爭屍). See e.g. 妙法蓮華經文句 (T1718.34.16c3-12), 大方廣佛華嚴經隨疏演義鈔 (T1736.36.658a16-29), and *Zhīgūān fúxíng zhuàn hóngjué* 止觀輔行傳弘決 (T1912.46.375a13-b7).

³¹See the version by Raymond Gressieux and Anita Ganeri (in: Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 214-5), as well as the version by Gelongma Karma Migme Chodron, in *The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna*, Vol. II, Chapters XVI-XXX, 585-6 (this has not been formally published). [With the publication of our essay in BJHP we came to know of Robert Sharf’s forthcoming essay “The Curious Case of the Conscious Corpse: A Medieval Buddhist Thought Experiment”, which uses the traveller’s story in making a valuable case for the transcultural availability of thought experiments.]

³²Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra)*, tome II, chapitres XVI-XXX. Louvain 1949, 738-40. We must note that Lamotte copied, almost word-for-word, Chavannes’s translation of a parable transmitted in the *Zhòngjīng zhūànzà pìyù* 衆經撰雜譬喻 (*Parables Selected from Various Sūtras*), cf. Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et apologues extraits du Tripiṭaka chinois*, tome II, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1911, 72-4. The Chinese text of this parable (T208.4.531c25-532a17) corresponds for the most part to Kumārajīva’s rendition of the body-swapping story in the *Dà zhìdù lùn*.

³³Let us, in the space available, give a few examples, all taken from the first few lines of our narrator’s speech, to show why Lamotte’s *Traité* should be treated with caution. (1) When his opponent finishes with his three arguments against the no-self doctrine, our narrator begins his reply with the remark: “此俱有難!” — “All of these [sc. all your arguments against the no-self doctrine] have refutations!” Lamotte, however, partly confused about the grammatical structure of this sentence and partly confused as to how the argument develops, translates it as “This difficulty is common to us”. (2) Our narrator goes on to talk about the relation between one’s self and the body (身). Lamotte’s mistranslation of “身” as “personne” (“他身” therefore as “la personne d’autrui”) makes the whole debate between the narrator and his opponent crumble and is also at variance with the (correct) translation of the same word in the traveller’s story as “corps” (“他身” accordingly as “le corps d’un autre”), which he copies from Chavannes. (3) “五陰相續” (*skandha-saṃtāna* “the continuity of the five aggregates”), which our narrator then proposes as the origin of the view that one is one’s body, is translated by Lamotte as “relation to the five aggregates”. This shows that he fails to recognize this important Buddhist concept. (4) A further distortion is created by Lamotte’s rendering of “彼我” (the distinction of other and I) as “the self of a third person”, which turns our narrator’s thesis—the existence of the spirit (神) is a premise for “彼我”—into pure nonsense.

been clear that a more reliable translation of the story in its original framework, one which can accurately capture the philosophical nuances of this important philosophical work, is needed.³⁴

The present translation, which follows the *Taishō* edition (大智度論釋初品中檀波羅蜜法施之餘(卷第十二), T1509.25.148b11-14, 148b19-c28), aspires to literal accuracy. Aside from correcting the mistakes and distortions in earlier translations, we have tried to translate a given Chinese term consistently wherever possible. In particular, although the word “我” (*wǒ*), the key to the text, is used here at times as the first-person pronoun and, at times, as a noun that denotes something like “self”, we have, in order to avoid interpretative intervention, translated it throughout by the English word “I”. Insertions intended to fill out the sense of the original are indicated with square brackets. Chinese words for important terms and, occasionally, the conjectural corresponding Sanskrit term have been added in round brackets—whether or not there is a Sanskrit *Vorlage* for every single Chinese sentence, these Sanskrit terms are probably what the composer(s) of our text had in mind. For additional elaboration of the concepts invoked, we recommend interested readers to consult the excellent *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* by Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr.

4 “Is This Me?” The Text in Translation

Question: How can you know that there is no I? Everyone conceives of an I (生計我)³⁵ in their own bodies, but does not conceive of an I in other bodies. If there is no I in one’s own body, but instead one only mistakenly sees an I in one’s own body, then it follows that one should also mistakenly see an I in other bodies, if there is no I in other bodies. [...] ³⁶

Answer: All of these³⁷ have refutations! If one can conceive of an I in other bodies, you would then say: “Why does one not conceive of an I in one’s own body?” Moreover, the five aggregates (*skandha*)³⁸ arise from causes and conditions (因緣), and hence they are empty and are non-I. Twenty [permutations of]

³⁴Stefano Zacchetti, who was working on a full English translation of the *Dà zhīdù lùn*, tragically passed away in 2020, before his project could be brought to fruition.

