



Parfitian or Buddhist reductionism? Revisiting a debate about personal identity

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Abstract

Derek Parfit influentially defends reductionism about persons, the view that a person's existence just consists in the existence of a brain and body and the occurrence of a series of physical and mental events. Yet some critics, particularly Mark Johnston, have raised powerful objections to Parfit's reductionism. In this paper, I defend reductionism against Johnston. In particular, I defend a radical form of reductionism that Buddhist philosophers developed. Buddhist reductionism can justify key features of Parfit's position, such as the claims that personal identity is not what matters and can also be indeterminate. Furthermore, Buddhist reductionism can avoid Johnston's objections to Parfit's reductionism. I conclude that reductionists have good reasons to favor Buddhist reductionism over Parfit's version.

Keywords Buddhist philosophy · Reductionism · Derek Parfit · Personal identity

1 Introduction

In *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit defends reductionism about persons.¹ According to reductionism, a person's existence does not involve a further fact, such as facts about souls or Cartesian egos. Instead, a person's existence just consists in the existence of a brain and body and the occurrence of a series of physical and mental events. Reductionism about persons has surprising consequences. For one thing, reductionism implies that personal identity is not what matters. What matters are psychological connections between your past and future self. Yet relations of psychological connection can come apart from personal identity. Another consequence of reductionism is that questions about personal identity can be indeterminate. There are sometimes no informative answers to the question "would this future person be

¹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1986), part 3.

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me?” In these ways, reductionism conflicts with our ordinary beliefs about personal identity.

Yet critics raise powerful objections to Parfit’s reductionism. The most influential and incisive critic of Parfit’s reductionism is Mark Johnston.² Johnston contends that Parfit’s arguments are unable to unseat our ordinary beliefs about personal identity. Johnston argues that Parfit’s reductionism fails to establish that there are no further facts about personal identity above and beyond facts about our psychologies and bodies. Reductionism is also vulnerable to devastating counterarguments. Parfit claims that higher-order facts, such as facts about personal identity, lack rational or moral importance. Johnston develops a *reductio* of Parfit’s position: if Parfit’s argument for the irrelevance of personal identity is sound, then it entails nihilism. For these and other reasons, Johnston concludes that we should reject Parfit’s reductionism.

Do Johnston’s arguments show that Parfit’s reductionism is false? In this paper, I will defend reductionism against Johnston. More precisely, I will argue that a revised version of reductionism is not vulnerable to Johnston’s objections. This is a radical form of reductionism that Buddhist philosophers developed and that has recently been defended by Mark Siderits. Here is the upshot of my argument: to defend reductionism about persons, we need to adopt a more uncompromising and throughgoing version of reductionism than Parfit defends. And that is what the Buddhist tradition has to offer.³ I will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will clarify the debate between Parfit and Johnston. In Section 3, I will introduce Buddhist reductionism and show how it can justify key features of Parfit’s reductionism while escaping Johnston’s objections. In Section 4, I will consider possible replies to my argument and respond. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 The debate between Parfit and Johnston

2.1 Parfit’s reductionism

Many of us believe that we are separately existing entities. We think that we are distinct from our bodies or psychologies. For example, I am inclined to believe that I am a permanent self that has thoughts, experiences, and a body and that I could survive even if my psychology changed or much of my body were destroyed. How

² Mark Johnston, “Human Concerns without Superlative Selves,” in *Reading Parfit*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 149–79; Mark Johnston, “Reasons and Reductionism,” *Philosophical Review* 101, no. 3 (1992b): 589–618; Mark Johnston, “Fission and the Facts,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989): 369–97; Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

³ Siderits frames his argument in *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* as an intervention in the debate surrounding Parfit’s account of personal identity. Siderits says that Buddhists forged “philosophical tools...that might help us adjudicate the dispute between Parfit and his many critics.” Yet, to my knowledge, Siderits never discusses Mark Johnston’s criticisms of Parfit or how a Buddhist reductionist might respond to these criticisms. Here, I aim to fill this gap. Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

might these beliefs be true? One possibility is I am an immaterial soul or a Cartesian ego. On this view, my existence involves a “further fact,” a fact that is distinct and separate from my body, brain, and experiences. This view is non-reductionism about personal identity.

Parfit rejects non-reductionism. He defends the reductionist view that a person’s existence just consists in the existence of a body and the occurrence of a series of thoughts, experiences, and other mental and physical events. On the basis of powerful arguments, Parfit concludes that there is no further fact, such as a permanent self or immaterial soul, that grounds personal identity. Parfit instead endorses a psychological account of personal identity. Personal identity depends on the psychological connections between our past and future.

In particular, Parfit defends:

Our identity over time just involves (a) Relation R with the right kind of cause, provided (b) that this relation does not take a ‘branching’ form, holding between one person and two different future people.⁴

Relation R consists in psychological connectedness and psychological continuity. To explain the psychological account, let us consider my relation with myself now and my past as a child. My present self and my past as a child are different in many ways. We have different character traits, desires, and intentions. But we share certain memories. We can both remember our seventh birthday party. This shared memory is an example of what Parfit calls “psychological connectedness.” It is the holding of a direct psychological connection, such as a memory or intention, between two people in time. Psychological continuity is the holding of overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness. Take my relation between myself today and myself yesterday. We are psychologically continuous because we share almost all of the same intentions, memories, desires, and other psychological states.

Parfit claims that person A and person B are numerically identical if they share relation R and this relation does not take a branching form. Yet he also argues that personal identity is not what matters for egoistic concern. To motivate this view, consider the following thought experiment:

My Division. A surgeon successfully transplants both halves of my brain into different bodies that are just like my body. The twins wake up and each of them has half my brain and is psychologically just like me.⁵

What happened to me after the surgeon divides and transplants my brain?

Here are three possible answers to this question: (a) I do not survive, (b) I survive as one of the two resulting people, and (c) I survive as both of these people. Option (a) looks false. That is because people can survive the loss of one half of their brain. If a person can survive this loss, then it is unclear why I am unable to survive My Division. Option (b) is false because it is arbitrary to single out one of the resulting people as me. On what grounds would I choose? Finally, option (c) seems to imply a

⁴ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 216.

⁵ Parfit, p. 254.

contradiction. If both twins are me, then both are the same person. Yet two individuals cannot be the same person.

Parfit argues that we should reject all of the possibilities. We should instead conclude that there is no answer to our question: “what happened to me?” This question is empty. By this, Parfit means that it would be neither true nor false that the resulting people are me. But, even without an answer, we could know the full truth about what happened. Here is an analogy. Suppose that a chess club splits into two different clubs. Did the club survive this split? Like our question about My Division, this question is empty. We know what happened: the chess club split into two. Certain members of the club are now part of one club that meets on Wednesdays; other members are part of the second club that meets on Tuesdays. Whether we describe this fact as “the club ended” or the “club survived in a new form” is a linguistic or conceptual matter. The same goes for My Division. If we know that my brain and psychology survived, then we know what happened, regardless of how we describe that fact.⁶

Parfit draws another lesson from My Division. My Division shows that identity is not what matters. I lack relations of personal identity with the two people who wake up. But I share psychological connections with them. Moreover, these connections are what ground egoistic concern. Egoistic concern is the special concern that we feel for our futures. For example, I care in a special way that I fulfill my plans, remain healthy, maintain good relationships with friends and family, and so on. Since I share relation R with my twins and relation R grounds egoistic concern, I have egoistic reasons to care for the people who wake up in My Division despite the fact that neither is identical with me. This shows that personal identity is not what matters in survival.

