Rejoinder to Kris McDaniel

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I would like to thank McDaniel for his reply. In my original reply to McDaniel I say that, given his interpretation of the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth (in Abhidharma metaphysics), we would no longer be able to employ certain powerful arguments in favor of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, and it would turn out that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent doesn’t have some of the important implications which proponents of that thesis generally take it to have. McDaniel offers responses to both of these concerns. In the remainder of this paper I’ll say a bit about his responses.

In my original reply to McDaniel I claim that a proponent of McDaniel’s interpretation of the two truths cannot adapt one of Vasubandhu’s arguments against the existence of the self into an argument for the merely conventional existence of persons. In response, McDaniel presents an argument for the merely conventional existence of persons which builds on Vasubandhu’s argument against the existence of the self (McDaniel forthcoming: section 2). I concede that this argument is a natural extension of Vasubandhu’s argument. It is, of course, a different argument from the argument I presented which was, I claim, inspired by Vasubandhu’s argument against the existence of the self. So, we’ve got these two arguments for the merely conventional existence of persons, and they are both inspired by Vasubandhu’s argument against the existence of the self. I don’t have much more to add at this point, other than the observation that some Ābhidharmikas and their sympathizers might prefer the argument I present to the one which McDaniel presents, and so, on those grounds, may prefer an interpretation of the two truths which allows them to employ the argument I present.

McDaniel also responds to a suggestion I make in a footnote that the proponent of McDaniel’s interpretation of the two truths cannot employ “neither identical nor distinct” style arguments for the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. (This suggestion of mine was borrowed from an anonymous referee.) McDaniel suggests that a proponent of his interpretation of the two truths can employ arguments of this sort. I think he’s right about that.

So, I don’t have much to say about McDaniel’s reply to my first concern, that proponents of his interpretation of the two truths miss out on certain otherwise powerful arguments for the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. I have more to say about his reply to my second concern, however. My second concern was that, given McDaniel’s interpretation of the two truths, it would turn out that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent doesn’t have some of the important normative and soteriological implications which proponents of that thesis generally take it to have.

McDaniel wonders whether the (mereological) nihilist, who rejects the existence of composite objects, can draw interesting normative conclusions from nihilism, and suggests the beginnings of an argument for the view that they can.[[1]](#endnote-2) McDaniel suggests that the proponent of his interpretation of the two truths can employ a similar argument. Both arguments appeal to the premise that “all ultimate truths are about ultimately real entities.” But the nihilist and McDaniel mean very different things by this premise. The nihilist thinks that ultimately real entities are the only entities that there are. The proponent of McDaniel’s interpretation of the two truths thinks, by contrast, that merely conventionally existent things exist in addition to ultimately real things. I can see why one might think that all ultimate truths are about ultimately real entities, if one thought that only ultimately real entities exist. I could also see why one might endorse a weaker thesis, that all ultimate *normative* truths concern only ultimately real entities, if one thought that only ultimately real entities exist. But I don’t see why we should think that all ultimate truths, or all ultimate normative truths, must concern ultimately real things, if one thought that there exist merely conventionally real things as well. Consider, for example, an ultimate normative truth to the effect that one should love one’s neighbor. I should think that this might be an ultimate normative truth even if all neighbors, and even all *possible* neighbors, were merely conventionally existent, if this just means that they exist, but they enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. Why should the fact that one’s neighbor enjoys a non-fundamental mode of being have any bearing on whether it is ultimately true that one is obligated to love them?

McDaniel might respond by saying that if my neighbor exists merely conventionally, it may be a *conventional* normative truth that I should love my neighbor, even if it is not an *ultimate* normative truth that I should love my neighbor. Ok, fair enough, but would this be an interesting or noteworthy normative conclusion? If I came to believe that my neighbors are all merely conventionally existent, and so moved from the belief that it is an ultimate normative truth that I should love my neighbor to a belief that it is merely a *conventional* normative truth that I should love my neighbor, have my normative beliefs changed in any interesting way? Plausibly not. If anything, it just seems like I’ve made a small adjustment in my beliefs in some trivial bookkeeping respect: ultimate normative truths can’t be about merely conventionally existent things, so I might as well label my belief that I should love my neighbor as a merely *conventional* normative truth. We were hoping to find some interesting soteriological or normative consequences of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. This isn’t it. So, when McDaniel appeals to the premise that “all ultimate truths are about ultimately real entities,” on his interpretation of “ultimately real entities,” it seems to me that this premise is either false, or is true but uninteresting and trivial.