³⁵That the sentence below “自於身生我” is paraphrased later as “自身中生計我心” shows that “生計我” is probably an elliptical form of “生計我心”. While the word “心” (*citta*) means “mind” or “consciousness”, the verb “計” has “reckon” as its basic meaning. We notice that in Kumārajīva’s rendition of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經, on which the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* comments, and which has Sanskrit parallels preserved, he uses “校計” to translate *pratyavekṣate* (T223.8.273c24-26). This strongly suggests that the word “計” in our text means “conceive” or “think”.

³⁶There are three arguments against the non-existence of an I. We have only translated the first argument, to which the traveller’s story is intended as an answer.

³⁷“All of these” refers to all the three arguments against the non-existence of an I.

³⁸The five aggregates (“五衆”, also called “五蘊” or “五陰”), which are believed to be constitutive of a human being, include matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), labelling (*saṃjñā*), dispositions (*saṃskāra*), and discriminative consciousness (*vijñāna*). For a detailed discussion of the five aggregates, see Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 76–81.

the view that one is one's body (身見 *satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*)³⁹ arise from the causes and conditions of ignorance (無明 *avidyā*).⁴⁰ This view that one is one's body arises itself from the continuity (相續 *saṃtāna*) of the five aggregates. [People] conceive of the five aggregates as I for the very reason that [this view] arises from the causes and conditions of the five aggregates. [They] don't [conceive of an I] in other bodies because of their habitus (習 *vāsanā*).⁴¹ Moreover, only if there is spirit (神)⁴² can there be a distinction between other and I (彼我). But you ask about the distinction between other and I when it is still uncertain whether the spirit that you talk about really exists! This is like answering someone who asks about the hare's horn that the hare's horn is like the horse's horn.⁴³ If the horse's horn really exists, [what] the hare's horn [is like] can be demonstrated. [But you are just like the one who] wants to demonstrate [the features of] the hare's horn by appealing to the horse's horn when it is still uncertain whether the horse's horn really exists. Moreover, you claim the existence of the spirit merely on the grounds that one conceives of an I in one's own body. Since you say that the spirit is present everywhere, you should also conceive other bodies as I. Because of this, you should not say that one recognizes the existence of the spirit on the grounds that one conceives of an I in one's own body, not in other bodies.

[Answer continued:] Moreover, there are people who do conceive of an I in other things. For example, when non-Buddhists who sit in meditation adopt

³⁹ *Satkāyadr̥ṣṭi* has twenty possible permutations in relation to the five aggregates. 1-5: the self is identical with each of the five aggregates, 6-10: a self possesses each of the five aggregates, 11-15: a self exists within each of the five aggregates, and 16-20: each of the five aggregates exists within a self.

⁴⁰ Ignorance (*avidyā*) is one of the twelve causes and conditions (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

⁴¹ *Vāsanā* (mental tendency, trace; lit. "perfume") comes to be conceptualized as the "habitus" which one's actions (*karma*) imprint in one's mind and whose accumulation predisposes one to act in a certain way. "習/習氣" is discussed in detail in *juàn* 84 of the *Dà zhìdù lùn*.

⁴² The questioner has various descriptions of "神", which is the word for "soul" or "spirit" in Classical Chinese. He first takes it as present in everything and everyone. Later he describes it as an entity and equates it roughly with the subtle body (*liṅga-śarīra*), which resides in the gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*), entering at birth and leaving at death. The subtle body, he says, "enters the five *gatis* in each rebirth constantly". From the refutation of his second and third arguments against the no-self doctrine we also learn that he seems to characterize "神" as "constant" (常) and "unconfined" (自在), claims that it "acts by itself" (自作), and takes it as "matter" (色 *rūpa*) and "person" (人) (T1509.25.149a5-150a17).

