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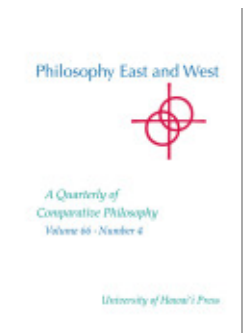
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## BUDDHIST REDUCTIONISM, FICTIONALISM ABOUT THE SELF, AND BUDDHIST FICTIONALISM



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Buddhist reductionism (BR) is the view that there is no self and that, strictly speaking, our talk of persons should be better understood as talk of fictional entities.<sup>1</sup> The version of BR introduced by Mark Siderits assigns a fictional status to our talk of temporally extended persons because of the idea that entirely giving up everyday alleged references to persisting people would be impractical and, possibly, even disadvantageous to the minimization of suffering. Although many Buddhists have recommended that we should ultimately renounce the idea that unchanging entities exist, dispensing with apparent reference to persons raises deep concerns about the applicability of moral concepts and virtues (moral responsibility, desert, filial pity, etc.) that seem to have a better foundation than doubts about the existence of persons. The problem of dispensing even with *fictional* reference to persons does not seem to be limited to attitudes or moral precepts (e.g., regret) that can be considered external to Buddhism; it also applies to concepts that are usually associated with a Buddhist worldview, such as the notions of *karma* and rebirth. Various strategies have been proposed to cope with these internal difficulties, such as the distinction between conventional and ultimate truths.<sup>2</sup> This is the strategy proposed by Siderits' BR: although it is ultimately true that there are no temporally extended persons, it is conventionally true—that is, fictional—that people exist.

In this essay, I first introduce Siderits' BR and then outline a different framework that can accommodate the main intuitions behind BR at least as well as BR does. In particular, I discuss the fictionalist strategy popular in contemporary metaphysics, improve on some minor problems usually overlooked by its proponents, and outline a general version of Buddhist fictionalism (BF).<sup>3</sup> In the second section of part 2, I provide a specification of the fictionalist strategy in terms of the concept of entertainment. In the subsequent sections, I specify in greater detail a general fictionalist strategy about persons and BF. Subsequently, I also develop other varieties of BF. The definitions of these varieties depend on which crucial features are ascribed to the fiction entertained when thinking about persisting persons.

As in the case of Siderits, who does not seem to believe that BR is the best theory of the self, it is my belief that the variants of BF here outlined are not the best theories available. Thus, I propose to offer a charitable reconstruction and mapping of philosophical views that combine some main Buddhist principles with recent developments in metaphysics and a reconstruction of a more general fictionalist attitude toward the self. However, by stating some of the theoretical costs of accepting

each theory, I provide the means for judging which theory on offer here is better than the others.

### *1. Buddhist Reductionism*

#### *Buddhist Reductionism, the Self, and Persons*

Siderits distinguishes between the concept of a person and that of a self by saying that the former should be intended as a psychophysical complex (whose parts will be described in what follows) considered as a whole. The self, in contrast, is only the essential part of this complex, the part that would remain constant and may account for the diachronic identity of the person-complex, if this self really existed.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as a first approximation, a self is the enduring part of a person, the unchanging essence of a sum of elements that, when considered together, are generally regarded as constituting a single person.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Derek Parfit's work on personal identity, Siderits claims that a reductionist about a type of objects, K, maintains that our talk of Ks, although dispensable in principle, is useful and satisfies some criteria of correctness.<sup>6</sup> From an ontological standpoint, a reductionist maintains that although there is a sense in which Ks may be said to exist, their existence consists of the existence of things of a more basic sort. Although Ks do not belong in our final ontology (that is, the complete description of the ultimate components of the world), Ks are said to be mereological sums of these more basic elements. Although talk of Ks can, in principle, be eliminated from our language, it retains some utility that may render its use tolerable and, as in the case of persisting persons, crucial for the understanding of certain moral virtues (e.g., gratitude). Siderits suggests that the distinction between eliminativism and reductionism about Ks may be a matter of degree and that such a distinction may be located at a semantic level. In particular, the eliminativist regards our talk about non-ultimate Ks as malformed, incoherent, and perhaps to be eliminated. The reductionist, in contrast, assumes a more relaxed attitude toward our talk about Ks because she concedes that some claims about Ks have theoretical or practical advantages.<sup>7</sup>

Another important distinction is that between ultimate and conventional truths. There is a wide consensus among scholars that the doctrine of the Buddha says that mereological sums are ultimately unreal, or, at least, that truths involving them are of a different type relative to truths involving the ultimate parts of reality.<sup>8</sup> This doctrine resembles a position in contemporary metaphysics called mereological nihilism, which suggests that there are no composite objects, only individuals with no parts.<sup>9</sup> A further clarification of the previous Buddhist ideas concerning the unreality of composite objects should be noted: Siderits claims that partite or composed entities are ultimately unreal because their essential properties must be derived from their parts. A *dharmā*, that is, an entity contained in our ultimate ontology, is such because it bears its own essential or intrinsic properties.<sup>10</sup> Abhidharma texts differ in the proposed taxonomy and organization of the *dharmas*. The Theravāda proposed a system of eighty-two *dharmā* categories, whereas the Sarvāstivāda introduced a system of seventy-five basic types. It should be remembered that the term *dharmā* was used to

indicate both a token and a type of these basic categories.<sup>11</sup> Keeping in mind these theoretical presuppositions, Siderits defines BR as the thesis according to which (1) there is no self and (2) the person is a fiction.<sup>12</sup> In addition to these two principles, I understand BR as including other theses typical of many Buddhist philosophers of different schools: (3) the previous two points are conducive, provided we interiorize them, to the elimination of a certain type of suffering and (4) the doctrine of the two truths (more on this later).

