H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Duerlinger. *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's 'Refutation of the Theory of a Self'*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. xii + 308 pp. $37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-40611-6.

Reviewed by Mark Siderits (Illinois State University)
Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2007)

This is a translation of the ninth chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmako?abh??ya*, together with an extensive commentary on the translation, plus a general introduction surveying the various views on the nature of the person that were held by Vasubandhu's interlocutors. As a Buddhist, Vasubandhu (fourth century C.E.) holds that fully comprehending the nature of persons is crucial for obtaining release from suffering. In the ninth chapter of *Ko?a*, he defends his Sautr?ntika-influenced understanding of the Buddha's teachings on persons against the views of those Buddhists known as Pudgalav?dins, as well as those Brahmanical philosophers who hold that persons are selves. An accessible full-length study of this important work is long overdue.

Unfortunately, the present work does not completely meet this need. In translating, James Duerlinger follows the common practice of inserting material in square brackets where it is needed to complete the sense of Vasubandhu's often laconic text. Duerlinger's additions are not necessarily incorrect, but they can make the translation extremely difficult to follow. Here is how he translates one of Vasubandhu's attacks on the Pudgalav?da thesis that persons are ultimately real and belong to a fifth category:

"Since [the Pudgalav?dins assert that a person is inexplicable,] they cannot say that a person is other than the aggregates. [Hence,] they cannot say, [as they do,] that 'there are five kinds of objects known to exist, [namely,] past, future, and present [causally conditioned phenomena], causally unconditioned phenomena, and the [persons that they call] inexplicable.' For they cannot say that an inexplicable [person] constitutes a fifth kind [of object known to exist, since if a person cannot be said to be other than the aggregates, which are the three kinds of causally conditioned phenomena, he must be the same as them]. Nor [can they assert] that he does not constitute a fifth kind, [since in asserting that he is inexplicable they cannot say that he is the same as the aggregates, and they do not believe that he is a causally unconditioned phenomenon. Hence they cannot assert that a person is inexplicable]" (p. 76).

And here is my more straightforward rendering of the same passage:

"And if that [person] cannot be said to be distinct from the *skandhas*, it follows that it cannot be said, 'There are five kinds of cognizable, past, future, present, uncompounded and indeterminate'. For it cannot be said to be a fifth over and above past, etc., nor to not be a fifth."

Vasubandhu's argument is simple and elegant. Pudgalav?dins claim that the person is indeterminate (*avaktavya*) in that it cannot be said to be either identical with or distinct from the *skandhas* of which it consists. They thus hold that in addition to the four kinds of existing thing recognized by other Buddhist schools (things existing in the past, in the present, in the future, and always), there is a fifth category, the indeterminate, and persons belong to this category. The difficulty is that in order for this to constitute a fifth category, its members must be distinct from the members of the other four. If the person cannot be said to be distinct from the *skandhas*, it cannot be said to comprise a fifth category. But then neither can it be said that this is not a fifth category, since that would require that persons be identical with members of one or more other categories. So the positing of a fifth indeterminate category leads to absurdity. Now it is possible to work out the logic of Vasubandhu's argument from Duerlinger's translation, but only by fighting one's way through the material in the square brackets.

There are also difficulties with individual word choices. The reader will have noticed that where Duerlinger translates *avaktavya* as "inexplicable," I use "indeterminate." This is the stock translation when those questions the Buddha refused to answer (such as whether the *arhat* exists after death) are said to be *avaktavya*. And it seems likely that Pudgalav?dins chose the term because of that usage. Another questionable choice is Duerlinger's rendering of *ucchedav?da* as "nihilism," which he describes as the view that "we do not exist at all" (p. 44).

Ucchedav?da is usually translated as "annihilationism," for it is the view that while I exist now, I shall go utterly out of existence or be annihilated (typically at death). Annihilationism and eternalism (*???vat?v?da*) are identified by the Buddha as two extreme views that must be avoided to overcome suffering. Both assume that there is a real subject of experience, the "I." They differ just over how long this entity endures. The difficulties with eternalism are well known. Annihilationism is said to be problematic because it entails that the reaper of the karmic fruit in the present life is not the same person as the sower of the karmic seed in a prior life. Karmic fruit is therefore undeserved.