⁴³ In Buddhist literature, the hare's horn (兔角) and the horse's horn (馬角) are classical examples of things that do not exist, but for which we have concepts. Although in Chinese texts there is no indication of whether "兔角" and "馬角" are singular or plural, the two terms have often been rendered as plurals in translations, for example in Lamotte's *Traité*. For some commentators assume that the phrase "兔角龜毛", which at times denotes deep-rooted delusions, refers to the circumstances where the hare's two ears are wrongly perceived as two horns and strands of algae that grow on the body of a turtle are seen as its fur. We translate the two words as singular mainly because the Sanskrit term for "兔角", *śaśaṅga*, is singular. Another reason is that the point of "兔角" or "馬角" may be that it is purely fictional, rather than based on an optical error, as shown by the Chinese idiom "兔角牛翼" ("牛翼" means "the wings of cattle"), and in this case the horned horse is probably a unicorn and the horned hare, like *al-mi'rāj* in Muslim iconography, a minor unicorn.

the earth-totality contemplation,⁴⁴ they see the earth as being I and I as being the earth. The same applies to water, fire, wind, and “space” (空 *ākāśa*).⁴⁵ Because of misapprehension (顛倒 *viparyāsa*),⁴⁶ [people] do conceive of an I also in other bodies.

[An Illustrative Story:] Moreover, there are times when [people] do conceive of an I in other bodies.⁴⁷ For example, there was a man who was sent afar as an envoy. He spent the night alone in an empty house. In the night a demon⁴⁸ carried a man’s corpse in and put it in front of him, and then there came another demon chasing after and shouting at the first demon angrily: “The corpse is mine. Why did you carry it here?” The first demon replied: “Of course I carried it here because it’s my property.” But the second demon said: “It’s I who carried this dead man here!” The two demons then fought over the corpse, each grabbing one hand of it. The first demon said: “There’s a man here whom we can ask.” The second demon then asked immediately: “Who carried this dead man here?” This man thought: “These two demons are mighty. If I tell the truth, I’ll die; but if I lie, I’ll still die. I can’t avoid death anyway, so why should I lie?” Thereupon, he said [to the second demon]: “[The corpse] was carried in by the first demon.” The second demon was terribly angered. He grasped the man by the hand, ripped [one arm] from his body and threw it on the ground. The first demon then took an arm from the corpse and immediately attached it to the man by slapping it on. In this way both of his arms, both feet, his head, two sides, and in the end his whole body was replaced. The two demons then devoured together the body that had been replaced, wiped their mouths and departed.

This man thought: “I’ve seen my body born of my mother has been eaten up by the two demons. Now this body of mine consists completely of the flesh of another person. Do I truly have a body now? Or do I have no body? If I think I have a body, what I have is completely a body of another; if I think I have no body, now I actually do have a body.” Thinking this way, he made his heart bewildered, and he was like a mad man. The next morning he searched

⁴⁴There are ten “spheres of totality” (*kr̥tsnāyatana*), namely the totality of earth, water, fire, wind, space, blue, yellow, red, white, and consciousness. For the ten *kr̥tsnāyatanas* see Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, London: Routledge 2007, 26-30.

⁴⁵In Indian tradition, the *five* elements of the material world are earth, water, fire, wind, and “sky” or “space” (*ākāśa*).

⁴⁶There are four types of *viparyāsa*: taking pain as pleasure, taking impermanence as permanence, taking non-self as self, and taking the impure as pure.

⁴⁷We suggest that the replier is actually speaking of a *viparyāsa* of non-Buddhists here. It seems that the previous sentence “顛倒故，於他身中亦計我” is repeated here in a paraphrased form both for the sake of emphasis and in order to further the discussion, in which the replier reinforces his conclusion with the example of the traveller. The ellipsis of “because of *viparyāsa*” may have been motivated primarily by stylistic considerations.

⁴⁸The word “鬼” can refer to either “demon” or “ghost”. This conforms to what we know about the precedents for our story. In the tale transmitted in the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* 阿育王傳, it is two *yakṣas* (夜叉) that fought over a corpse (T2042.50.123b3-20). The *Āyù wáng jīng* 阿育王經 mentions two *rākṣasas* (羅刹) (T2043.50.165b11-c2). *Yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*, mythological beings in Buddhism that consume raw flesh, can be placed somewhere in between demons and ghosts.