We can summarize Parfit’s argument for the irrelevance of personal identity as follows. In My Division, I lack relations of personal identity with my twins. But what happens to me in My Division is not as bad as death. In fact, it is about as good as ordinary survival. The best explanation for this judgment is that I share relation R with my twins. So, personal identity only matters derivatively. In other words, personal identity only has rational importance because it consists in relation R. There is no intrinsic reason to care about personal identity in itself.

2.2 Johnston’s criticisms

Mark Johnston claims that personal identity has intrinsic importance. Personal identity grounds egoistic concern. Furthermore, psychological or physical continuity only has derivative importance. They get their value from the value of personal identity. So, I should care about the continuation of my body or psychology in virtue

⁶ What Parfit means by an “empty question” is a little unclear. He seems to have two different ideas in mind. First, there is indeterminacy: it is neither true nor false that I survived My Division. Second, different descriptions of what happened in My Division are merely verbal. In other words, the difference between “I survived” and “I didn’t survive” are merely linguistic or verbal differences in the description of what happened. In this paper, I will focus on indeterminacy in particular.

of the fact that it is mine. In this way, Johnston wants to preserve ordinary beliefs about the importance of personal identity.

But why precisely does Johnston reject Parfit's reductionism? Johnston attributes the following argument to Parfit:

1. *Reductionism about personal identity.* Personal identity consists in certain other facts, such as facts about physical or psychological continuity.
2. *Reductionism about importance.* If one fact consists in certain others, it can only be these other facts which have rational or moral importance.
3. Thus, personal identity cannot be rationally or morally important. What matters can only be one or more of the other facts in which personal identity consists.

Following Johnston, let us call this: *the argument from below*.⁷ Parfit accepts the first premise, reductionism about personal identity. He thinks that personal identity consists in facts about psychological connectedness and continuity. Parfit's argument also relies on reductionism about importance. This is why he endorses the view that personal identity is not what matters—what matters are the psychological connections that constitute personal identity. If the argument from below is valid, then this would establish Parfit's conclusion that personal identity is not what matters.

Here is the problem though: premise 2 ("reductionism about importance") seems false. Johnston gives the following argument against this premise. Let us start by assuming reductionism about importance. And let us also assume materialism, the view that all facts consist in facts about fundamental particles and their paths through space–time. Yet fundamental particles lack intrinsic rational or moral importance. Quarks and electrons do not matter in themselves. But, if reductionism about importance and materialism are both true, we arrive at the conclusion that nothing matters. After all, everything consists in fundamental particles that lack value. We have arrived at an absurd conclusion, the conclusion that nihilism is true. We should reject one of the premises that entails this absurd conclusion. Reductionism about importance is the obvious candidate. And, if reductionism about importance is false, then the argument from below is unsound.

Johnston concludes that we should reject reductionism about importance. He thinks we should accept another principle instead: "there can be constituted facts whose value is not a simple sum or upshot of the value of the facts that constitute them."⁸ For example, a painting can have non-derivative value despite the fact that the paint and canvass that constitute this painting only have derivative value. This principle also applies to personal identity. Personal identity matters, even though the facts that constitute personal identity lack non-derivative importance.

⁷ Johnston, "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves," p. 167.

⁸ Johnston, *Surviving Death*, p. 310.

2.3 Parfit's response

Parfit responds to Johnston's criticisms by conceding that reductionism about importance is false as a general matter. But Parfit claims that we can still apply this principle to personal identity. He maintains that the argument from below is sound when the relation between lower-level facts and higher-level ones is conceptual.⁹ Suppose you know that a small group of trees is growing on a hill. Later, you learn that there is a copse on this hill. But, when you learn that there is a copse on the hill, you have not acquired any new knowledge. You only learn a new way of describing what you already knew. That is because the relationship between the copse and the group of trees is entirely conceptual. As a conceptual matter, a copse just consists in a small group of trees. If you know all of the facts about those trees, then you know all of the facts about the copse, too.

Next, Parfit argues that the relationship between personal identity and physical or psychological continuity is conceptual as well. Imagine that I encounter an oracle who can predict the future perfectly. The oracle tells me all of the facts about my physical or psychological continuity ten years from now. I then ask the oracle: "do I survive ten years from now?" Can the oracle give me any new factual information in response to this question? According to Parfit, the answer is "no." At most, the oracle can only redescribe what I already know about my physical or psychological continuity. Now, suppose the relationship between personal identity and lower-level facts about physical or psychological continuity is conceptual. Parfit claims that the argument from below can therefore apply to personal identity. Because personal identity consists entirely in facts about physical or psychological continuity, it is these other facts that matter, not personal identity. Only the facts that constitute personal identity can have value.

But things are different when it comes to the fundamental constituents of the universe and higher-level facts. Assume that we know everything about the elementary particles that make up a person, Sam. We still would not know everything about Sam. We can learn new facts about Sam, even if we know everything about the particles that constitute him. As Parfit says: "To understand the world around us, we need more than physics and a knowledge of our own language. We need chemistry, biology, neurophysiology, psychology, and much else besides."¹⁰ Therefore, it is false that the relationship between elementary particles and persons is entirely conceptual.

Parfit's revised argument can block Johnston's reductio. That is because reductionism about importance fails to apply to cases where the relationship between a constituted entity and this entity's constituents is not conceptual. Recall that reductionism about importance holds that if one fact consists in certain others, it can only be these other facts which have rational or moral importance. This premise leads to

⁹ Derek Parfit, "The Unimportance of Identity," in *Identity*, ed. H. Harris (Oxford University Press, 1995), 13–45, at 29–33.

¹⁰ Derek Parfit, "Is Personal Identity What Matters?" (South Plainfield, NJ: The Ammonius Foundation, December 31, 2007). 35.

nihilism since, if materialism is true and everything consists in elementary particles, then reductionism about importance implies that only elementary particles can have value, and they do not. But Parfit has revised reductionism about importance. The revised premise says that, if some fact consists in certain other facts *as a conceptual matter*, it can only be these other facts that have non-derivative importance. And it is false that higher-level facts consist in facts about elementary particles as a conceptual matter. That means that we are not forced to conclude that only elementary particles have value if reductionism about importance is true. Other things besides elementary particles, such as higher-order facts about persons and what they care about, can have value too. So, once Parfit restricts the scope of reductionism about importance to cases where the relation between the constituted and constituents is conceptual, he can resist the inference from materialism to nihilism.

We can summarize Parfit's response to Johnston as follows:

1. If the relationship between higher-level fact F_1 and lower-level fact F_2 is entirely conceptual, then only F_2 can have rational or moral importance.
2. The relationship between personal identity and the facts that constitute personal identity, such as psychological continuity, is entirely conceptual.
3. So, only the facts that constitute personal identity can have rational or moral importance (and not personal identity itself).
4. But the relationship between the fundamental constituents of the universe, such as elementary particles and their paths through space–time, and higher-level facts, such as facts about persons and what they care about, is not entirely conceptual.
5. So, even if 1–3 are true, that is consistent with other things besides the fundamental constituents of the universe having rational or moral importance.

This response promises to rescue Parfit's reductionism while stopping the slide to nihilism.