Annihilationism, then, is a view concerning the diachronic identity of persons; it is the view that persons do not endure for very long. Duerlinger takes it instead to be the blanket denial that there are persons. This leads him to misidentify a key Pudgalav?da argument (p. 114, n.20). They claim that persons cannot be said to be identical with the *skandhas* because that would lead to annihilationism. But the reason is surely that the person would then be just as impermanent as the *skandhas*, so that when the present set of *skandhas* goes out of existence, the person who is identical with that set of *skandhas* would likewise go out of existence. The upshot would be that karmic consequences would accrue to someone other than the agent of the action. Duerlinger says instead that annihilationism means for the Pudgalav?din that we do not exist, in which case there is no one who performs the action or reaps the fruit (p. 150).

Duerlinger also says that Vasubandhu seeks to avoid annihilationism by asserting that persons ultimately exist. But such a strategy would fail. Vasubandhu holds that all ultimate existents are momentary. So if persons ultimately exist, they are momentary. In that case the problem of the non-identity of karmic sower and reaper returns with a vengeance. The mistranslation of *ucchedav?da* as 'nihilism' appears to have blinded Duerlinger to the real problem here.

I take Vasubandhu's view to be that persons are only conventionally and not ultimately real. What are ultimately real are only impermanent psychophysical elements (*dharmas*) in a causal series. Only the individual elements are real, the series as a whole is not. Given the nature of the causal relations that hold among the elements in such a series, it turns out to be useful to treat the series as if it were a single enduring thing made up of different elements at different times. To so treat the series is to accord it conventional reality, or the status of a conceptual fiction. Our word for this useful fiction is "person." The difficulty is just that when we lose sight of the fictional status of the person, we can fall into states of attachment and suffering. The cure is to see that our talk of persons is reducible without remainder to talk of impersonal psychophysical elements in a causal series.

There are passages in which Duerlinger appears to express something like this view. For instance, he cites Vasubandhu's famous definitions of the conventionally real and the ultimately real (p. 19). Likewise he attributes to Vasubandhu a "two-tiered conception" of what is real (p. 55). And he repeatedly stresses (e.g., pp. 124, 240, 242, 251) the very important point that "person" is not synonymous with "causal series of impersonal *skandhas*," so that our talk of persons cannot be translated without loss of meaning into talk of *skandhas* and their causal connections.

The problem is that while Duerlinger may well grasp this, he also insists that according to Vasubandhu we ultimately exist. He frequently puts this as the claim that persons are "the same in existence" as collections of *skandhas*. And this he glosses as being "the same in extension" as those ultimately real entities on the basis of which persons are conceptualized (p. 60, n.21). But this suggests that our use of "person" involves reference to things that are ultimately real. It is true that there are ultimate facts on which our use of "person" supervenes. But this is not to say that it is to these facts we refer when we use the word. If it were, then since there is always a multiplicity of such facts behind any use of the word, we would never use "I" but only "we." This is the point of the "neither one nor many" argument.

Duerlinger might also see a difference between Vasubandhu and Candrak?rti where there is none. Of course Candrak?rti denies Vasubandhu's thesis that *dharmas* are ultimately real. M?dhyamikas claim that the notion of an ultimately real entity is incoherent. But Duerlinger takes the arguments of *Madhyamak?vat?ra* VI.126-41 to be directed against Vasubandhu and other reductionist ?bhidharmikas. In fact, these arguments can be read in a way that is perfectly consistent with Vasubandhu's reductionist view of persons. For these can all be seen as objections to non-reductionism about persons. Candrak?rti may differ from Vasubandhu just over the assumption that reduction requires there to be ultimately real entities of some sort or other.

Duerlinger also, I think, misconstrues the difference between Vasubandhu and Pudgalav?da. Pudgalav?dins hold that the person is an ultimately real whole that is conceptualized on the basis of impermanent *skandhas* forming a causal series. Since Pudgalav?dins agree