We may add other principles to the previous formulation of BR that are more contentious from a secular perspective, such as certain versions of the doctrines of rebirth and *karma*.<sup>13</sup> However, our discussion will focus on the core version of BR discussed above. What we call a person is, according to BR, a series of five kinds of impersonal, impermanent, but causally related psychophysical elements (this is the so-called doctrine of the five *skandhas*). These elements are the category of the physical and four other categories of psychological states: feelings, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, a person contains no further substance that connects these *skandhas* or that persists alongside particular instantiations of these categories of psychophysical elements. Persons and personal identity are illusions, or so the supporter of BR contends, because there is no self that can be considered the essential and immutable core of a person, the subject of change. Although it is not completely clear how to make sense of the suggestion that each component of a person is a simple in itself or that it bears its own essential properties (for instance, can we really say that all instances of the category of the physical are mereological simples?), this difficulty is not decisive. The supporter of BR can increase the number of physical *skandhas* (types and tokens) to include those simples that can be sensibly considered ontological primitives (*dharmas*). What matters, at least in the Buddhist tradition at issue, is that these primitives are impermanent in the sense that their existence is momentary and that each simple or impartite entity is not identified with what we would identify as the whole person. For instance, the theory is compatible with holding that a quark is a *dharma*, provided that a quark is not what we consider to be a person and that its existence is momentary.<sup>15</sup>

In Indian Buddhist philosophy, there is a long tradition of different lines of reasoning in support of the idea that there is no self. One of these lines revolves around the idea that all phenomena the explanations of which seemingly require the postulation of a self (such as cases of diachronic identity) do not require, after careful examination, anything over and above *dharmas*. In other words, the self is a dispensable entity, devoid of explanatory power. Even mental events such as memories, for instance, can be explained in terms of the momentary existence of causally linked *skandhas* of the proper type. One source of the mistake of considering the self an existing entity is our language, particularly our use of and familiarity with expressions such as "I," "you," and "mine." Moreover, we indulge in the mistake of talking about an enduring self and, consequently, about persons because they appear to be necessary for certain aspects of our social life. Despite the utility of talking about persisting persons, however, belief in the existence of a persistent self leads to existential suffering (a form of *duḥkha*), that is, a painful mental state that derives from

the awareness of our mortality—or so the Buddha claimed. The recognition of the nonexistence of a self and the practices aimed at reinforcing this belief are supposed to have a therapeutic effect, such as obtaining freedom from our lingering desires of clinging to life.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, the Buddhist reductionist wants to preserve our talk about the self by virtue of its apparent utility (and perhaps as a means of optimizing overall welfare). On the other hand, such talk may result in the perpetuation of unattainable desires, such as the desire to avoid death.

In summary, although BR denies the real existence of persons, many Buddhists do not purport to eliminate our *talk* about persons given its utility. Point (4), the doctrine of the two truths, is one way in which BR can harmonize the claim that persons do not exist with the belief that our talk about persons is useful.

### *Buddhist Reductionism and the Doctrine of Two Truths*

Our talk about the self and persons may be pragmatically useful to minimize suffering (or maximize overall well-being) but also dangerous enough to exacerbate some of our concerns about our own (if at all) future nonexistence. The pragmatic advantages of our talk about persons can also be appreciated if we imagine a world in which such a talk is absent: various basic kinds of social practices and interactions would be impossible. BR has a way of reconciling our pre-theoretical beliefs about the utility of our talk about persons (and other partite entities) with (1) and (2), namely the doctrine of the two truths.<sup>17</sup> According to Siderits—and cutting through a history of more than 2,500 years—this doctrine says that a statement is said to be *conventionally* true if and only if it is assertible by the conventions of common sense, which are based on the standard of utility. A statement is said to be *ultimately* true just in case it both corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of what is not ultimately real.<sup>18</sup> A Buddhist reductionist would thus say that the statement “The person King Milinda did not exist” is conventionally false. There are *skandhas* connected by causal chains, so it is ultimately true that, say, there is a set  $s_1$  of *skandhas*<sub>1</sub>, . . . , *skandhas*<sub>n</sub> closed under causal connection, whereas it is ultimately false to say that there is an enduring self that connects all of these parts. So, the doctrine suggests that a statement ultimately true has the form: this *dharma* in association with these other *dharma*s causes this new *dharma* to come into existence.