Things are not over yet, though. Johnston has a powerful response to Parfit. Johnston rejects premise 2 in Parfit's response, the premise that the relationship between facts about psychological or physical continuity and personal identity is conceptual. Johnston alleges that reductionism "cannot be known just thanks to reflection on our concepts and their relations."¹¹ We can only establish reductionism about personal identity a posteriori. Parfit, in fact, agrees that the truth of reductionism is not merely conceptual. In *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit rejects non-reductionism on the grounds that it is empirically unsupported. He argues that, if we had strong evidence of reincarnation, then this would support non-reductionism, but we lack this evidence.¹² However, if our evaluation of theories of personal identity depends, in part, on facts about the world, then we should reject the view that the truth of reductionism is conceptual. And, if reductionism about personal identity is not a conceptual truth, then Parfit's revised version of reductionism about importance fails to apply

¹¹ Johnston, *Surviving Death*, p. 314.

¹² Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 227–8.

to the relation between facts about personal identity and facts about physical or psychological continuity. Parfit's argument from below falters again.

Where does this leave us? In my view, Parfit has failed to adequately rebut Johnston's criticisms. Yet these criticisms, if correct, threaten Parfit's thesis that personal identity is not what matters. Can we develop a better response to Johnston's objections? I will now argue that we can. But, to do this, we will need to adopt a more Buddhist reductionism.

3 A Buddhist reductionist response to Johnston

In this section, I will first explain Buddhist reductionism. Next, I will show how Buddhist reductionism can justify Parfit's central conclusions about personal identity. Finally, I will argue that Johnston's criticisms are impotent against Buddhist reductionism.

3.1 Buddhist reductionism

What is Buddhist reductionism? In order to answer this question, I am going to draw on a particular interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. This is the interpretation that Mark Siderits has developed. I am going to primarily rely on Siderits' interpretation of the Buddhist critique of the self because, in my view, Siderits has given the most systematic articulation and defense of this position in contemporary philosophy. However, I acknowledge that Siderits' interpretation is not the only possible one. Other authors interpret the Buddhist no-self view in ways that disagree with Siderits' interpretation, and I am unable to resolve this disagreement here. So, I will refrain from claiming that Siderits' account is the only viable reconstruction of Buddhist ideas. Instead, my goal is to describe *one* prominent interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and show how this interpretation can help us make progress in the debate between Parfit and Johnston. But, for ease of exposition, when I refer to "[Buddhist reductionism](#)" below, I am generally referring to Siderits' interpretation of the no-self view.

Buddhist reductionism relies on the idea that there are different kinds of truths. In particular, there are ultimate truths and conventional truths. Ultimate truths describe how reality is independent of our concepts, interests, and practices. A statement is ultimately true if and only if this sentence both corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conceptual fictions. In contrast, conventional truths depend on our practices and interests. Siderits defines conventional truth in the following way: a statement is conventionally true if and only if it uses conceptual fictions and reliably leads to successful practice.¹³

¹³ Mark Siderits, *The Buddha's Teachings as Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2022), p. 88. Some authors dispute Siderits' analysis of conventional reality. These authors reject the view that persons and other composites are merely useful fictions and instead argue that conventional entities are real, although they enjoy a mode of being that is different from entities that ultimately exist. It is beyond the scope of this paper to settle this debate about the status of conventional entities. For defenses of non-fictionalist accounts of conventional truth, see: Laura P. Guerrero, "Being Conventio-

Consider persons. Buddhist reductionists claim that persons are not ultimately real. Why is that? They endorse mereological nihilism, the view that composites are ultimately unreal. Our minds and conventions construct wholes. Yet wholes do not exist in ultimate reality. Now, consider that persons are made of parts. Early Buddhists claimed that persons are made up of the *skandhas*. The *skandhas* are psycho-physical elements, such as material form and consciousness. If persons exist, then they are composed of *skandhas*. Since composites are ultimately unreal, it follows that persons are also unreal in this sense. This is the ultimate truth about persons.

There is another truth about persons, though. The conventional truth about persons is that they are real. This is so because, although persons are conceptual fictions, these fictions can be useful. They can reduce suffering. Suppose that you believe that you are a person. You think that your personal identity continues through time. This belief will likely lead you to identify with your future self. More precisely, the belief in personal identity can cause the present *skandhas* in a causal series to identify with future elements in that series. And this pattern of identification can bring about good results. This identification will lead you to act prudently. For example, you may look out for your health, avoid unreasonable risks, invest for retirement, and so on. This behavior will prevent pain. So, if you identify with your psychophysical continuum, then this can result in less suffering overall.¹⁴

The personhood convention can have good consequences for others as well. Consider our practice of holding people responsible for their wrongdoing. At first glance, this practice is incompatible with the ultimate truth about persons. Blaming another person requires that this person exists. Yet there are advantages to retaining our practices of holding persons responsible. Our practice of holding people responsible gives them an incentive to behave well. If a prospective criminal knows that others will punish him for his crimes, then this person may refrain from offending. So, if we accept that persons and personal identities are real, this will be better for society. The personhood convention leads to successful practice, which qualifies it as a conventional truth.¹⁵

Before I move on, though, let me comment on one key premise in the argument for the ultimate unreality of persons. Remember that the argument against persons

Footnote 13 (continued)

ally Real: A Buddhist Account of a Degenerate Mode of Being,” *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2023): 1–19; Kris McDaniel, “Abhidharma Metaphysics and the Two Truths,” *Philosophy East and West* 69, no. 2 (2019): 439–63; Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of the Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For criticisms of non-fictionalist accounts of conventional truth, see: Andrew Brenner, “Ontological Pluralism, Abhidharma Metaphysics, and the Two Truths: A Response to Kris McDaniel,” *Philosophy East and West* 70, no. 2 (2020): 543–57.

¹⁴ Siderits, *The Buddha’s Teachings as Philosophy*, pp. 90–99.

¹⁵ But there is a connection between the conventional and ultimate truths. Siderits claims that there will be some ultimately true statement that explains why the acceptance of some conventionally true statement will lead to successful practice. For this reason, Siderits argues that we can translate most conventionally true into ultimately true statements and “all that is lost in such translation is the misleading implication that conceptual fictions exist.” See: Mark Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionism,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 4 (1997): 455–78 at p. 464.

depends on the premise that composites lack ultimate existence. This premise is mereological nihilism. Mereological nihilism is a revisionary principle. The objects that we are familiar with, such as laptops, chariots, and persons, are made up of parts. So, if mereological nihilism is true, then these objects do not ultimately exist. Only their parts are real.

Why should we endorse mereological nihilism? Buddhist philosophers give a “neither-identical-nor-distinct” argument for mereological nihilism. Here is a simplified version of it. Consider a whole with parts, such as a person. What is the relationship between the whole and the parts that constitute the whole? There are two options. Either a whole is identical with its parts or a whole is distinct from the parts that constitute it. The first option (“a whole is identical with its parts”) cannot work since a whole is one entity and its parts are many. In other words, the whole has a property that its parts lack. Thus, the whole and its part are not identical. Now, consider the possibility that a whole is distinct from its parts. This option also runs into problems. For one thing, the whole seems to inherit all of its properties from its parts. If the whole inherits all of its properties from its parts, then it seems unnecessary to posit the existence of the whole. This suggests that wholes are unreal.

There are several other arguments for mereological nihilism, too.¹⁶ But I will put those aside. Suppose that mereological nihilism is correct. It follows that only parts, not wholes, ultimately exist. But what are the parts? As I noted, early Buddhism says that these parts are *skandhas*. But a later tradition of Buddhist philosophy, Abhidharma, held that the *skandhas* are also aggregates that we can deconstruct into their component parts. Abhidharma philosophers contend that the ultimate constituents of reality are *dharmas*. *Dharmas* are what remain after “division and analysis.”¹⁷ After we divide up and analyze objects down to their irreducible constituents, we arrive at *dharmas*. In other words, *dharmas* are simple entities that bear their own natures. So, what are *dharmas* exactly? They are property-particulars. Property-particular includes items such as wetness, redness, hotness, coarseness, and pleasantness.¹⁸ Our minds and conventions construct wholes out of these property-particulars. But Abhidharma philosophers say that, in ultimate reality, there are only *dharmas*.