for the roads and left. When he reached the land from where he came,⁴⁹ he saw that there was a Buddhist stūpa and many monks.⁵⁰ He did not talk about anything else with them, but only asked if he still had a body or not. The bhikkhus asked: “Which person are you?” He answered: “I don’t even know myself if I’m a person or not.”⁵¹ Immediately afterwards he described to the monks in detail what had happened to him. The bhikkhus said: “This man has learned by himself that there is no I. He can easily obtain deliverance.” Therefore they told him: “Your body, from the very beginning, has always had no I, not just now. It is only because of the combination (和合 *saṃyoga*) of the four great elements⁵² that it is conceived as ‘my’ body, just as your original body is not different from the present one.” The bhikkhus led the man to the Path. He abandoned all the defilements (煩惱 *kleśa*) and immediately gained arhatship.⁵³

[**Conclusion:**] So there are times when the body of another is also conceived as I. One cannot say that there is an I on grounds of the distinction between other and I.

5 Conclusion

The story of the two demons is embedded in not one but two narrative frames in the *Dà zhìdù lùn*. The story itself has the hapless traveller uncertain what has become of him. As we emphasise in our introduction, the gradual replacement of body parts is used as a technique to interrogate intuitions, and yet the story ends in *aporia*: the traveller has no idea whether he has survived the

⁴⁹It is difficult to determine whether the word “前” in “到前國土” describes a spatial or temporal relation, namely, whether it means “front” or “previous”. Both “[the man] reached the land ahead” (or Dharmamitra’s more liberal rendering “he reached the neighboring country”) and “[the man] reached the land from where he came” make sense here (although the second option seems more natural in Chinese). What we can directly rule out is Chavannes’s suggestion, which Lamotte follows: “étant arrivé au royaume dont il a été question plus haut”, because no land is mentioned previously in the story. However, the precedent for our story in the *Āyù wáng zhuàn* provides an important clue to the meaning of “前”. In that tale, Upagupta’s disciple, who was on his way from the master’s dwelling to his family, encountered two *yakṣas* fighting over a corpse, and the subsequent replacement of his body by parts of the corpse led to his return to Upagupta and to his final deliverance. It seems reasonable to assume that the *Dà zhìdù lùn* story retains its basic structure: departure–transition–return.

⁵⁰Or: “he saw that there were Buddhist stūpas and many monks.”

⁵¹The narrator plays on the double meaning of “人” (*rén*): person and human being. In Classical Chinese, the customary expression for asking someone’s identity is “which person are you?” (汝是何人?). Although under normal circumstances, its meaning is not importantly different from that of “who are you?”, we translate this sentence here literally not only in order that the man’s reply makes more sense. “汝是何人?” also has an implication that is absent in “who are you?": the man appears in the eyes of the monks as a human being, not as something else, say, a ghost. And his reply “我亦不自知是人非人” should be understood as conveying that he himself does not know whether after the replacement of his body by a corpse he is still a human being or now a being that is not human (非人 *amānuṣya*), let alone, a fortiori, which person he is.

⁵²Buddhism understands the human body as composed of earth, water, fire, and wind.

⁵³The *arhat* is the one who severs the *kleśas* and attains an awakening by following the teachings of another.

complete loss of his original material or not. He is left bewildered and on the verge of going out of his mind. If we call this “the protagonist swaps bodies” episode in the story, a narrative context is supplied by the continuation of the story in what we might call “the protagonist returns” episode. His return is depicted not only spatio-temporally but also as a return to his senses thanks to an encounter with a group of Buddhist monks, and through them, with the Buddhist teachings. The monks inform him that it was always an error for him to conceive of himself as his material body, or of some particular body as uniquely his own. And, they go on to add, our protagonist’s mishap has taught him the most valuable lesson of all, that there is no I.

Yet this further step seems to be unwarranted and without justification—for what is there in the body-swapping episode to rule out the idea that the man has survived but in another body? His memory, for instance, seems to be intact, since he remembers his former body “born of my mother”, and he also, it seems, remembers the way home. If psychological continuity (the *skandha-saṃtāna*) is the criterion for personal identity over time, as indeed some Buddhists believe, then this story by itself, without the nuances of Lem’s elaborations, does not seem to warrant the verdict of the Buddhist monks whose assessment constitutes the inner narrative frame of the story. Moreover, within the body-swapping episode, the traveller himself, we are told, “searched for the roads and left” and that “*he* reached the land from where *he* came”. It is very hard to make sense of these assertions on the monks’ interpretation of the episode. Though the monks’ council is said to be enough to assuage the traveller’s existential dread, it leaves the story’s reader even more perplexed.