McDaniel concedes that on his interpretation of the two truths, it is unclear whether Abhidharma metaphysics supports any “first-order theory in the normative ethics of behavior.” He doesn’t see this as a defect in his account, since “in general, it’s not a straightforward matter to derive ethical claims from metaphysical premises.” That may be true, but I’ve argued that if we reject McDaniel’s interpretation of the two-truths, then we may have available to us powerful arguments for conclusions regarding how we are morally obligated to behave from the Abhidharma metaphysical thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. For example, we have a powerful argument to the effect that we should care about the suffering of others to the same extent that we care about our own suffering. It would be regrettable if the Ābhidharmika employed an interpretation of the two truth which prevented them from endorsing an argument of this sort, since it is in service of a conclusion which the Ābhidharmika will have independent reasons to accept (not least because it comports well with the teachings attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon). We should remember that within Buddhist philosophy metaphysics is generally *meant* to have important normative (and soteriological) consequences. That's much of the *point* of Buddhist metaphysics. So it really does matter whether McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction comports well with the normative (and soteriological) goals of the Ābhidharmika. The Ābhidharmika has strong motivations to employ an interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction which helps advance their normative and soteriological project.

On that note, McDaniel says that, while it would be difficult to draw conclusions regarding how we are morally obligated to act from Abhidharma metaphysics, it is nevertheless true that there may be important ramifications from our coming to learn that we are merely conventionally existent, and so enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. In particular, “the view that human persons are ultimately real is an important (albeit implicit) part of our self-conception. If we are merely conventionally real, then we are not substances and we lack an essence in the strict sense. Learning that our self-conception is deeply mistaken—that our sufferings are more real than we are, and that, fundamentally speaking, they are unowned—might be profoundly disorienting” (McDaniel forthcoming: section 3). I don't share this reaction. In fact, if I were to learn that I enjoy a less than fundamental mode of being, my reaction would be more of a shrug than anything else. (By contrast, I’d be pretty shocked to learn that I don’t exist!) What's important to note here, however, is not that I don't react in the way that McDaniel does to the news that I enjoy a less than fundamental mode of being. Rather, what's important to note here is that we lack any compelling arguments for the conclusion that we *should* react in the way that McDaniel reacts. (McDaniel refers us to another publication where he defends the idea that we would react in the way he suggests. But the publication McDaniel refers to here again seems to me to lack a compelling argument for the view that we should react in the way that McDaniel suggests.) This doesn't show that we *shouldn't* react in this way. But it shows us that the Ābhidharmika who wishes to advance the idea that our learning that persons are merely conventionally existent has important ramifications should be hesitant to accept McDaniel's interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. Their accepting that interpretation would limit their ability to convince other people *via argument* that there are important implications of our accepting the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. By contrast, as we've seen in my initial reply to McDaniel, there *are* interesting arguments to the effect that the view that persons are merely conventionally existent has important implications for core questions regarding personal identity, and for what sort of value we should attach to those goals and projects which are meant to advance our own self interest. Coming to accept that these arguments are sound very likely would upset our values and everyday conception of ourselves. But these arguments are not available to us if we accept McDaniel's interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent.

References

McDaniel, Kris. Forthcoming. “Ontological Pluralism and the Two Truths: Reply to Brenner”, *Philosophy East and West*.

1. A side note: McDaniel says that “It’s an interesting sociological fact that most contemporary defenders of nihilism do not argue that their view has interesting normative consequences” (McDaniel forthcoming: section 3). That may be true, but I suspect that it is true only because in general modern-day analytic metaphysicians rarely draw normative conclusions from their metaphysics. And in any case nihilists in particular have had their hands full with the preliminary task of *defending* nihilism. Since nihilism is so widely rejected, it would seem very premature to work out the normative implications of nihilism before one has convinced more philosophers to take nihilism seriously. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)