This ends my preliminary sketch of Buddhist reductionism. With a preliminary description of Buddhist reductionism now on the table, we can return to the debate between Parfit and Johnston. I will now argue that Buddhist reductionism can justify key features of Parfit’s position, particularly his claims that identity is not what matters and that survival can be indeterminate.¹⁹

¹⁶ For a much more detailed description of the neither-identical-nor-distinct argument and other arguments for mereological nihilism, see: Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, chapter 4.

¹⁷ Vasubandhu influentially says that “if the cognition of a thing disappears when this thing is broken into parts, this thing exists relatively or conventionally... That which is other than this is absolute truth.” See: Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosa-Bhasya* of Vasubandhu: The Treasury of the Abhidharma and Its Commentary, trans. Gelong Lodro Sangpo and De La Vallee Poussin, 2012th edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012), p. 1891–2.

¹⁸ Contemporary philosophers refer to property-particulars as tropes.

¹⁹ Other authors have also commented on the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and the debate between Parfit and Johnston. Roy Perrett shows how Johnston’s position has some affinities with the conventional understanding of persons that we find in the Mādhyamaka school of Buddhism. Charles Good-

3.2 Identity is not what matters

Let us start with Parfit's claim that personal identity is not what matters. To recap, Parfit contends that personal identity is not rationally or morally important. Instead, what matters are the facts in which personal identity consists. The Buddhist reductionist agrees with Parfit that personal identity is not what matters. Yet Buddhist reductionists argue for the unimportance of identity in a different way. Buddhist reductionists say that persons and personal identity are conventions. These conventions can be useful. At the end of the day, though, personal identity is a conceptual fiction. And conceptual fictions lack non-derivative importance. Therefore, it is false that personal identity is what matters.

Why should we believe that conventions lack non-derivative importance? To explain, let us consider an illustration. Suppose that we are considering two possible conventions to adopt. One convention is that disease is caused by an imbalance of humors, such as blood and bile, in the body. Let us call this "the humor convention." Another convention is that most diseases are caused by invasions of pathogens, such as microorganisms and viruses. We will refer to this as the "germ convention." Both conventions refer to composites, not simples. So, both conventions fail to express ultimate truths. Nonetheless, we should adopt the germ convention and reject the humor one. Why? The germ theory leads to better results. If we adopt the germ convention, we will do better at treating disease than if we adopt the humor convention. So, the germ convention will reduce suffering more. And that suggests that it is a conventional truth.

Notice something about this case. Our choice between conventions depends on the consequences of adopting each convention. The germ convention leads to better results and that is why we should accept it. The upshot is that our reasons for selecting conventions are instrumental. We pick the convention that best reduces suffering. And, if our reasons are instrumental, then these conventions lack non-derivative value. We should generalize from this case. In general, our reasons for picking any convention are instrumental, including our reasons for picking conventions about personal identity. Siderits writes that the "social construction [of persons] involves the ultimate fact that pain is bad; without this fact, there could be no explaining the force of any convention."²⁰ The personhood convention, and other conventions, are justified in virtue of the fact that it helps minimize suffering. It follows that the personhood convention is merely instrumentally valuable. Since persons and personal

Footnote 19 (continued)

man argues that we can defend reductionism and its ethical consequences "without appeal to the distinction between a priori and a posteriori ways of knowing." If so, this would be a response to Johnston's claim that, if reductionism is true, then it is only a posteriori true. While suggestive, Goodman's argument is rather brief and, at any rate, I will offer a different way of defending reductionism in this section. See: Roy W. Perrett, "Personal Identity, Minimalism, and Madhyamaka," *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 3 (2002): 373–85; Charles Goodman, "Can We Know Whether Śāntideva Was a Consequentialist?," in *Reasons and Empty Persons: Mind, Metaphysics, and Morality: Essays in Honor of Mark Siderits*, ed. Christian Coseru, 1st ed. 2023 edition (Springer, 2023), 437–557 at p. 455.

²⁰ Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 131.

identity are only conventionally real, personal identity is not what matters. At best, personal identity has only derivative importance.

You might be wondering why the reduction of suffering is the relevant normative criteria for selecting conventions. Why not use some other normative standard? Here is the reason. We can ground our obligation to reduce suffering in ultimate reality. This is so because pain sensations exist ultimately. Painfulness is a property-particular that remains after division and analysis. Abhidharma philosophers refer to this property-particular as *vedanā*, which means “feeling” or “sensation.” More precisely, *vedanā* is the bare, affective quality of experience that can have a positive, negative, or neutral valence. *Vedanā* is a *dharmā*. The affective quality of experience remains even after we attempt to analyze it into its component properties.²¹ So, *vedanā* with a negative valence, or pain, is part of ultimate reality. And, everything else being equal, pain is bad and ought to be reduced. In this way, we can ground the obligation to reduce suffering in ultimate existents, particularly *vedanā*.

Contrast the normative reasons to reduce pain with other possible normative reasons. Many of us think that we should respect the rights of others, that we have special obligations to friends and family members, that we have duties to keep our promises, and so on. The issue with these obligations is that they require the existence of entities that are ultimately unreal, particularly persons. Consider the obligation to respect rights. This obligation is usually thought to be grounded in the inviolability and separateness of persons. But, of course, Buddhist reductionists deny that persons are ultimately real. And a similar line of argument applies to other directed obligations. To take another example, duties of partiality depend on the existence of the people to whom I owe this partiality. The ontological commitments of Buddhist reductionism are incompatible with direct-duties of this kind. But, once we reject all direct-duties, there are only impersonal reasons to reduce suffering left. Through a process of elimination, we arrive at the view that we only have impersonal reasons of beneficence.²²

To recap, here is the Buddhist reductionist argument for the view that identity is not what matters. Personal identity is a convention. Our reasons for selecting one convention over another are instrumental in nature.²³ So, our reasons for valuing

²¹ Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosa-Bhasya* of Vasubandhu, p. 1892.

²² I realize that my argument for this sweeping conclusion is rather brief and undeveloped. For more sustained versions of it, see: Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Goodman, “Can We Know Whether Śāntideva Was a Consequentialist?” Parfit also gives arguments along these lines in *Reasons and Persons*. He contends that, if reductionism is true, then this at least partially undermines the separateness of persons and other non-consequentialist views. See: *Reasons and Persons*, chapter 15.

²³ An objector might argue that my description of Buddhist ethics ignores the diversity of normative reasons for acting that we find in Buddhist philosophical texts. For example, Buddhist texts indicate that we should keep our vows, refrain from killing, avoid deceptive speech, and satisfy a range of other obligations. Are all of these commitments really compatible with the kind of consequentialism that I am endorsing? Here are two brief comments in response to this concern. First, consequentialists have long argued that their normative ethics is consistent with many commonsense moral obligations. Perhaps, we can offer a consequentialist defense of the normative commitments that we find in the Buddhist ethical tradition as well. For an attempt to do this, see: Charles Goodman, *The Consequences of Compassion*. Second, the version of Buddhist reductionism that I am describing is a rational reconstruction of Buddhist ideas. Even if it turns out that some Buddhist authors and texts would reject this version of Bud-

personal identity are instrumental, too. It follows that personal identity only matters derivatively. What matters in itself is the reduction of impersonal suffering.²⁴

3.3 Personal identity is indeterminate

Another striking component of Parfit's position is that personal identity can be indeterminate. To defend this claim, Parfit gives the following thought experiment:

The Combined Spectrum. A surgeon gradually replaces my mind and body with the mind and body of another person, Greta Garbo. At T_1 , the surgeon only replaces a few cells in my brain and body with Greta Garbo's cells. But the surgeon gradually replaces more and more of my cells, and I take on more of Greta Garbo's psychology and characteristics. The surgeon replaces half of my brain with Greta Garbo's brain at T_2 . And the surgeon completely replaces my brain with that of Greta Garbo's at T_3 . After T_3 , the person who wakes up from the surgery has Greta Garbo's psychology, memories, and body.