Siderits further suggests that, logically and semantically, ultimate truth behaves classically and bi-valently, whereas a degree-theoretic or infinite-values account can be used at the level of conventional truth. Later, however, Siderits claims that statements that employ convenient designators (that is, words purportedly referring to sums of *dharma*s) are not truth-apt.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that conventional truths about persons are not only accepted for pragmatic reasons but also rely on facts about the causal connections between *skandhas*. If we take both types of discourses, conventional and ultimate, as truth-apt, then BR seems to embrace one version of what is now called alethic pluralism.<sup>20</sup> Nicolaj Jang Lee Pedersen distinguishes at least two different forms of alethic pluralism: strong pluralism and moderate pluralism.<sup>21</sup> According to the former, truth-bearers, whatever they are, do not all share the

same truth property. According to a moderate version of pluralism, all truth-bearers have a truth property (called “truth-as-such”), but a multitude of diverse properties are responsible for the possession of such a property. Siderits’ original interpretation of the doctrine of two truths lacks a number of details that would settle the question of how to interpret his earlier view in terms of the terminology of alethic pluralism. It is my understanding that the doctrine of two truths is better seen as an instance of a strong version of alethic pluralism, but it also seems that nothing excludes the possibility of interpreting it as a form of moderate pluralism (particularly considering the further developments of the doctrine in other, especially Mahāyāna, schools of Buddhism).

Adopting either version of alethic pluralism may be regarded as theoretically onerous: in fact, BR would inherit a whole series of objections that apply to them.<sup>22</sup> For reasons of space I will not discuss these objections, and thus I provide a rationale for the alternative theories proposed in the next sections only in the form of a conditional: if adopting alethic pluralism is taken to be theoretically disadvantageous, then we have a *prima facie* reason to seek an alternative theory of the self based on Buddhist principles that remains neutral in regard to controversial issues on the nature of truth. Given the already revisionary metaphysics proposed by BR, I take it to be a theoretical advantage to avoid including other theories that are highly controversial.<sup>23</sup> In the next section, I propose a different account of the idea that our talk about selves is related to our fictional discourse that does not require assuming anything over and above certain faculties and capacities that we have independent reasons to ascribe to rational agents.

## *II. Fictionalisms and Fictionalism about the Self*

### *General Formulation*

There are many ways in which contemporary scholars have specified the general fictionalist position in regard to different areas of thought.<sup>24</sup> One of the characterizing features of fictionalism, which also justifies its name, is that, as for fictions, certain thoughts or propositions do not have to be true to be good. In turn, this “goodness” is variously specified in relation to the kind of thoughts at issue. For example, in the case of fictionalism about possible worlds, the goodness of thoughts about possible worlds is their facilitating role in theorizing about modality. Similar to error theories, some versions of fictionalism assume that certain areas of discourse or thought have the same ontological commitments and semantic structure they appear to have and that such thoughts are false.<sup>25</sup> Like some instrumentalists, fictionalists believe that discourses at issue are useful, but do not necessarily think that sentences used to express such thoughts have a meaning different from what they appear to have. If a fictionalist were forced to give a different semantic account of the area of discourse at issue, she would only be committed to what she is committed to by her preferred semantic and logical account of our talk about fictional entities.<sup>26</sup> A characterizing feature of all forms of fictionalism is that this family of theories prescribes the adoption of a specific propositional attitude different from belief toward the areas of

thought at issue. The fictionalist attitude characterizing the different variants of fictionalism can be understood in a number of ways: as pretense, acceptance, indifference, make-believe, or entertaining.<sup>27</sup> In what follows, I discuss one version of fictionalism about the self (FS) based on the notion of entertaining, and then formulate Buddhist fictionalism (BF) as a type of FS.

Philosophers have distinguished between three different types of fictional discourse: fictive, metafictional, and transfictional.<sup>28</sup> Fictive discourse includes utterances that are part of a fictional text and provide content to a fiction. Metafictional discourse includes utterances that affirm something *about* the content of a fiction and that can be either true or false in relation to their scope. For example, “Kurtz is a fictional character” is true in the real world because the name “Kurtz” is used to refer to a character in Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>29</sup> In the fiction *Heart of Darkness*, it is true that Kurtz was an ivory trader, but it is false that he was a fictional character.<sup>30</sup> The third type of fictional discourse, transfictional discourse, includes utterances that establish relationships between objects internal and external to a fiction, such as “Marlon Brando resembles Kurtz.” A fourth category of fictional discourse can be named generative discourse. Utterances of this type express principles or axioms that govern the generation of fictional truths and (some of) the eventual consequences and inferences that can be drawn from them. If we consider David Lewis’ genuine modal realism a fiction, the descriptions of the set of ontological primitives and concepts given in his *On the Plurality of Worlds* and more rigorously formulated by John Divers can be considered examples of the generative fictional discourse proper of modal fictionalism.<sup>31</sup> In principle, it is possible for sentences to belong to more than one category.

Here, I use the notion of “entertaining” to denote the particular propositional attitude used in FS. From this view, FS exhorts us to treat our person-talk as if, when using it, we were *entertaining* a fiction. More precisely, the fictionalist stance suggests that we are to entertain propositions in a particular area of discourse, where an agent A entertains a fiction F if (1) A entertains the content of F, which includes F’s generative discourse, and (2) the consequences of F’s generative discourse are entertained without a specific interest in asserting the literal truth of those sentences that (appear to) refer to persons. In the following section, I provide more detail on the propositional attitude that characterizes FS.

### *Entertaining and Fictionalism*

The notion of entertaining is similar to the concept of acceptance when the latter is contrasted with belief. According to Jonathan Cohen, belief and acceptance differ in many respects: if A believes that P, then A is disposed to feel that P is true. On the contrary, if A accepts P, then A has adopted a mental policy to the effect that, for a certain well-determined period of time, A includes P among its premises for either practical or theoretical purposes.<sup>32</sup> As Cohen says, although believing P signals a disposition to feel that something is the case, acceptance is characterized as a voluntary attitude toward rational planning, such as when we accept, in a certain context

and for a certain purpose, that something is the case without maintaining that the content of what is accepted describes reality.

