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Stephen Voss

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Can the Chariot Take Us to the Land of No Self?

William F. Vallicella

This paper examines a famous argument for the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* ("no self") according to which nothing possesses self-nature or substantial reality. The argument unfolds during a debate between the monk Nagasena and King Milinda (Menandros). Nagasena's challenge to the King is that he demonstrate the substantial reality of the chariot in which he arrived at their meeting when said chariot is (i) not identical to any one of its proper parts, (ii)

not identical to the mereological sum of its proper parts, and (iii) not identical to anything wholly distinct from its parts. After presenting the argument and defending it against a plausible objection, I argue that it cannot be taken to show that persons lack self-nature.

According to Buddhist ontology, every (samsaric) being is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of self-nature. *Anicca, dukkha, anatta*: these are the famous three marks (*tilakkhana*) upon which the whole of Buddhism rests. I would like to consider a well-known Buddhist argument from the *Milindapanha* for the third of these marks, that of *anatta*, an argument one could call 'The Chariot.'¹

I will avoid the historical niceties and plunge right into the argument:

P1. No concrete partite thing is identical to any one of its proper parts.

P2. No concrete partite thing is identical to the mere(ological) sum of its proper parts.

P3. No concrete partite thing is identical to something wholly distinct from its parts.

Therefore

C. Terms denoting concrete things, useful as they are for counting and classifying, do not refer to anything real, anything possessing self-nature or 'own-being'.

The premises of this argument are exceedingly plausible. Thus it is surely obvious that King Milinda's chariot is not identical to its right wheel, or to any other proper part. It is also obvious that the chariot is not identical to the mere sum of its parts: the sum of the chariot's parts can exist even if the chariot does not exist, as when the chariot is disassembled. It is the same sum whether the chariot is assembled or disassembled. As for the third premise, it also seems quite clear that there is not, in addition to the parts, some further physical or metaphysical entity that is the 'real chariot' or substance or substratum of the chariot. That is no more the case than that there is a little man – a homunculus – inside my head looking through my eyes, and hearing through my ears, etc.

The premises, then, seem to be true; but does the conclusion follow? One obvious response is that the argument is a *non sequitur* since it ignores a fourth possibility: that terms like 'Nagasena' and 'this chariot' refer to wholes of parts in a *definite arrangement*, where this arrangement is a feature of reality and is not introduced by our use of such terms as 'Nagasena' and 'chariot'. Thus a chariot is neither a sum of disconnected chariot-parts, nor something wholly distinct from the parts, but a sum of parts connected in the right way. Thus one might argue that 'this chariot' does indeed refer to something in reality, namely, a whole of connected chariot-parts, where both the parts and the connectedness are features of reality. Surely we cannot effect the assembly of chariot-parts simply by applying the term 'chariot' to them. It is the other way around: 'chariot' applies to them because of their antecedent connectedness. If this is right, then things like chariots would have a sort of *relative self-nature* which would entail relative permanence and relative satisfactoriness.

This response to the argument, however, is workable only if there is indeed some distinction in reality between the mere sum of chariot-parts and the connected parts. It is open to the Buddhist, however, to argue that there cannot be any such distinction, and thus to argue against even relative self-nature. To simplify the discussion, suppose we have a whole W consisting of two parts, a and b . Then from (P1) we know that $\sim(W = a)$ and $\sim(W = b)$. From (P2), we know that $\sim(W = (a + b))$. From (P3), we know that there is no c wholly distinct from both a and b such that $W = c$. The objector, however, wants us to consider a fourth possibility, namely, that $W = aRb$, where R is an entity in the world that connects a and b , and in connecting them, makes the difference in reality between the whole and the mere sum of its parts.

One problem with this suggestion is that in many cases no entity R is given. Thus if W is a bolt on which has been screwed a nut, all that analysis reveals is the bolt and the nut: there is nothing in reality that connects the bolt and the nut. Of course, in the past someone or something had to screw the bolt onto the nut; but now all we have is a bolt and a nut with nothing that connects them. We may agree that the bolt and nut are connected – in that the nut is threaded onto the bolt – but this connectedness is not a further constituent of reality that can be found by analysis. Not finding any connectedness, philosophers of an empiricist and analytic bent will deny that there is any connectedness. If we introduce the term 'nolt' to refer to the bolt-cum-nut, then our Buddhist analyst will say that 'nolt,' like 'chariot,' refers to nothing in reality. It does not refer to the sum of the parts, because all will agree that a whole cannot be identified with the mere sum of its parts. Thus our natural thought that there is a connectedness in reality that justifies our belief that 'nolt' refers to something, and

that what it refers to has relative self-nature, turns out, on the Buddhist analysis, to be an illusion.