Suppose that, before we reach T_2 , I ask the surgeon: "am I about to die?" or "will this person be me?" Parfit argues that these questions are empty because personal identity is indeterminate. That is, it is indeterminate whether the person at T_2 is me or Greta Garbo. The question "am I about to die?" lacks an informative answer.²⁵

Buddhist reductionism can agree with Parfit's analysis of the Combined Spectrum. Yet Buddhist reductionists can also explain why personal identity is indeterminate. The first step in their explanation is that conventions are vague. The classic versions of the sorites paradox illustrate this point. Take our convention "heap." This convention applies to, say, a large pile of sand. Clearly, a large pile of sand is a heap. But does the convention "heap" apply to, say, a thousand grains of sand? A hundred? Ten? The answers to these questions seem indeterminate. At some point, it is neither true nor false that some collection of sand is a heap. And this makes sense. The concept "heap" is a vague convention that reflects our use patterns and practical interests in communicating with one another. There is little reason to believe that this human creation carves anything in nature at its joints. Since the concept of "heap" is vague, it will sometimes be indeterminate when we should apply it. Or think about our convention "ocean." Consider the region between Antarctica and South America where the Pacific and Atlantic oceans meet. Where exactly does the Pacific end and the Atlantic begin? Our conventions are too imprecise to settle this

Footnote 23 (continued)

dhist reductionism, this does not necessarily show that this version of Buddhist reductionism is false or unjustified. For additional discussion of how we should go about developing a rational reconstructions of Buddhist ethics, see: Jay Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. iv-x. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

²⁴ I will qualify this claim in a moment. As I explain below, the promotion of welfare also matters intrinsically, not just the reduction of suffering.

²⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 236–243.

issue. This indeterminacy is explained by the fact that we are applying a vague convention to continuous bodies of water.²⁶

Buddhist reductionists can offer the same analysis about the Combined Spectrum. Persons are conventions. Thus, persons can be indeterminate. For sure, our personhood convention is usually precise enough for practical purposes. And our personhood convention tells us that, if a person changes somewhat or in an expected way, then this person survives. Suppose that, in Combined Spectrum, the surgeon only replaces one percent of my brain cells. Our personhood convention says that I survive the operation. After all, we also tend to say that people survive minor brain damage. It thus stands to reason that, according to our conventions, I survive during the initial stages of the Combined Spectrum.

Yet, like most conventions, the boundaries of the personhood convention are vague. Consequently, it can be indeterminate whether a person continues to exist or not. So, just as there is no precise answer to the question “where does the Atlantic end and the Pacific begin?,” there is also no precise answer to the question “will this person be me?” in the more advanced stages of the Combined Spectrum. Take T_2 , when the surgeon has replaced half of my brain cells with those of Greta Garbo. Here, our conventions fail us. It is unclear whether we should describe my status at this stage as “survival” or “death.” Once again, we are generating indeterminacy by applying our vague, conventional categories to a continuous reality.

In this way, Buddhist reductionists can agree with Parfit’s argument about the Combined Spectrum. But they can also explain *why* Parfit’s answer is correct. If persons are conventions, then it is plausible that the boundaries of persons are indeterminate.²⁷

3.4 Rebutting Johnston’s *reductio*

So far, I have explained how Buddhist reductionism supports key features of Parfit’s position, although it sometimes arrives at Parfit’s conclusions in different ways than he did. Now, I will return to Johnston’s main argument against Parfit’s reductionism. This is his *reductio* against reductionism about importance.

To recap, Johnston’s *reductio* goes like this:

1. Assumption for *Reductio*: if one fact consists in certain others, then it can only be these other facts which have rational or moral importance.
2. All facts consist in facts about fundamental particles and the distribution of fundamental forces across space–time.

²⁶ Here my analysis draws on Michael Huemer’s solution to the sorites paradox in: Michael Huemer, *Paradox Lost: Logical Solutions to Ten Puzzles of Philosophy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁷ To clarify, classical Buddhist philosophers did not argue that conventional concepts are vague. However, contemporary defenders of Buddhist reductionism, such as Siderits, do make this claim. See: Mark Siderits, “Is Reductionism Expressible?,” in *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Mario D’Amato, Jay L. Garfield, and Tom J. F. Tillemans (Oxford University Press, 2009), 57–69 at pp. 64–5.

3. So, only facts about fundamental particles and the distribution of fundamental forces have rational or moral importance.
4. Facts about fundamental particles and the distribution of fundamental forces do not have rational or moral importance.
5. So, it is false that if one fact consists in certain others, then it can only be these other facts which have rational or moral importance.

Does this argument have force against Buddhist reductionism?

One problem with using this *reductio* against Buddhist reductionism has to do with premise 1, reductionism about importance. Buddhist reductions are not committed to reductionism about importance. The antecedent of reductionism about importance is “one fact consists in certain others.” To say that one fact consists in other facts is to indicate that one fact is composed out of, or constituted by, other facts. But Buddhist reductionists deny that composition ever occurs in ultimate reality. If it is impossible for one fact to consist in other facts, then the antecedent of reductionism about importance is always false. This makes reductionism about importance vacuously true.²⁸ And it is hard to see why Buddhist reductionists should endorse this vacuously true conditional. After all, reductionism about importance is not, as far as I can tell, a premise in any argument that Buddhist reductionists give for their position. Thus, Buddhist reductionists are uncommitted to reductionism about importance. And, if Buddhist reductionists are uncommitted to reductionism about importance, then Johnston’s *reductio* fails to have force against them, as his *reductio* targets this specific claim.

Although Johnston’s *reductio* falls short of making contact with Buddhist reductionism, we might be able to revise this argument to make it more applicable. Here is one attempt. Remember that Buddhist reductionists want to anchor morality in the ultimate constituents of the universe. Buddhist reductionism says that ultimate existents are *dharma*s. Yet *dharma*s are mere property-particulars. And it is hard to see why mere property-particulars could have non-derivative value. Thus, it looks like Buddhist reductionism implies nihilism. But most of us are inclined to think that nihilism is false. We can conclude that Buddhist reductionism must be incorrect. This argument goes:

1. If Buddhist reductionism is true, then the ultimate constituents of reality are *dharma*s.
2. *Dharma*s do not have rational or moral importance.
3. If the ultimate constituents of reality are *dharma*s and *dharma*s do not have rational or moral importance, then nothing has rational or moral importance.
4. Something has rational or moral importance.

²⁸ If mereological nihilism is true, then premise 2 of Johnston’s *reductio* is also false. Premise 2 says that all facts consist in facts about fundamental particles and the distribution of fundamental forces across space–time. But this once again suggests composition. If composition never occurs, then it is false that all facts consist in facts about fundamental particles and the distribution of fundamental forces across space–time.