with orthodox ?bhidharmikas that persons lack intrinsic natures (and thus disappear under analysis), they must deny that persons belong to any of the four recognized categories of ultimate reals–past, present, and future *dharmas*, and permanent (uncompounded) *dharmas*. Hence their claim that persons belong to a fifth category, one said to be indeterminate in that the person is neither identical with nor distinct from the *skandhas* on the basis of which it is conceptualized. Now because Duerlinger takes Vasubandhu to hold that persons ultimately exist in some sense, he must locate the disagreement with Pudgalav?da elsewhere than in ascribed ontological status. He takes their disagreement to be over the claim that the person is neither identical with nor distinct from the *skandhas*. But Vasubandhu does not disagree with this claim. It is a standard strategy of orthodox ?bhidharmikas to argue that persons could be neither identical with nor distinct from the *skandhas* that persons are thought to consist in. What separates them from Pudgalav?da is what this is taken to show. ?bhidharmikas like Vasubandhu take this to show that the person could not be ultimately real and must be a mere conceptual construction. Pudgalav?dins, on the other hand, being already committed to the claim that persons are ultimately real, take this to show that the person belongs in a fifth, indeterminate category of ultimate reals.

This leads Duerlinger into interpretive difficulties with Pudgalav?da's fire-fuel analogy, which they offer to illuminate their claim about persons. Fire, they say, (1) is conceived in dependence on fuel, (2) exists apart from fuel, (3) is not distinct from fuel, and (4) is not identical with fuel. For the analogy to work, "fuel" must be taken here to mean a causal series of aggregates of *r?pa dharmas*, in the form of the *mah?bh?tas* and their associated *bhautikas*. Fire is then something that we judge to occur when certain of these elements are arranged in a certain way. Hence, (1) may be construed as a supervenience claim. The problem is to understand what (2) might mean if it is not to contradict (3) and render (4) otiose. But notice that fuel understood as elements is ultimately real. This means that (3) and (4) are *prima facie* reason to judge fire to be a mere conceptual fiction. Once we see this, we see that (2) must be the claim that fire is an ultimately real existent over and above those elements in dependence on which it is conceptualized. What we have here is the claim that fire non-reductively supervenes on the elements that make up the fuel. And this in turn tells us what it is that they are trying to show about fire: that it exerts "downward" causation. They want to establish that fire is more than just an arrangement of elements, that it is no less ultimately real than the elements. And they seek to establish this by showing that it brings about real changes in those elements that are its supervenience base. What they want is a case where the whole has causal powers that are not just the collective powers of its parts.

But this is not how Duerlinger understands the analogy. His analysis of the Pudgalav?da position is enormously complex, and I shall not attempt to summarize it here. It has the distinct disadvantage of making Vasubandhu's responses to the analogy either irrelevant or else question-begging. If we instead interpret the analogy as seeking to make a case for non-reductive supervenience, then Vasubandhu's replies make more sense. Vasubandhu's basic point is the usual reductionist one, that the causal powers of the whole reduce without remainder to the causal powers of the parts. The history of the emergentist idea–that in systems of sufficient complexity there emerge novel higher-level entities ontologically distinct from their constituents–contains many failed attempts to provide a convincing illustration of how this is all supposed to work. It should not be surprising if Vasubandhu is able to defeat this Pudgalav?da attempt.

In his commentary on the translation, Duerlinger reconstructs the arguments, objections, and replies of the various parties to the debate. And after discussing a particular exchange, he evaluates Vasubandhu's defense of his claims. This is appropriate and welcome. Vasubandhu was a philosopher, and his work should be assessed in terms of its philosophical adequacy. But I am not sure Duerlinger's criteria of philosophical adequacy are appropriate. Consider the following exchange. Vasubandhu argues that there is no reason to believe there are indeterminate persons. The Pudgalav?din responds by saying something like, "I can imagine that there might be some empirically undetectable entity whose relation to empirically detectable entities is not conceivable by us, hence your refutation fails to prove that there is no such thing." Descartes sometimes uses such arguments from what can be imagined. If this is a valid philosophical technique, then Duerlinger may well be right that Vasubandhu has failed to refute the Pudgalav?din. For my own part, I am quite certain that Vasubandhu did not use this technique. And I suspect that he was right not to.

Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons represents a huge undertaking. Duerlinger has carefully examined Vasubandhu's text and the extant commentaries, many other relevant Sanskrit texts, and the voluminous secondary literature. He has given much thought to how

best to make sense of all this. I believe he has gotten some key details wrong. And his understanding of the text is sometimes concealed behind a writing style that can be difficult to penetrate. It would be nice to have a work that could introduce non-specialists to the Indian philosophical debate over persons and personal identity. My sense is that we do not yet have that work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mark Siderits. Review of Duerlinger, James, *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's 'Refutation of the Theory of a Self'*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13194

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.