Pascal Engel further distinguishes two senses of acceptance—acceptance<sub>1</sub> and acceptance<sub>2</sub>.<sup>33</sup> The first type of acceptance is related to belief in the sense that we sometimes “*assent* to propositions to which we assign a high degree of probability . . . that is to propositions which we take to be likely to be true on the basis of our evidence.”<sup>34</sup> Accepting, in this sense, involves assenting to a proposition and holding that that proposition is likely to be true. Acceptance<sub>2</sub> shares features with the attitude of entertaining I have in mind here: (1) it is voluntary, (2) it does not necessarily aim at truth, (3) it is context dependent, and (4) it is not a matter of degree (contrary to believing).<sup>35</sup> However, in characterizing acceptance<sub>2</sub>, Engel emphasizes the practical aspect of this attitude. Adopting this second type of acceptance is primarily justified on the basis of its pragmatic or practical consequences. This does not mean that Engel is not onto something. However, adopting his characterization of acceptance<sub>2</sub> as the peculiar propositional attitude of fictionalism does not seem to take into account one important feature of our engagement with fictions; in particular, we do not seem to engage with fictions exclusively for pragmatic reasons. Thus, if we want to retain the idea that fictionalism prescribes the adoption of a strategy toward an area of discourse that is similar to what we do in relation to a fiction, the characterizing notion of fictionalism should be considered not to be essentially pragmatic (although this may well be the case).

Uriah Kriegel has proposed an interesting account of “entertaining” that is better suited, with slight modifications, to play the theoretical role of the characterizing propositional attitude of fictionalism.<sup>36</sup> He distinguishes entertaining from other propositional attitudes generally considered more basic, such as belief and desire, by claiming that entertaining is an attitude that is characterized by a lack of phenomenal orientation on either the truth or the goodness of the propositions at issue, at least for the variety called “disengaged entertaining.”<sup>37</sup> This sense of entertaining the proposition “that P,” which Kriegel equates to contemplating P, is also characterized by a varying degree of phenomenal intensity. For instance, A can entertain P more or less vividly to varying degrees analogous to the degree of when we have an experience. The variety is on a scale of phenomenal intensity that, in the case of entertaining, is determined by the clarity and alertness with which they are manifested in consciousness.<sup>38</sup>

Another relevant aspect of Kriegel’s account is his formulation of *thinking-of* in terms of entertaining.<sup>39</sup> He claims that thinking-of is doxastically noncommittal in a way that is similar to entertaining. More specifically, Kriegel suggests that thinking of a particular A does not commit us to the existence of A. What distinguishes thinking-of from entertaining is that the latter is a *propositional* attitude, whereas the former is an *objectual* attitude. Although thinking-of is directed at objects and entertaining is directed at propositions, both are phenomenologically noncommittal attitudes toward their subjects. The sense of entertaining that is at issue here shares crucial features with Engel’s acceptance<sub>2</sub>; in particular, they are voluntary (contrary



to the general characterization of beliefs), context dependent (I can entertain a proposition for a specific issue and for a determined length of time), and do not aim at truth. In addition, the sense of entertaining I have in mind includes the possibility of visualizing or imagining (in the broad sense of the term) a specific situation described in the entertained proposition. The correct phenomenological order seems to be: first, we entertain a proposition or an object in our minds; then, if we are prescribed by the activity with which we are engaged (e.g., reading a novel) or if we so desire, we imagine the proposition at issue. It is in this sense that entertaining is connected to our engagement with fictions. The act of entertaining can be considered to have phenomenological priority compared to imagining or even conceptualizing. Entertaining should not be confused with the idea of grasping a proposition; the latter implies a sense of involuntariness that is absent in the former. In fact, entertaining propositions seems to be at least partially voluntary, while, unfortunately, we cannot grasp a proposition at will.

The main reason for the previous modified account of entertaining seems to come from the phenomenology of consciousness. Entertaining is something that we are simply able to do, and negating its existence is hard to justify. We can object that such an attitude can be reduced to something more basic (say, a combination of belief and desires) or that this attitude, when the semantic and referential components of the propositions or thoughts entertained are analyzed, is not truly noncommitting.

Another possible concern is that the aforementioned attitude does not seem to be clearly connected to the attitude we assume toward fictions. The appreciation of works of art, for instance, does not seem to many contemporary aestheticians to be essentially connected to a purely disinterested and disengaged attitude. Leaving these concerns aside for the moment and supposing that an account of entertaining and thinking-of will eventually reveal the noncommittal character of the objects of these two attitudes, I understand fictionalism toward a specific area of discourse as a theory either *prescribing* the adoption of this attitude or as suggesting that this is the attitude that we *already have* toward the area at issue.<sup>40</sup> This formulation is meant to accommodate a distinction that is usually drawn between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism.<sup>41</sup> The latter has a descriptive aim (specifically, capturing our current talk about contentious entities in an area at issue), whereas the former (fictionalism as a theory that prescribes the assumption of a specific attitude) is revisionary of actual usage, in that it prescribes how we should talk and think about contentious entities. The form of fictionalism about the self that will be pursued in the rest of this essay is intended to be prescriptive; the propositional attitude toward our talk about persons *should* be one of entertaining.

