H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Siderits. *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons.* Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003. xvii + 231 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3473-7.

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Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2007)

Mark Siderits describes this book as an exercise in "fusion philosophy" (p. xi). His intention is to contribute to a dialogue between Indian Buddhism and recent analytic philosophy about the issue of personal identity. Although very aware of the dangers of anachronism and Orientalism, Siderits contends that such a conversation is worthwhile given the resources that Buddhism offers for solving contemporary philosophical problems. Siderits also thinks that the tools of the analytic tradition can be used to clarify and defend key Buddhist ideas. His book is a "rational reconstruction" (p. xiii) that extrapolates from what is explicitly said by Indian Buddhist philosophers; their thoughts are to be used as a basis for creative philosophizing rather than treated as "museum diorama" (p. xiii) of interest only to historians and philologists. Siderits rejects the claim that the soteriological aims of Buddhism render impossible any fruitful discussion. In particular, he dismisses as an Orientalist fantasy the claim that Indian Buddhism advocates the attainment of a "non-discursive, direct insight that is antithetical to rational analysis" (p. xiv). Rather than abandoning reason, Buddhism employs arguments in pursuit of liberation.

This is an approach that holds great promise. Siderits's detailed application of recent philosophical thinking to a Buddhist context is a fine example of sophisticated cross-cultural intellectual engagement. An especially praiseworthy feature of his analysis is its even-handedness. He gives considerable space to numerous arguments against the Buddhist views and endeavors to show how these objections might be overcome. However, the book's highly technical language and style will be extremely demanding, especially for those unfamiliar with recent developments in analytic philosophy. Indeed, the latter tend to dominate the discussion so that the specifically Buddhist contribution sometimes appears less obvious than it might have been.

Chapters 1-5 elaborate the Abhidharma Buddhist ontology that Siderits characterizes as "reductionist" (p. 7), and as akin to the views Derek Parfit influentially advanced in *Reasons and Persons* (1984). Both the Abhidharmikas and Parfit reduce the person to its impersonal constituents. Indeed, the Abhidharma traditions go further, extending reductionism to all composite entities–chariots, trees, mountains, and so forth. Siderits thinks that the Buddhist "two truths" distinction can be used to clarify Parfit's position. Partless entities are ultimately real; they are how things objectively are. Persons and all other partite things are only conventionally real; they are conceptual constructions and do not exist "independent of our subjective wants, needs and interests" (p. 8). Nevertheless, the Buddhist reductionist claims that the person-concept has value as pragmatic shorthand for what is a vastly complex aggregation of physical and mental processes. Thus, it is conventionally true that a person has a body, experiences, is an agent of actions, and so forth. This is a middle path between non-reductionism–which says that persons are ultimately real–and eliminativism–which says that the person-concept is simply false and has no utility. Siderits makes an interesting comparison with the relationship between quantum physics and organic chemistry. While organic chemistry can be reduced to quantum physics so that the former is in principle dispensable, in practice organic chemistry is extremely useful, given the cumbersome nature of quantum physics as an explanatory tool in relation to organic compounds. Similarly, the person-convention is pragmatically important as a rough-and-ready way of referring to the web of psychophysical events that it is impractical to describe accurately in everyday situations.

Siderits devotes considerable attention to a variety of objections to reductionism. In particular, reductionists are often accused of circularity in that their impersonal descriptions actually presuppose the existence of the person that they are trying to reduce. He is very aware of the power of this criticism and the success of his meticulous repudiation of it is debatable. The non-reductionist commonly argues that the person is the con-

dition for the possibility of experiences; it acts as the necessary subject that, for example, explains our capacity for self-control, unifies perceptions across different times and sense faculties, and makes it possible to distinguish the experiences that happen to one individual from those that happen to someone else. However, the reductionist rejects such accusations of question-begging by applying "a classic argument from lightness" (p. 28). At the ultimate level of description, the person is superfluous given that all of the functions that it supposedly fulfills can be performed by the "shifting coalition of psychophysical elements" (p. 27) itself. For example, a person's ability to remember his or her past experiences can be explained impersonally as the result of the right sorts of connections in the causal series of contiguous psychophysical elements; the person's inability to remember the past experiences of someone else is explained by the absence of these connections. The label "person" thus gets applied to complex formations of psychophysical elements that Siderits describes as having the property of "maximal causal connectedness" (p. 46). He presents a consequentialist and evolutionary argument that this personhood-convention arose because assigning "psychophysical elements to maximally causally connected sets yields greater overall welfare than alternative assignments" (p. 49).

There is an apparent tension between this justification of the person-concept and the Buddhist contention that belief in the person (or the self) is the fundamental cause of suffering. Siderits's solution appears to be that the person-concept does cause suffering, but only when it is taken too seriously, that is, as ultimately real rather than merely conventional. In reply to the accusation that seeing persons as merely conceptual fictions would alienate us from our personal projects and concern for others, the Buddhist reductionist recommends, Siderits suggests, a strategy of "ironic engagement" (p. 106) where one remains involved in the conventional world while recognizing that it is no more than conventional. However, it is surely a debatable point whether one could successfully maintain this engagement while realizing the mentally constructed nature of that with which one is engaged. Furthermore, Siderits claims that Buddhist ethics is a form of consequentialism according to which pain, impersonally construed, is intrinsically bad. Thus, there is an obligation to alleviate it as much as possible wherever it occurs. However, as Siderits is well aware, the notion of pain is often thought to require a subject who has the pain. He argues carefully–if not entirely convincingly–for the intelligibility of impersonal pains.