5. So, Buddhist reductionism is false.

Does this argument fare any better against Buddhist reductionism than Johnston's reductio?

The problem with this revised argument is premise 2, the premise that *dharma*s lack rational or moral importance. This premise is false. *Dharma*s can have non-derivative value. Here is an illustration. Remember that one kind of *dharma* is *vedanā*. *Vedanā* refers to the affective quality of experience or hedonic tone. *Vedanā* with a negative valence is pain. As I claimed earlier, there are impersonal reasons to reduce pain. But consider that *vedanā* can also have a positive valence. *Vedanā* with a positive valence is pleasure. And most of us think that pleasure has non-derivative value. Many of us also believe that other things besides pleasure have value. Nonetheless, it is fairly uncontroversial that pleasure has value, if anything does.

Consider a quick thought experiment to show that pleasure has intrinsic value. Imagine that, going forward, your life has all of the goods that it currently has except one: pleasure. You still have friends, family, knowledge, achievement, money, and so on. If you like, you can even stipulate that you have more of these goods. But, from now on, your life is devoid of pleasure. You will never again experience the pleasure of watching a beautiful sunset, laughing at a joke, having sex, or whatever. Your hedonic tone is completely flat. Is your life worse now? I submit that pretty much everyone would say that your life is vastly worse than it was, even if everything else in your life stayed exactly the same.²⁹ And the only plausible way of making sense of this judgment is that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and the loss of what is intrinsically valuable makes your life worse.

So, my argument against premise 2 of the revised reductio goes like this. *Vedanā* is *dharma*, and thus, it is ultimately real. *Vedanā* with a positive valence is pleasure. Moreover, pleasure is intrinsically valuable. In my view, this is why Buddhist reductionism can justify obligations to promote positive well-being, alongside an obligation to reduce suffering. We should promote *vedanā* with a positive valence. And there may be other *dharma*s besides *vedanā* that have intrinsic value as well. But, at any rate, my point here is that *dharma*s can have non-derivative importance. Thus, the revised argument is unsound since its second premise is false.

So, either Johnston's reductio fails to make contact with Buddhist reductionism or, once we try to revise this reductio to make it applicable to Buddhist reductionism, this reductio has a false premise. Either way, Johnston's reductio does not give us a reason to reject Buddhist reductionism. Now, Johnston or a like-minded critic could try other strategies. For instance, a critic might argue that the trope-theoretic ontology of Buddhist reductionism is false. Or a critic could contend that we should reject mereological nihilism, which is a key premise in the argument for Buddhist

²⁹ I of course concede that it is highly improbable that everything could stay the same if you no longer felt any pleasure. But it seems in principle possible and that is the possible world that I am asking you to evaluate.

reductionism.³⁰ These are possible avenues of attack and maybe they can work. But, if we focus on the arguments that Johnston gives or ones that we can easily adapt from his criticisms of Parfitian reductionism, then Buddhist reductionism escapes unscathed.

3.5 Summing up

Where does all of this leave us? The upshot of my discussion is this. First, Buddhist reductionism can justify key features of Parfit's position, such as the claims that personal identity is not what matters and can also be indeterminate. Second, Buddhist reductionism can avoid Johnston's powerful objections to Parfit's reductionism. Suppose that you are sympathetic to reductionism, but you are not sure what kind of reductionism to endorse. My arguments establish that, insofar as you want to support a version of reductionism that justifies the unimportance and indeterminacy of personal identity while avoiding Johnston's criticisms, then you should support Buddhist reductionism over Parfit's version.

To be clear, though, this is not an all-things-considered conclusion. Buddhist reductionism could have serious problems that Parfit's reductionism avoids. I certainly have not ruled this possibility out. So, my conclusion is limited. It is only that, in the respects that I have highlighted, Buddhist reductionism is superior to Parfit's reductionism. The question of whether Buddhist reductionism is all-things-considered more justified than Parfit's version is beyond the scope of this paper.

4 Objections

In this section, I will consider and respond to objections.

4.1 Parfit's criticisms of Buddhist reductionism

I have argued that we have good reasons to favor Buddhist reductionism to Parfit's version. But Parfit considers a Buddhist view and rejects it. Let us examine his reasons for this rejection.

Parfit attributes the following view to Buddhists:

The Eliminativist View. There really aren't such things as persons: there are only brains and bodies, and thoughts and other experiences.

³⁰ Johnston does in fact criticize a kind of mereological nihilism in: Mark Johnston, "Constitution Is Not Identity," *Mind* 101, no. 401 (1992a): 89–106. However, it is still somewhat ambiguous whether Johnston's position is incompatible with the kind of mereological nihilism that Buddhist reductionists endorse. This is so because Buddhist reductionists can, as a matter of conventional truth, agree that composition occurs. They will just deny that composition occurs in ultimate reality. Since Johnston does not consider the Buddhist position or the two truths, it is unclear whether his view that composition occurs conflicts with the Buddhist view.

Parfit says of the Eliminativist View: “Reductionism about some kind of entity is not often well expressed with the claim that there are no such entities. We should admit that there are nations, and that we, who are persons, exist.”³¹ So, Parfit thinks that some Buddhists are eliminativists about persons. But we should say that persons exist. Thus, we should reject the Eliminativist View.³²

Yet Parfit’s objection to the Eliminativist View fails to apply to Buddhist reductionism. Nations and persons are convenient designators. Convenient designators are useful fictions. And that is enough to justify their use. Thus, Buddhist reductionists can admit that there are nations and that we, who are persons, exist. They can say that it is conventionally true that nations and persons are real.

In fact, Parfit may even agree with Buddhist reductionism. At one point in *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit says: “We could fully describe our experiences, and the connections between them, without claiming that they are had by a subject of experiences. We could give what I call an *impersonal description*.”³³ Earlier, though, Parfit writes: “A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is what has experiences, or the subject of experiences. *This is true because of the way in which we talk*.”³⁴ The distinction between ultimate and conventional truths can help us to make sense of Parfit’s claims. The impersonal description is the ultimate truth. It tells us what the world is really like. But our conventions—the way that we talk—refer to persons. And these conventions can be useful, which is why it makes sense for us to talk as if persons were real.

So, Parfit misinterprets Buddhist reductionism. He thinks it endorses the Eliminativist View. That is inaccurate, though.³⁵ And, once we clarify Buddhist reductionism, it is hard to see where Parfit and Buddhists disagree.

4.2 Pleasure and intrinsic value in Buddhist philosophy

In Section 3, I proposed that Buddhist reductionists should accept that pleasure is intrinsically valuable. Here is a summary of my argument. Johnston contends that Parfit’s reductionism entails the view that nothing matters. Buddhist reductionism faces a similar challenge since Buddhist reductionism holds that only *dharmas* ultimately exist. And it is unclear how *dharmas* can have non-instrumental significance. Thus, like Parfit’s reductionism, Buddhist reductionism may lead to nihilism. But the worry that Buddhist reductionism implies nihilism is unfounded, since *dharmas* can have non-instrumental value. Pleasure is a *dharma* and, furthermore, pleasure has intrinsic value. Hence, Buddhist reductionism fails to entail nihilism.

³¹ Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity,” pp. 17–18.

³² But, in some of his writings, Parfit seems to express greater agreement with Buddhist thought. For example, in one paper, Parfit suggests that he endorses the Buddhist view of no-self and that, in a sense, persons are unreal. See: Derek Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons,” in *Science Fiction and Philosophy: From Time Travel to Superintelligence*, ed. Susan Schneider (Wiley, 2016), 91–98.

³³ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 225.

³⁴ Parfit, p. 223. My italics.