### *Fictionalism about the Self and Buddhist Fictionalism*

In the previous sections, I argued that entertaining is a plausible candidate for the characteristic propositional attitude that our version of fictionalism prescribes adopting toward our talk about enduring selves and persisting persons. More schematically, FS requires us to treat our talk about persons as talk about fictions in the following ways.

1. *Fictive discourse*. Vincenzo's utterance "Andrea paid the rent yesterday" is used to express a thought that Vincenzo should simply *entertain*. The thought "Andrea paid the rent yesterday" has its apparent truth-conditions and commitments, but it is false because there are no persisting persons. More generally, fictive utterances should be understood as episodes of entertaining thoughts, and the speaker is not being irrational by making utterances about things whose existence s/he does not believe in.

2. *Metafictive discourse*. Vincenzo's utterance "Andrea is a good person" (and other cases of metafictive discourse) can be understood as fictive discourse, that is, as being literally false and as being pragmatically useful.

3. *Transfictional discourse*. The interpretation of this type of discourse in the case of FS is not straightforward and depends on what we consider the scope of a fiction. If, for instance, we suppose that there is one fictional narrative associated with each person, then each utterance comprising references to two or more persons is a case of transfictional discourse. For instance, Vincenzo says that Emanuela is shorter than Andrea. One way to understand this statement is as an episode of the entertainment of a thought regulated by the generative principles of two fictions, the Andrea-fiction and the Emanuela-fiction. Presumably, these two fictions share enough characteristics (e.g., the reliability of measurements of simples arranged person-wise) to make them compatible. A similar result can be obtained by considering the Andrea-fiction and the Emanuela-fiction as characters in a broader fiction, that is, the socially and implicitly generated person-fiction entertained by the community of human beings.<sup>42</sup>

4. *Generative discourse*. When someone claims that what we consider to be a person involves sets of causally connected psychological *skandhas*, this should be understood as an episode of Siderits entertaining the pragmatically useful thought that psychologically connected *skandhas* constitute an entity. More generally, utterances describing the process of formation or the actual composition of persons should be understood as episodes of entertainment. It is not the case that an agent believes that a new entity results from the addition of psychologically connected *skandhas*; rather, the thought in question is simply entertained.

Another characteristic feature of various forms of fictionalism is the idea that there are usually good reasons for not dispensing with or reducing our talk about entities about which we should be fictionalist. In the case of FS, the reasons for continuing to talk about persons and selves are numerous and may be classified usefully under the name of "practical or pragmatic concerns." In a nutshell, it seems that our everyday lives in society would hardly be possible without at least accepting or entertaining thoughts that presuppose that the people we meet every day can be met, in a proper sense, the day after. What characterizes BF, as a variety of FS, is the particular story, including its caveats, about the reasons for our acceptance of our talk about persons. As recognized by advocates of the doctrine of two truths, our talk about persons is indispensable to many of the concepts we live by. In addition, accepting our talk of an enduring self can help to make sense of the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth. In particular, one popular way of understanding the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth is that there is a connection between an action and its retribution,

whether the latter is an instance of pain, pleasure, or indifference. One possible problem with combining the view of non-self with the idea that rewards or punishments generated by *karma* are transmitted across lives is accommodating the idea that the person rewarded or punished is the same person who was responsible for the actions in question, despite the absence of an enduring or transmigrating self. One response to this challenge is to recognize that the Buddhist motivation for introducing this doctrine may be, among other things, to minimize overall pain and suffering. Suggesting that *karma* and rebirth exist would lead to the mentioned minimization by acting as if there were enduring persons—to use our terminology, by regulating our actions following the entertainment of thoughts concerning persons. It would thus be useful to entertain thoughts about fictional persons because, among other things, this way of thinking may allow us to intervene in the elimination of future instances of those psychological *skandhas* related to suffering. For instance, an enlightened monk may better coordinate his actions to eradicate one source of suffering (ignorance) in a series of psychologically related *skandhas* by considering that this series forms a person and considering her a disciple on whom continuous influence is exercised. Although this fictional talk is useful and meaningful, the sentences used to express our person-talk are false and should only be entertained, not believed.

#### *Particularist and Generalist Fictionalism about the Self and Esoteric and Exoteric Buddhist Fictionalism*

A further question to be investigated concerns the nature of the fiction that FS and BF suggest should regulate our entertaining of thoughts concerning person-fictions. For instance, we should investigate the generality of the person-fiction or fictions that FS prescribes us to entertain. More specifically, the question is whether we must adopt a different fiction narrated by its author for each single person-fiction or whether the fiction to be entertained is a general fiction that is implicitly created in the society or societies in which persons happen to live. Another alternative, related to this second “communitarian” view of the creation of person-fictions, conceives the generative discourse of the general person-fiction as the result of a common conceptual and explicit effort. According to this last perspective, the relevant fiction for FS should be informed by our best conceptual analysis of the concept of a person and the best use of such a concept for practical reasons once the nonexistence of persons is believed.