Indeed, a defender of the Buddhist view could take a further step by pointing out that any further constituent introduced to do a connecting job will be unavailing for essentially Bradleyan reasons. Suppose two boards are connected with a nail. The resulting whole has three parts: two boards and a nail. An ordinary person will say that one of the parts, the nail, connects the other two. The Buddhist philosopher, however, could point out that there is no difference in reality between the unconnected sum of two boards and a nail, and the same three things connected. For even given that someone in the past drove the nail through the two boards, what we have now before us is simply two boards and a nail. At the present moment there is nothing in reality -- nothing that analysis can uncover -- that accounts for the connectedness. There is nothing we can point to, nothing empirically discernible, that is the connectedness or the ground of the connectedness. If we call the two boards nailed together 'noard,' then our Buddhist will say that 'noard' does not refer to anything. For the noard is not identical to one of its proper parts, nor is it identical to the mere sum of its proper parts, nor is it identical to something wholly distinct from its parts.

It is furthermore clear that introducing a fourth entity to connect the nail to the boards will only generate a Bradley-style vicious infinite regress. For we can then reiterate the inquiry by asking what grounds the difference between the mere sum of these four items and the concrete whole having them as parts. The ground of connectedness continues to elude the analytic understanding.

Thus one can see that the Chariot is an argument that cannot be easily dismissed. We want to say, with King Milinda and with common sense, that a whole of parts is more than a mere sum of parts, and that this something more -- the unity of the parts -- is something real as opposed to something introduced by our conceptual or linguistic activities, or by our craving for permanence. But since we cannot find this 'something more' by analysis, the pressure is on to write it off as illusory.

But even if the Chariot succeeds in showing that nonpersons lack self-nature, does it also show that persons lack self-nature? It may be that to argue by analogy as Nagasena does, applying to persons what is true of nonpersons, is a mistaken procedure. Indeed, I will now argue that the analogy is mistaken, and that a person is a whole of parts in an importantly different sense than that in which a chariot is a whole of parts.

Suppose my mental state passes from pleasurable to painful. Not only is the painful state painful, the *transition* from the pleasurable state to the painful one is itself painful. The fact that the transition is painful shows that it is directly perceived. Thus what we have here is not merely a succession of consciousnesses, but also a consciousness of their succession. For there is a consciousness of the transition from the pleasant state to the painful state, a consciousness that embraces both of the states. But a consciousness of their succession is a consciousness of their succession in one subject. It is a consciousness of the identity of the self through the transition from the pleasurable state to the painful one. Passing from a pleasurable state to a painful one, I am aware not only of a pleasant state followed by a painful one, but also that the one who was in a pleasurable state is strictly the same as the one who is now in a painful state.

What this example shows is that there is direct awareness of the self as that in which the two distinct states are united. I am not only aware of the two states; I am aware of myself as the unity of the two states, as a substratum of a mental alteration. The self, therefore, is directly given; but it is of course not given as a separate object wholly distinct from its states. Thus the failure of Buddhists and Humeans to find a self as separate object distinct from its states has no tendency to show that there is no self. The Buddhist-Humean mistake is to think that if a self is not either one of its states or the sum of its states, then it must be something entirely separate from its states. But this is to ignore a fourth possibility, namely, that a self is the unity of its states.

If the "no self" view were correct, there would be no such thing as mental alteration: all mental change would be *existential* change. One state would come into and pass out of existence, to be followed by another state that would come into and pass out of existence. But this contradicts the phenomenological evidence: we are aware of ourselves as persisting unities, as substrata of alterational change.

The fundamental problem with the Buddhist approach, as it seems to me, is an exclusive and unjustifiable reliance on analysis as the way to truth. The commonsensical suggestion that a chariot is a whole of connected parts, and not a mere sum of parts, was rejected on the ground that this connectedness cannot be found by analysis, as indeed it cannot. But this is to presuppose that only what can be found by analysis is real. We have, however, no good reason to accept this presupposition, and a very good reason to reject it. We ought to reject it because the project of analysis itself presupposes the existence of wholes which are more than mere sums. It is only a *unitary* whole which needs analysis, and yet no such whole can be exhaustively understood by analysis. Thus the very project of analysis presupposes

that there are unitary wholes which cannot be exhaustively understood by analysis. Every analysis presupposes a prior synthesis.

However things may stand with chariots and other nonpersons, what I want to suggest is that each of us, as a person, is just such a whole. Each one of us is a synthetic unity of consciousness and self-consciousness. Analysis may lay bare the contents of our mental lives, but it will never disclose their unifying principle: not because there is no such principle, but because it is not the sort of thing that can turn up under analysis.

E-mail: BillVallicella@cs.com.

1 Cf. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, eds. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 281-286.