³⁵ Jonardon Ganeri argues at length that Parfit’s description of the Buddhist view is inaccurate and based on faulty translations of ancient Buddhist texts. See: Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*.

Yet the claim that pleasure is intrinsically valuable seems incompatible with Buddhist commitments. Buddhist scriptures often warn against the dangers of sensual pleasures and enjoin the followers of the Buddha to abandon their pursuit. One problem with pleasure is that it generates craving and clinging. We want the pleasure that we experience to persist, and we long for it when it is gone. But pleasure is impermanent. So, our craving for pleasure is bound to be frustrated, and this leads to suffering.³⁶ Other Buddhist doctrines may imply that pleasure lacks value as well. Consider Buddhists' attitudes toward the attainment of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*). The attainment of cessation is an advanced meditative state in which the meditator's mental functions cease. In other words, the attainment of cessation is a mindless, trance-like state. Yet Buddhist commentators claim that the attainment of cessation is desirable. One influential commentator, Buddhaghosa, even seems to identify the attainment of cessation with *nirvāṇa*.³⁷ Obviously, though, a meditator experiences no pleasure while he is in a mindless state since the meditator's mental functions are suspended. Yet, if pleasure has value, then it is hard to explain how the attainment of cessation could be a good thing. For these reasons, it is implausible that Buddhists can endorse the claim that pleasure has intrinsic value.³⁸

So, do Buddhist doctrines imply that pleasure lacks intrinsic value? One problem with this suggestion is that, while Buddhist texts often condemn the pursuit of sensual pleasure, in other cases, they suggest that happiness or pleasure (*sukha*) and rapture (*pīti*) can be desirable. For example, in the *Cūḷadukkhakkhandhasutta*, the Buddha boasts that he experiences greater pleasure than a powerful king. In commenting on this *sutta*, Christopher Framarin and Steven Harris note: "the Buddha is clear that this pleasure experienced in meditation has none of the negative drawbacks of sensual pleasure, such as stimulating pernicious craving."³⁹ Similarly, Keren Arbel surveys a variety of early Buddhist texts and argues that these texts distinguish between sensual pleasures that perpetuate desire and "wholesome" pleasures that avoid having this harmful effect. Arbel contends that, according to these early texts, the joy and pleasure that meditators encounter while entering advanced meditative states "aid the process of purification and liberation" and "should be cultivated."⁴⁰ Charles Goodman observes that the Buddha sometimes advises people on how to be reborn in the heavens. However, beings in the heavens experience intense pleasure and feel no motivation to achieve enlightenment. Goodman argues that "if life in heaven is not an effective means to spiritual progress, and if the pleasures of heaven are not intrinsically good, then it makes no sense for the Buddha to praise

³⁶ For an analysis of early Buddhist attitudes toward pleasure, see: Stephen E. Harris, "Suffering and the Shape of Well-Being in Buddhist Ethics," *Asian Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2014): 242–59.

³⁷ Paul Griffith, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind–Body Problem* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1986).

³⁸ I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

³⁹ Christopher Framarin and Steven Harris, "Pleasure, Desire and Welfare in Buddhist and Hindu Texts," in *The Road Less Taken: Essays in Honor of John Taber*, ed. Birgit Kellner et al. (Vienna: The Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2021), 127–45 at p. 134.

⁴⁰ Keren Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhanas as the Actualization of Insight* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 55 and 58.

the heavens or give others advice about how to get there. But he does both of these things; so the pleasures of heaven must be intrinsically good.”⁴¹

There is another objection to the claim that pleasure lacks value in Buddhist ethical thought. Indian Buddhist texts refrain from distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental value.⁴² Given that Indian texts neglect to clarify the different kinds of value (or disvalue) that pleasure could have, the condemnation of pleasure that we often encounter in early Buddhist texts is ambiguous. Consider the following two claims:

- A. Pleasure is intrinsically valuable.
- B. Pleasure is often the cause of suffering since we crave and cling to the experience of pleasure and these attitudes generate suffering.

Notice that claim B is compatible with claim A. That is because a good can have intrinsic value even though craving and clinging to this good generates suffering. And, if the experience of pleasure leads to suffering, then pleasure can be instrumentally bad on net, despite the fact that pleasure has intrinsic value. Thus, even if pleasure has intrinsic value, it may in some cases be irrational to pursue pleasure in virtue of the suffering that this causes.⁴³ Now, it is clear that Buddhist texts do often assert claim B. But it is far less clear that these texts deny A. Since Indian Buddhist texts do not distinguish between the claim that pleasure has intrinsic value but can be instrumentally bad and the claim that pleasure lacks intrinsic value altogether, it is difficult to settle whether these texts are rejecting A or merely affirming B.

Finally, let us consider the attainment of cessation. How can Buddhists positively evaluate the attainment of cessation if the meditator’s mental functions have been suspended? I concede that this is puzzling. In fact, commentators have struggled to explain why attainment of cessation is a good thing.⁴⁴ But here is one possible interpretation. Buddhists, of course, believe that suffering is bad. Furthermore, it could be that the reasons to avoid suffering outweigh the reasons to experience pleasure. During the attainment of cessation, the meditator ceases to experience suffering. If the reasons to prevent suffering outweigh the reasons to experience pleasure, then the balance of reasons can favor cultivating the attainment of cessation. This in turn explains why Buddhist practitioners should bring about this meditative state. Yet this evaluation of the attainment of cessation is compatible with the claim that pleasure has intrinsic value. Buddhaghosa may even have had something like this analysis in mind when he explained why meditators should cultivate the attainment of cessation.⁴⁵ To be clear, I am not sure that my explanation of the value of the attainment

⁴¹ Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*, p. 66.

⁴² Charles Goodman makes this observation in *Consequences of Compassion*, p. 127.

⁴³ Consider the alcoholic who derives pleasure from drinking, but whose pursuit of this pleasure is ruining her life. In this case, we can say that the pleasure that drinking brings about is intrinsically good and also that this pleasure is instrumentally bad because of the suffering that it causes.

⁴⁴ See: Griffith, *On Being Mindless*, pp. 13–31.

⁴⁵ Buddhaghosa says that meditators seek out the attainment of cessation because they become “tired of the occurrence and dissolution of formations” and they think “Let us live in happiness having become mindless here and now having attained that cessation which is Nirvana.” A later commentator, Dhamma-

of cessation is correct. My claim is only that it is coherent to positively evaluate the attainment of cessation while affirming the intrinsic value of pleasure.

Despite initial appearances to the contrary, the position that pleasure has intrinsic value is not clearly incompatible with Buddhist doctrines and commitments. If that is true, then Buddhist reductionists can continue to appeal to the value of pleasure in order to rebut the objection that their views have nihilistic implications.⁴⁶

4.3 Metaphysical minimalism

There is an aspect of Johnston's position that I have neglected to discuss. This is his minimalism about metaphysics. Minimalism is the view that "metaphysical pictures of the justificatory undergirdings of our practices do not represent the crucial conditions of justification of those practices."⁴⁷ Here is what Johnston has in mind. We sometimes think that our practices and concerns depend on metaphysical assumptions. Take personal identity. Some people think that egoistic or prudential concern relies on the truth of non-reductionism. On this view, it is rational to be egoistically concerned about your future self because you share a soul, or Cartesian ego, with this future self. But, if non-reductionism is false, then we lack good reason for egoistic concern. On closer examination, though, the assumption that prudential concern depends on non-reductionism turns out to be incorrect. According to Johnston, we can justify our self-concern without relying on metaphysics.