Let us review each solution in detail. According to the first option, which we may call Particularist Fictionalism about the Self (PFS), there is a person-fiction associated with what we take to be a person. Therefore, if we state that Ryan Gosling exists, PFS suggests that the propositional attitude to adopt toward the proposition “Ryan Gosling exists” is entertainment. “Ryan Gosling” does not refer to anything in the world. Rather, what we should believe is the thought “there is a Ryan Gosling–fiction” as told by the causally connected psychophysical sum of elements that calls itself “Ryan Gosling.”<sup>43</sup> The author of the fiction is its main fictional character. This particularistic reading of the fiction-creation may provide a connection to recent theories of narrative identity, the main idea of which is that selves are inherently self-narrative entities (that is, entities narrating their own self-story).<sup>44</sup>

A striking difference between one rigorist interpretation of this narrative-identity view and a Buddhist approach to personal identity is that the former tends to endorse and approve the idea that we should *create* our own fictional identity and that, in borrowing from material taken from our tradition, this provides the background for a morally valuable existence.<sup>45</sup> Quite the contrary is suggested in the Buddhist tradition: our liberation from suffering and our enlightenment pass through the abandonment of our sense of—and/or our belief in—a continuing self. PFS prescribes that we simply entertain thoughts about persons, where this is seen as talk involving thoughts the appropriateness of which is regulated by particular person-fictions created by singular authors. Our shared talk about persons is thus the conjunction of particular fictional narratives. Our shared person-fiction about which philosophers have intuitions has the structure of a conjunction of different fiction stories:  $F\langle a; a \rangle \wedge F\langle b; b \rangle \wedge F\langle c; c \rangle \dots F\langle n; n \rangle$ , where  $a, b, c, \dots, n$  denote sums of psychophysical elements, and  $F\langle x; y \rangle$  should be interpreted as saying that the fiction  $F$  is about  $x$  and is created by  $y$ . The number of person-fictions we are acquainted with delimits the extension of our philosophical intuitions about persisting persons. Generalist fictionalism about the self<sub>1</sub> (GFS<sub>1</sub>) suggests that our person-talk is the result of a common effort that is hardly understandable outside the context of a specific group of people. The relevant fiction is generated within a community or a similar non-individual group. Therefore, according to this view, our person-talk is not a conjunction of particular fictions but rather something with the structure  $F\langle a, b, c, \dots, n; a, b, c, \dots, n \rangle$ .

Another variation on the same idea, which differs only as a matter of detail from GFS<sub>1</sub>, suggests that our fiction-talk should derive from the conceptual reconstruction of terms that are useful in specific areas (say, moral reasoning). According to this second interpretation (GFS<sub>2</sub>), the proper creators of the general person-fiction, the general fiction that should be entertained, are those able to create fictions conducive to specific aims and informed by conceptual analysis. GFS<sub>2</sub> suggests that there is a proper person-fiction that we should entertain and that not all person-fictions are equal in providing good reasons to be entertained. The best fictions are those told, for example, by whoever is involved in clarifying what the concept of a person can do pragmatically and its theoretical and scientific foundations.

We can specify two further versions of BF, esoteric BF (esBF) and exoteric BF (exBF), which are intended to be different instances of GFS<sub>2</sub> and GFS<sub>1</sub>, respectively. Both theories begin from the consideration that the proper propositional attitude toward our talk of persons is entertainment. In addition, esBF claims that our talk of persons should be further regulated and intended as the general fiction created by those who are aware of the risks and benefits of such talk—for instance, those who have realized that there are no persons and that such talk is useful to the point that it is conducive to minimizing suffering. This formulation of esBF accommodates the idea that the Buddha's teachings are prescriptive: we should not believe in a self, but we can entertain person-thoughts. Not all person-talk should be seen as a proper process of fiction-creation. In particular, the proper generative principles of the person-fiction should involve a collection of psychophysical *skandhas*. Those who have attained enlightenment have proposed such a proper person-talk. This view thus

suggests that there is a proper way in which we can be fictionalists. The exoteric version of BF (exBF), in contrast, is the view according to which our person-talk is what is commonly accepted and created in a specific community, without the specification that the process of fiction-creation should be conducted by the enlightened. A community of Brahmins or of Christian believers in immaterial souls can be considered to form proper general person-fictions. BF can also be compatible with one version of PFS, leading to the view that each person-fiction should be seen as the result of a singular effort, possibly conducive to the main Buddhist goal of minimizing suffering. This last possible variation on the theme concludes the expository part of my project.

### *III. Objections and Conclusions*

All of the versions of BF previously explored do not require a particular theory of the nature of truth, and this, again, may be taken as an advantage over BR. Still, much work remains to be done. For instance, assuming the propositional attitude of entertainment may not be considered sufficient to defuse our ontological commitments to persons. Although we are asked simply to entertain thoughts about persons, the fictionalist claims that person-talk is meaningful and has the ontological commitments it seems to have. Meaningful or true sentences involving persons may still commit us to the existence of persons. The fictionalist agrees on this point but suggests that the attitude to be adopted toward thoughts about persons is entertainment. After all, things do not need to exist to be useful. Thus, we are not irrational in entertaining false thoughts because of their utility. The fictionalist claims that we are not irrational because we do not think that those false beliefs about persons are true; we believe that they are false, and we believe that they are useful, so we entertain person-thoughts. However, the critic may suggest, this does not get us off the hook. Maybe we are not irrational, but we are committed to the existence of, for example, fictional entities. The critic may also suggest that the same mechanism of our thinking-of is committing or that thoughts about persisting persons must be committing if they are to be meaningful at all. For instance, it can be claimed that thoughts with no subject are only apparently meaningful as there are no “gappy” propositions.<sup>46</sup> The articulation of a full reply to these concerns would lead us too far afield, but it is clear what this reply requires: a specification of the structure of our thoughts concerning this type of objects.

