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A Review Essay of *Personal Identity and
Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*

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Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons. By Mark Siderits. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003. 231 pages. Cloth. ISBN 0-7546-3473-6.

This is the work of an analytical philosopher, working within the Western tradition, on something central to Buddhist doctrine, which is also the subject of much debate in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Professor Mark Siderits, of Illinois State University, describes it as “an essay in fusion philosophy”. By this he means the bringing to bear of a form of analysis developed within one philosophical tradition on topics and problems to be found within another. The new century is likely to see many more instances of this enterprise, which has an obvious promise. Its dangers are almost as obvious. They lie in a likely dependence on translation, and in unfamiliarity with the alien contexts in which arguments are to be found and with their governing assumptions. There follows a risk of finding and fastening on convergences of thought which may be striking, but only superficially so. Some such weakness can, I believe, be seen to mark many earlier offerings of “fusion philosophy”.

Siderits’ subject is personal identity and, more particularly, the view of the person put forward by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons*, published in 1984. Parfit is concerned with what it is to be a person, and with whether and how we continue to be the same persons throughout our lives. He argues for a version of “Reductionism”, on which what we take to be identity is to be understood as—that is, “reduced to”—the existence of chains of psychological connectedness and continuity. We may continue to talk of “persons” on grounds of convenience, but a complete account of reality may be given without employing the person-notion. It is Siderits’ claim that this line of argument can be strengthened and clarified by arguments to be

found within the Buddhist tradition. The first half of the book is devoted to a defence of Reductionism of this kind.

Parfit is aware of the Buddhist parallel to his own thought, and makes a few ill-ordered references to it. These fall well short of enlisting the Buddhist tradition in his support, and Siderits' undertaking is plainly worthwhile, having indeed a rather wider application than he suggests. The Buddhist-advocate is likely to be conscious of difficulties of the same order as those facing the proponent of Parfitian Reductionism. Siderits' arguments, if they are cogent, may be open to enlistment towards the resolution of these concerns, in particular to disposing of the objection that Buddhist orthodoxy both asserts and denies persistent individuality or personhood. This is an objection likely to be prompted by any comprehensive account of Buddhist doctrine. The enquirer will register the stress on continuity implicit in the notions of karma and rebirth and will understand this to be personal continuity ("At that time Sariputta was X"). He will register the warning that misconceived action will have painful consequences. For the warning to count as such, it seems that he must assume his own continuance. At the same time, he will learn that he has no soul or other permanent part, and that he is made up of five skândhas in a state of perpetual flux, and of nothing else. This is a view of the subject that seems to rule out the very continuity just emphasized. The problem for morality seems to lie in the doubt cast by this perplexity.

Parfit is aware of the ethical dimension to his argument. He records finding his Reductionist conclusion "liberating", by which he means that it brings about a loosening of self-concern and some weakening of attachment to existence. These consequences are of a kind to accord with a main conclusion of an earlier part of *Reasons and Persons*, one that considers reasons. This was that it was a deeply rooted error to suppose that it could never be irrational to act with a view to one's own long-term interest. On the contrary, disinterested action might well be rational. This fits well with Parfit's later conclusion that our morality should be more impersonal. All this, in its rather tepid way, will be congenial to the Buddhist-advocate. What may be less congenial is what Parfit identifies as a continuing problem. He styles this "the Extreme Claim", finding it at least an arguable deduction from Reductionist conclusions. The Claim is that I have no reason to be more concerned for "my own" distant future than for that of anyone else. If this is right, it seems at least arguable that I have no reason to be concerned with the future. There may be an equality of indifference between myself and others. This has implications for action and moral choice that may be found disturbing. They will be seen to be comparable with those to be found

within the Buddhist sphere.

Here is one form of Reductionism, with its difficulties, that Siderits sets himself to defend. What he argues for is not quite the Buddhist version, nor the Parfitian, but one that has its own, somewhat intransigent, philosophical character. He provides—as Parfit does not—a clear statement of what he takes Reductionism to be, placing it between Non-Reductionism and Eliminativism. On Reductionist premises, the person is found to be dispensable by way of being “reducible”—yet to have, for all that, a certain utility. In contrast, the Non-Reductionist will deny the possibility of any “reduction” of the person; the Eliminativist will object to its part-perpetuation, on the grounds on which he would object to the continued recognition of any entity postulated within, and only within, some discredited theory within natural science. On this account of things Siderits is also able to place the *Pudgalavāda*: it appears between Non-Reductionism and Reductionism.

I find that what Siderits offers is not quite what he promises. While the Buddhist scheme of things, and Buddhist arguments, are a steady background presence, they do not figure as strongly in the defence of Siderits’ version of Reductionism as we might have expected. Siderits does, however, put considerable weight on the notion of the Two Truths. If the Sanskrit and Pali terms designating the Truths may be glossed as “ultimate” and “conventional”, the elements composing personhood are found to be ultimate and the person itself to be conventional. How much of a clarification of Reductionism this amounts to will depend on the view one takes of the Two Truths notion. This is a topic too large to be considered incidentally, but it can be said that Siderits has nothing to say about the history of the notion and does not make sufficiently clear its slow development. The simplest historical account would bring out its barely embryonic presence in the early texts, its uneven development through the commentarial texts and the *Milindapañha*, and its centrality in the assertions of the *Mahāyāna*. Such an account seems necessary as a preface to any consideration of the Two Truths. Reference to it is needed for the defence of the notion against the sceptic, who may be supposed to claim that the notion is less a solution to the basic difficulty in Buddhist doctrine to which I have referred above than a restatement of that difficulty in fresh terms, providing cover for simultaneous assertion and denial (“I go on as a discrete individual, even across lives, yet I am not a discrete individual”). In other words, to put the sceptical hint at its plainest, the practitioner can accommodate the simultaneous assertion of incompatibles by way of verbal paltering over the notion of truth.