The whole story as consisting in both episodes is, however, itself embedded in the *Dà zhìdù lùn* in still another narrative frame. This outer frame is not itself a narrative episode but rather a philosophical dialogue. A first party to the dialogue endorses the view that the application of the concept “I” is exclusively, and veridically, with regard to one’s own body. This is what is technically known as the *pūvapakṣa* in a dialogue, the opponent’s view, a *prima facie* view which is to be refuted. The *pūvapakṣa* should also include an argument, whether in defence of the *prima facie* view or in opposition to the rival’s view. That is, indeed, exactly what we have here. The rival view, which is of course the “correct” view, the *siddhānta* endorsed by the *Dà zhìdù lùn* itself, is that the concept “I” has no veridical application-conditions, for it is only a confabulation and as such its application is only ever erroneous. This is, evidently, a special case of the Mādhyamika thesis that all concepts are confabulations without veridical application; the Sanskrit term is *prapañca*. Nāgārjuna’s method of tetralemma (*catuskoṭi*) and impalatable consequence (*prasaṅga*), which we described in the introduction, is designed precisely to demonstrate the truth of this thesis.

The first party next articulates a principle which governs the debate, a principle to which both sides are committed. This is the principle that if it is true that concepts are confabulations then their application should be unrestricted in scope. If a concept has no genuine application-conditions but only invented or transactional or conventional ones, then one is violating no norm should

one choose to apply the concept to whatever one wishes. So, in particular, in the case at hand, nothing prevents one from applying the concept “I” to bodies other than one’s own. The second party in the dialogue now jumps in to scoff at this attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum* of their view. Yes, they reply, that is quite so, and here is an example! The story of the body-swapping traveller is now related, and the conclusion we are given to draw is not, contra the Buddhist monks in the inner frame, that there is no I, but rather that the traveller does indeed apply the concept “I” to the substitute-body, and hence to a body “other than his own”, meaning other than his original one. So the point of the story is to affirm the conditional in the principle which both parties have agreed should govern the debate. The interpretation supplied in the outer frame, moreover, makes better sense than that of the Buddhist monks in the inner frame, for the point is not that there is no I but that there is no veridical application-condition on the use of “I”. Nāgārjuna himself refutes both the view that there is a self and the view that there is no self.⁵⁴ Both these views assume that there is a correctness norm on the use of “I”, whereas there is none. Were there to be such a norm it would provide one with a way to distinguish what is I from what is other. But there is no such norm, and the entire passage rightly ends with the statement “One cannot say that there is an I on grounds of the distinction between other and I”. It might only have added, but to avoid an overt conflict with the inner frame does not, that one cannot say that there is no I on such grounds either. We might indeed find in his perplexity the traveller’s slow awakening to the fact that there is no determinate use of “I”.

Philosophical debate proceeds by drawing out the implications of one’s own and others’ claims. Sometimes what a philosophical position implies is that something apparently counter-intuitive is indeed possible. Stories such as the one we translate here serve an important philosophical function when they present their readers with situations in which possibilities seem, against initial expectations, to be plausible after all. Moreover, the narrative framing of the story is very instructive as to the role of narrative form in the structure of philosophical argument. What we see here is that a semantic ascent in the interpretation of the Buddhist no-self doctrine, from a simple metaphysical denial of self to a thesis about the function of the concept “I”, is mirrored in an ascent from inner to outer narrative frame. Embedded in the story, let us not forget, is its own retelling. It is told once by the narrator who is addressing us, the readers, and again by the protagonist to the monks; yet *our* response is not thereby assimilated to *theirs*. Such narrative manoeuvres are a feature of Sanskrit philosophical texts and intrinsic to the system of argumentation as one of graded refinement. In our short text we witness a transition from the existential confusion of the story’s protagonist, through a straightforwardly metaphysical interpretation of the no-self thesis by the monks who hear the story retold, to a thesis about the nature of concepts and their application by the text’s own narrator. The body-swapping story in the *Dā zhìdù lùn*, when embedded

⁵⁴ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 18.2. See Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka*, 153–64.

in its full dual discursive framework, not only contributes to the history of the philosophy of personal identity then, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, to an understanding of philosophical methodology and practice across cultures.

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