Also questionable is the Buddhist reductionist's contention that all composite entities are conceptual fictions. Siderits defends at length the reductionist view that only partless entities are ultimately real, arguing that everything that the whole supposedly does can be explained as being done by the parts. Thus, to include wholes "in our final ontology is just to count twice over what is already there" (p. 96). Of course, non-reductionists protest that wholes–such as trees, mountains, and so forth–can exist mind-independently with novel properties that are not possessed by their parts. Siderits has skillfully stated the reductionist's case but this perennial metaphysical dispute is unlikely to be resolved.

In chapters 6-9, Siderits argues that although reductionism is the most plausible form of realism, it is nevertheless "wrong in important respects" (p. 113) and should be supplanted by a form of "global anti-realism" (p. 132), which is how he characterizes the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness. Reductionism is superior to non-reductionism, but global anti-realism is to be preferred to both. The problem with reductionism is that it claims that there is a mind-independent reality accurately described by its ontology of impersonal, partless entities and their causal connections. Siderits reconstructs a number of intricate arguments from the Madhyamaka tradition intended to demonstrate that these supposedly ultimately real entities and their causal relations are–like everything else–entirely the product of conceptual construction. The doctrine of universal emptiness entails that "the very notion of ultimate truth, of there being an ultimate nature of reality, is incoherent" (p. 132).

Siderits distinguishes this global anti-realism from metaphysical nihilism, the latter being a form of realism that claims that the "ultimate nature of reality is such that nothing exists" (p. 132). He also cursorily dismisses as another form of realism the interpretation that emptiness entails that "the real is strictly ineffable" and beyond conceptualization. He acknowledges that global anti-realism is very difficult to understand, not least because of its apparently paradoxical claim that "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth" (p. 133). Furthermore, he contends that the notion of the conventional truth only makes sense as a "kind of linguistic shorthand" for the ultimate truth. Thus, without the ultimate truth there can be no conventional truth. So, the two-tiered Abhidharma understanding of truth is to be replaced by "semantic non-dualism" (p. 160), according to which propositions are true if they successfully identify entities that exist as part of the socially constructed world of human projects and interests, which is the only world that exists.

These chapters contain plenty of analysis to make the case for Buddhist anti-realism, with extended forays into recent philosophical discussions about the nature of semantics, truth, and knowledge. For instance, Siderits contends that the Buddhist anti-realist–unlike the skeptic–claims that knowledge is possible but–unlike the realist–that this knowledge is always "contextual" (p. 150); it is always constrained by pragmatic considerations and never based on proofs that will be conclusive "for all time and all cognizers" (p. 147). However, despite Siderits's arguments to the contrary, it is plausible that a sophisticated realism might be able to accommodate a version of contextualism.

Siderits also highlights the soteriological significance of the Buddhist anti-realist's claim that the pursuit of the ultimate truth itself represents a "subtle form of clinging" (p. 200). Moreover, the doctrine of emptiness reinforces the practice of compassion "by reminding us that pains have no ultimate owner" (p. 201). And because global anti-realism is "not wholly forgetful" (p. 200) of the reductionism that it transcends, the bodhisattva continues to consider suffering as impersonally and intrinsically bad, and thus seeks to alleviate it wherever it occurs. The bodhisattva engages with the world but in the full recognition that the only reality that entities possess is as part of human "lifeworld contexts" (p. 202).

Siderits makes a plausible case for an anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka. However, there is surely more to be said for other readings of the doctrine of emptiness than Siderits allows–for example, as a type of skepticism or as advocating the ineffability of reality. Furthermore, despite Siderits's admirable efforts to defend global anti-realism, it remains a puzzling philosophical position. At the risk of simply displaying a realist prejudice, I would say it is unlikely that the entire world is in all respects simply a conceptual fabrication that exists only relative to human purposes and interests. Moreover, anti-realists risk incoherence if they do not hold the statement that "all entities are conceptually constructed" to be ultimately true as a claim about how things actually are. It is also difficult to make sense of the idea that everything is simply a conceptual construction, including whatever is doing the constructing. The accusations of infinite regress and circularity are serious. Although Siderits and the Madhyamikas themselves are adamant that the doctrine of emptiness is not metaphysical nihilism, differentiating the two positions might be more difficult than they allow.

Furthermore, Siderits argues that assertions of realism are typically accompanied by a "table-pounding gesture" that reveals realism to be an act of bare "self-assertion" to the effect that "there is a world that serves as final arbiter of all our judgments, and it bestows the prize on my side" (p. 200). It is not clear that realists must display this hubris. Furthermore, the realist can direct a similar criticism against anti-realism. For anti-realists themselves are arguably guilty of anthropocentric arrogance when they claim (with Siderits) that "[c]hariots, houses, forests, trees, rivers, mountains, persons, atoms, quarks–all are real in the only way in which something could be real. Each has its own determinate nature by virtue of its functional role within some human practice" (p. 202). Despite these concerns, Siderits's book is to be highly recommended as a subtle and enjoyable philosophical exploration of Buddhist views about personal identity.

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Citation: David Burton. Review of Siderits, Mark, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13394

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