Minimalism opposes Parfit's reductionism. Parfit's arguments are about the metaphysics of personal identity. His arguments try to show that our metaphysical assumptions about personal identity are wrong and, for this reason, we should adjust our practical concerns. Parfit concludes that reductionism helps support consequentialism. It also should make us less concerned with our own lives, more concerned with the lives of others, and less fearful of death. But, if minimalism is right, then it is a mistake to revise our practical concerns on the basis of metaphysical arguments. The metaphysics of personal identity could merely be epiphenomenal to our practices. This is also an objection to Buddhist reductionism. Buddhist reductionists hold that the truth of reductionism has important ethical and soteriological consequences. But, if Johnston is right, this claim is false.

Here is a problem with Johnston's minimalism, though. It is unclear what the argument for minimalism is supposed to be, apart from the negative arguments that Johnston gives against reductionism. If Johnston's arguments are sound, then they show that reductionism is false. Yet this falls short of vindicating minimalism. That is because minimalism is a general claim about how our practices and concerns are

Footnote 45 (continued)

pala, interprets "happiness" in this passage to mean the absence of suffering. If that interpretation is correct, then Buddhaghosa is saying that meditators seek out the attainment of cessation in order to achieve the absence of suffering. If this choice is rational, then it seems that the reasons to prevent suffering must outweigh other reasons. These sources are quoted in: Griffith, p. 29.

⁴⁶ I have developed an argument for the view that Buddhist reductionism is compatible with the view that pleasure has intrinsic value in greater detail elsewhere. See: Javier Hidalgo, "An Abhidharmic Theory of Welfare," *Asian Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2021): 254–70.

⁴⁷ Johnston, "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves," p. 260–1.

insulated from metaphysics. Reductionist arguments are just one attempt to show how metaphysics bear on our practices. Perhaps some of our practices do depend on metaphysical assumptions, but reductionist arguments failed to undermine these assumptions. Other arguments, however, may succeed in doing so. This means that minimalism could be false even if Johnston's criticisms of reductionism are correct.

However, let us grant for the sake of argument that if Johnston's criticisms of reductionism are correct, then this provides indirect support for minimalism. As I have argued in Section 3, Johnston's arguments against reductionism are unsuccessful, provided that we adopt Buddhist reductionism. So, if the main argument for minimalism is the falsity of reductionism, then this argument fails.

At any rate, Buddhist reductionist can accommodate minimalism to a degree. Once again, they can do this by using the two truths. Buddhist reductionists think that persons are conventionally real, as the personhood convention may lead to successful practice. This is so because, if a series of psychophysical elements identifies as a person, this can result in less suffering. Suppose that is correct. We now have a justification for personal identity that avoids relying on metaphysical assumptions. Personal identity has a pragmatic justification, not a metaphysical one. And, for this reason, metaphysical arguments are unable to undermine our practice of thinking of ourselves as persons who persist across time. We should still have prudential concern for our futures. In this sense, Buddhist reductionism is compatible with a modest version of minimalism.

So, the following claim seems plausible:

- (i) We can justify some of our attitudes and practices relating to personal identity, such as our special concern for our own futures, even if reductionism about persons is true.

But we can distinguish (i) from:

- (ii) If reductionism about persons is true, then this fact should not affect any of our attitudes and practices.

And claim (ii) seems false. The truth of reductionism should affect our emotions, attitudes, and practices.

Here is just one, vivid example: our attitudes toward death. Most of us fear death. The prospect of death may even evoke existential terror and dread. But, if we are reductionists, this changes how we should think of death. Parfit writes:

Consider the fact that, in a few years, I shall be dead. This fact can seem depressing. But the reality is only this. After a certain time, none of the thoughts and experiences that occur will be directly causally related to this brain, or be connected in certain ways to these present experiences. That is all this fact involves. And, in that redescription, my death seems to disappear.⁴⁸

Parfit also says that death "is merely the fact that, after a certain time, none of the experiences that will occur will be related, in certain ways, to my present

⁴⁸ Parfit, "The Unimportance of Identity," p. 45.

experiences. Can this matter all that much?”⁴⁹ So, Parfit is arguing that the truth of reductionism should make us fear death less.

How is this argument supposed to go? We can reconstruct it as follows. First, if reductionism is true, then death is, in a relevant way, similar to our ordinary existence. Ordinary existence just involves the experiencing of a series of interrelated mental and physical events. In a similar way, Buddhists say that we are bundles of *skandhas*, psychophysical properties that interact with one another, and we conventionally designate these psychophysical properties as “persons.” That is all that our existence consists in.

Now, what happens after we die? There will still be series of mental and physical events. They will just happen in the lives of others. Yet, just as my current mental and physical states influence my future ones, my current psychophysical properties may still influence the future experiences that will exist after we die. For example, people might remember me for a time or act on advice that I have given. In this sense, what ordinary existence consists in and what happens after death are analogous. Note that we can provide a similar analysis of death if we accept the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. According to Buddhists, ordinary existence consists in one set of *skandhas* causing another set of *skandhas* to come into existence. And the same thing occurs after we die. When a person dies, one set of *skandhas* causes another set to come into existence, but these *skandhas* come into existence as a new life. So, if we accept the doctrine of rebirth, then ordinary existence and death are, in this respect, also analogous.

The final step in the argument is that ordinary existence, understood in a reductionist way, is nothing to fear. We lack reason to regret that we are a series of mental and physical events rather than Cartesian egos or immaterial souls. And, given that ordinary existence and death are similar in a relevant way, then we have little to fear in death. Reductionism dissolves our existential terror.⁵⁰

My point here is not to fully defend this argument. Instead, my point is to explain how, if reductionism is true, this plausibly should impact our attitudes and concerns. This is a reason to reject (ii), the claim that, if reductionism about persons is true, then this fact should not affect any of our attitudes and practices.

5 Conclusion

Johnston’s views have evolved over time. He once defended metaphysical minimalism and commonsense views about personal identity. But, in his book *Surviving Death*, Johnston revises his position. Johnston now defends a version of *anattā*, or

⁴⁹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 282.

⁵⁰ This is not to say that there is nothing bad about death. If Buddhist reductionism is true, then death may still make the world impersonally worse, and this is a reason to avoid it, if we can. I should also note that traditional Buddhists may object to this argument. They may well contend that ordinary, samsaric existence is indeed something to regret. If so, then this argument will fail to convince Buddhists that we should not fear death. Nonetheless, the argument that I am sketching could at least give Buddhists a reason to believe that death is not necessarily worse than our continuing existence within our present lives.

the Buddhist no-self doctrine. He denies that there are persisting selves and argues in favor of a kind of relativism according to which our personal identity is determined by our dispositions and responses.⁵¹ In various ways, Johnston's position has moved closer to Parfit's views. Yet differences remain. While Johnston accepts a no-self doctrine, he believes that "personal identity and the persistence of individual personalities matter."⁵² In other words, Johnston still thinks that personal identity matters non-derivatively, and he continues to endorse his earlier criticisms of Parfit's reductionism.

In this paper, I have tried to make progress on the debate between Parfit and Johnston. On the whole, my sympathies lie with Parfit. Nonetheless, we should revise Parfit's position in key ways. In particular, we should revise it in a Buddhist direction, everything else being equal. Buddhist reductionism has the resources to counter Johnston's criticisms while justifying Parfit's more radical views on personal identity. So, Parfitian reductionists have good reason to become Buddhist reductionists.

Data availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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⁵¹ Johnston, *Surviving Death*.

⁵² Johnston, p. 315.

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