There are various theories dedicated to singular or plural thoughts containing names apparently referring to nonexisting entities.<sup>47</sup> A promising strategy employs the concept of a mental file to accommodate the previously mentioned semantic and epistemological concerns.<sup>48</sup> Briefly, mental files serve as individual or singular concepts, whose connections to the object to which they purport to refer are given in an externalist fashion (in our case, chains of fiction-creations and generative discourse) and whose function is to store information on what a subject thinks the referent should have. The mechanisms of reference and meaning related to our person-talk, inscribed in this framework, would thus require no commitment to existing enti-

ties to ensure the meaningfulness of the sentences and thoughts involved in our fiction-talk and our apparent commitment in our thinking of specific persons. The fiction, or fictions, of the BF would provide content to the particular mental files used to think about persons.<sup>49</sup>

In this essay, I have outlined a variety of views based on the idea that persisting persons and selves should be regarded as fictions. In the first part, I outlined BR as proposed by Siderits and claimed that this view reconciles our practically necessary talk about persons with the view that there are no such entities by introducing a form of alethic pluralism—the doctrine of two truths. I then proposed an alternative framework in which the Buddhist idea that persons are fictions can be inscribed: fictionalism about the self. According to my version of fictionalism, we should *entertain* thoughts involving persisting persons. The apparent inconsistency in uttering claims concerning entities we believe do not exist is defused when we simply entertain such thoughts without being committed to believe their existence. In a sense, fictionalism removes the apparent irrationality of talking about persons and believing that they do not exist. BF, one version of FS, can be divided into subspecies in relation to the particularity and generality of the relevant fiction or fictions that generate and regulate our person-talk. I have not argued extensively in favor of the plausibility of a particular view but rather have aimed to map the conceptual territory of how to relate fictionalism in metaphysics, one particular theory of the Buddhist non-self, and a more general fictional theory of the self with persisting persons. Still, if theoretical parsimony is taken as a criterion to choose among theories, the varieties of BF explored above only require the notion of entertainment and thus seem more appealing than BR.

## Notes

- 1 – My discussion of Buddhist theories on the self is based mostly, but not exclusively, on Mark Siderits' works. See Siderits 1997, pp. 455–478; 2003; 2007, chap. 3; and 2011, pp. 297–315. Another interesting work discussing the doctrine of the non-self in the Theravāda tradition is Collins 1982. It should be noted that BR does not seem to be Siderits' preferred view of the issue; in fact, in his book he seems to advocate a form of antirealism that aims to demonstrate the ultimate incoherence of the notion of ultimate truth (so that any given proposition can be neither ultimately true nor ultimately false). See the second part of his *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (Siderits 2003). In what follows, I will focus on BR.
- 2 – This doctrine has a long history, and various Buddhist scholars have proposed a variety of interpretations of its main tenets. For a contemporary discussion, see Jay Garfield, "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality," in Cowherds 2011, pp. 23–38.

- 3 – Other recent scholars have pursued a similar strategy; see T.J.F. Tillemans, “How Far Can a Madhyamika Buddhist Reform Conventional Truth?” in Cowherds 2011, pp. 151–161, and D’Amato 2013. The difference between my proposal and D’Amato’s relies on his specification of the fictionalist strategy along the lines of Stephen Yablo’s elaboration of Carnap’s discussion of the ontological commitments of a theory and the notion of a framework. See Yablo 2001, pp. 72–102, for discussion.
- 4 – Siderits 2010, p. 32.
- 5 – Siderits 2010, p. 33. This should be considered one possible understanding of the distinction. See *Milindapañha* 1972 for a classical source on how to interpret the claims in the main text. See also Siderits 1997, pp. 462–463.
- 6 – Siderits 2003, p. 6. Parfit’s characterization of his reductionist position can be found in Parfit 1984, pp. 210–214.
- 7 – Siderits 2003, p. 6.
- 8 – Ibid., p. 77. See Collett Cox’s impressive study (2004, pp. 543–597) for a convincing historical account of the evolution of the use of relevant terms (*dharma*) for these ultimate components of reality in Abhidharma.
- 9 – Recent works on this theory include Unger 1979, pp. 117–154, and van Inwagen 1990. See Simons 1987 for an introduction to mereology.
- 10 – It is not always clear whether *svābhava*, which literally means “own nature,” should be understood in terms of essential or intrinsic properties in contemporary metaphysics. However, since Buddhist philosophers tend to reject the notion of substance and agree on the idea that nothing persists, *svabhāvas* seem to be better seen as intrinsic properties. Thanks to Mark Siderits for this suggestion.
- 11 – See Rupert Gethin 2004, pp. 513–542. Later Buddhist philosophers, such as Nāgārjuna, argued against the independent possession of essential properties of *dharmas*. Some philosophers have drawn a connection between *dharmas* and what is understood in analytic metaphysics as tropes; see Goodman 2004, pp. 389–401.
- 12 – Siderits 2011, p. 298.
- 13 – See Flanagan 2011 for a recent attempt to isolate the elements of Buddhism that are more palatable to scientifically oriented minds. See Reasoner 2010, pp. 639–648, for an introduction to theories of *karma* and rebirth in various Indian traditions.
- 14 – Siderits 2003, p. 24, and 2007, pp. 112–123. See also Edelglass 2009, pp. 261–370, for more details on the nature of the ultimate elements composing persons and a list of references to some original sources along with influential commentaries.