Part of the appeal for Siderits of the Two Truths notion may have been the ready compatibility of the view of “conventional” truth that it supports

with his position on other matters. His view of morality is plainly Consequentialist, while his understanding of meaning has more than a smack of the version of Pragmatism associated with William James. Here are the ingredients for what is certainly a coherent position. What Siderits argues for is a Reductionist notion of the person spelled out much more fully than it is by Parfit. His “person” resembles a committee or a “system” rather than an entity; it is an association of shifting elements, which is nonetheless capable of self-appraisal and calculated action. The notion of truth and meaning that goes with this, and to which the quasi-entity, if enlightened to some degree, may be taken to subscribe, takes all everyday assertion to have its significance in its value for the practical purposes of survival and flourishing.

Siderits’ Consequentialism—utilitarian in character—receives explicit statement in an endnote in which he distinguishes his view of Buddhist ethics from that of Damien Keown, but it is evident in the main text from references to “overall maximization of welfare” and to “welfare-maximizing strategies”. It is most evident in a passage where he defends his position from criticism by a notional Pudgalavadin. This critic is taken to have suggested that Siderits’ notion of the person cannot admit the concept of moral desert. He counters with a purely utilitarian account of punishability, concluding, “I can be judged as culpable only if there is a reasonably high probability that pain input [punishment] into this causal series will alter the motivational structure that brought about the original misdeed obvious riposte to this is that “culpable” does not mean “reformable”, but to Siderits it plainly does: his position is too clear for us to suspect inadvertence.

Whatever the merits of the case he makes for a Reductionist view of the person, Siderits draws on Buddhist resources less than he supposes. He also offers little that might be applied to the fortification of the specifically Buddhist Reductionism against obvious attacks. It will be apparent from what has just been said about his Pragmatism that his view of Buddhist ethics is less than fully sympathetic. Consequentialist though he is, he has no time for the central doctrine of karma. He sees the tension between this doctrine and the Reductionist view of the person, but does not address the point.

There is room to make one point only about the philosophical cogency of Siderits’ case. His exposition, and “reduction”, of the person is made in isolation, unaccompanied by any consideration of the living thing, “the man” as Locke has it. This seems a damaging omission, as it is hardly deniable that either the “unreduced” person, or the “system” that succeeds it in understanding, must be taken to be vitally connected with “the man”—just

how connected being of course the whole question. In so disregarding this connection, Siderits follows Parfit, and might, perhaps, be inclined to reply that he was acting defensibly in considering the question on Parfitian terms. But it is here that Parfit himself has received some trenchant criticism. This naturally receives no attention. There is no consideration of perhaps the most acute of Parfit's critics, John McDowell, though his essay, "Reductionism and the First Person", with its concluding reference to the need to hold fast to the concept of the "rational animal", is to be found in the bibliography.

The second part of the book must be considered more briefly. Siderits presents what he calls, "the objection that Buddhist anti-realists first developed against Buddhist Reductionism". This is commonly the line of criticism given classic expression by Nagarjuna and found, not without variations, throughout the Mahayana. Central to it is the claim that not only complex entities but all entities lack self-being or "intrinsic essence", as Siderits has it. This claim has an obvious bearing on the assumption made by Reductionists, Buddhist or otherwise, that there are "basic" elements to which complexities such as that caught by the person-notion may be reduced.

Siderits brings this criticism to bear on the contemporary debates between realists and anti-realists. He claims that the tradition which produced it has strengths which contemporary anti-realism often lacks, and considers the consequences for morality of an anti-realist conclusion, suggesting the outline of an answer to the basic problem in Buddhist ethics outlined above and to Parfit's Extreme Claim. He has already advocated "ironic engagement" in winding up his discussion of Reductionism. This is the stance of both taking as given and also of "seeing through" the world of experience. He now concludes by relating this recommendation to an anti-realist standpoint, and by suggesting how the practitioner might follow it with the disinterestedness and benevolence of a Bodhisattva.

It would take a book as long as the one under review to deal properly with the demanding arguments to be found within it. This is a rewarding contribution to discussion, avoiding the superficiality and confusions that, I have suggested, often accompany "fusion philosophy". It caters for its two potential readerships, of differing basic interests, by way of distinguishing footnotes and endnotes. It is not easy reading, and cannot claim anything like Parfit's stylistic felicity. The proofreading is less than perfect, and once or twice I had to conclude that something had gone wrong with the text. Apart from that, the book is well-produced and no more expensive than is to be expected. It deserves to be read by anyone with the concerns that it addresses.