- 15 – See the passages quoted in Siderits 2007, p. 120, from Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, in which Vasubandhu discusses the idea that nothing lasts longer than an instant.
- 16 – See Siderits 2007, chap. 4, for a clear assessment of the ethical consequences of BR.
- 17 – See the collection of articles in Cowherds 2011 for various discussions of the many evolutions of this doctrine. In the rest of this essay, I will follow Siderits’ presentation of the main ideas of the doctrine, which seems close to Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, such as 6.4, *Mngon pa khu* 7ab. A different interpretation of Vasubandhu’s remarks is offered in Ganeri 2007, pp. 169–175.
- 18 – See Siderits 2007, p. 56. In the Sarvāstivādin tradition, there seems to be a triad of almost equivalent concepts: lack of intrinsic/essential reality, partite composition, and conventional truth. See Thakchoe 2011 for further details.
- 19 – See Siderits 2011, p. 301.
- 20 – See Pedersen 2012, pp. 588–607, and Pedersen and Wright 2013b for two surveys on recent positions in the debate and bibliographical references.
- 21 – Pedersen 2012, pp. 590–593.
- 22 – See Pedersen and Wright 2013a, section 4, for a list of criticisms.
- 23 – This reasoning does not apply to those who think that we have independent reasons to adopt alethic pluralism.
- 24 – See Sainsbury 2010 for a recent survey.
- 25 – Certain versions of fictionalism, which are not discussed here, also offer analyses in terms of a fictional operator (“In F, x”) of the discourses or utterances about which we are supposed to be fictionalists.
- 26 – For various reasons, I prefer accounts of fictionalism that do not rely on paraphrasing strategies of fictional utterances or implicit prefixing, such as those inspired by David Lewis (1978, pp. 37–46). See Eagle 2007, pp. 125–147, for a convincing criticism of implicit prefixing views.
- 27 – The list is not intended to be exhaustive. See Walton 1990 for an account of pretense and make-believe, and Eklund 2005, pp. 557–579, for indifference and related attitudes.
- 28 – See Currie 1990 and Woods and Alward 2002, pp. 241–316.
- 29 – See Sainsbury 2005 for an account of reference without referents. The issue of whether fictional names refer (and to what) or just purport or pretend to refer is highly controversial.
- 30 – The case of fictional truths in *Heart of Darkness* is even more complex because claims that have the surface form of declarative sentences, such as “Kurtz was an ivory trader,” can also be classified as samples of *fictive* discourse: it is a



character within the fiction (Marlow) who tells the story of Kurtz to his companions. This is an example of a fiction within another fiction. Complications related to these cases are left aside in the present essay. For more discussion, see Le Poidevin, 1995, pp. 227–238, and Hayaki 2009.

- 31 – Divers 2002, pp. 45–46.
- 32 – See Cohen 1992.
- 33 – Engel 1998, pp. 140–151.
- 34 – *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145; my emphasis.
- 35 – *Ibid.*, pp. 146–147. See also Bratman 1992, pp. 1–15.
- 36 – Kriegel, 2013, pp. 1–22. It is not my concern here to evaluate his claims about the non-reducibility or priority of entertaining and its role in our cognitive architecture.
- 37 – Kriegel 2013, p. 5.
- 38 – *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 39 – *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
- 40 – More discussion of a possible way to defuse the ontological commitments of singular thoughts is presented in the last section of this essay.
- 41 – The application of this distinction to fictionalism is based on Stanley 2001, pp. 36–71.
- 42 – In this sense, each person-fiction would function as a fictional, implicitly edited entry in the Wikipedia by its author-character. Obviously, this does not require that there are no reality constraints in the generation of a person-fiction. These difficulties will not be addressed here, but see the fourth part of section 2 for further discussion of how the particularity and generality of generating fictions may affect the type of FS at issue. See Schechtman 1996, pp. 73–162, for discussion of the process of formation of persons seen as self-constituted narratives.
- 43 – I do *not* claim that “Ryan Gosling exists” (or other claims of existence for persons) means or can be substituted in all contexts by “There is a Ryan Gosling-fiction” (or by generalizations of the latter).
- 44 – See Schechtman 2011, pp. 394–416, for an accurate survey of the main theories at issue. See Strawson 2004, pp. 428–452, for a vigorous criticism of the narrative view(s).
- 45 – See Taylor 1989 for a spirited defense of this view. Narrative theories of personal identity do not necessarily have to support the strong claim that a narrative identity is also a prerequisite for a meaningful or righteous life.
- 46 – See Everett 2003, pp. 1–36, for discussion.

- 47 – See Jeshion 2010 for a collection of recent essays on the topic and further bibliographical references. The formulation above should not suggest that I believe in nonexistent entities.
- 48 – See Kent Bach 1987/1994 and Recanati 2013 for further discussion.
- 49 – Admittedly, this is a sketch of a complete answer that will have to wait for further work to be properly addressed. Although not entirely new, the mental file approach is a relatively recent addition to the contemporary debate and has not been applied in detail to fictional talk.

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